Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, **13**, 3 (2021) 1–15

DOI: 10.2478/ausp-2021-0024

Travel Writing, Literature, and Romance: Polixéna Wesselényi's *Travels in Italy and Switzerland*

Márta PELLÉRDI
Pázmány Péter Catholic University (Budapest, Hungary)
Institute of English and American Studies
pellerdi.marta@btk.ppke.hu

Abstract. Polixéna Wesselényi's *Travels in Italy and Switzerland*, the first travel narrative that was written by a woman in Hungary and Transylvania, is a work little known to the wider international public, as it was published in Hungarian in 1842, seven years after her tour. There are few travel narratives written by East-Central European women in the first half of the nineteenth century. This essay attempts to reflect upon Wesselényi's personal motives, her intellect and literary craftsmanship, as well as the cultural constraints she had to encounter. The romantic nature of the relationship between Wesselényi, a married woman, and the fellow travel writer John Paget, is also mirrored by the text. *Travels in Italy and Switzerland* not only offers an insight into the relatively favourable situation of Transylvanian women of the aristocracy in the 1830s but also shows that it had the power to inspire the works of celebrated Hungarian novelists after its publication. Although Wesselényi's style conforms to the picturesque and sentimental travel writing published by European women in the period, it justly demands a place for itself on the list of distinguished nineteenth-century European travel writing by women.

Keywords: John Paget, Polixéna Wesselényi, women's travel writing, East-Central European travel writers

1. Polixéna Wesselényi, the first Hungarian woman travel writer

Upon leaving the town of Leutschau[1] in the northern highlands of Hungary in 1835, English travel writer John Paget and his friend receive a basket full of flowers and bottles of Tokay, accompanied by a mysterious letter. It is from an "Unknown" admirer written "in the name of the ladies of Hungary" (Paget

1 Lőcse (in Hungarian), Levoča, Slovakia today.

BDD-A33023 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:10:53 UTC)

1839: 1. 446). In the letter, the travellers are addressed "as the representatives of a free nation," "the compatriots of Shakespeare, Byron, Scott, and Bulwer" (1839: 1. 446–447). Paget recalls his romantic musings concerning the identity, and especially the beauty of the feminine writer. But the pleasant thoughts are brutally dispelled when they are informed that the writer of the letter is a lady of "advanced age" (Paget 1839: 1. 448). Paget's subtle sense of humour is present throughout his writing, and his fondness for women, especially pretty women, is evident on the pages of *Hungary and Transylvania; with Remarks on Their Condition, Social, Political, and Economical*. First published in 1839 by John Murray, Paget's comprehensive travel narrative introduced to English readers the rarely travelled regions of the Austrian Empire, Hungary and Transylvania, their peoples and institutions, their past and present. It is less widely known, however, that the lady who inspired this successful publication and to whom his travel narrative was dedicated, Polixéna Wesselényi, the lady he admired the most, was also the first Hungarian woman travel writer.

Anna Fábri describes Wesselényi as being responsible for "not only the first piece of Hungarian-language travel writing, but also the earliest Hungarian Romantic work to be written by a woman" (2001: 95). From a European perspective, Wesselényi's *Travels in Italy and Switzerland* (*Olaszhoni és schweizi utazás*) published seven years after her tour in 1842, conforms to the picturesque and sentimental travel writing by women in the period, in which it is the "intensity of personal response" that dominates, rather than the scientific or factual approaches typical of male travel writers (Thompson 2011: 185). Her work also stands out in the respect that it was written by an East-Central European woman traveller, more precisely by a Hungarian baroness from Transylvania, a country which was then regarded as being "on the very limits of European civilization" (Paget 1839: 2. 259). Although Carl Thompson warns scholars about regarding women's travel writing only "as a form of autobiographical life writing" (2017: 133), travel narratives written by East-Central European women in the first half of the nineteenth century are so rare that in this case Wesselényi's personal motives, the relative independence of her social status, as well as her intellect and literary craftsmanship are worth taking into account. Therefore, this essay throws light not only on the autobiographical and "emotive and impressionistic" traits in Wesselényi's writing (Thompson 2011: 185) or on her intellectual feats and literary accomplishments but also on the power of her independent nature which can be glimpsed through her text. Her writing, which challenges contemporary prejudice against women travellers and travel writers, also reflects strong religious and political convictions, as well as emotional attachments. Within a European context, *Travels in Italy and Switzerland* can be placed alongside the travelogues of Mariana Starke, Lady Morgan, or Mary Shelley, even if the writer herself came from the Principality of Transylvania, under Austrian rule at the time, and the

BDD-A33023 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:10:53 UTC)

language of the text is Hungarian. The power of her narrative, as well as the romantic nature of her experience, even proved to be strong enough to inspire famous Hungarian novelists who borrowed scenes from her *Travels*.

Who was this woman who proved to be such an inspiration for Paget that he ended up marrying her around 1837-38 and settling down with her on her Transylvanian estates? When Polixéna Wesselényi first met Paget in Rome in 1835, she was thirty-four, still married to the liberal Transylvanian politician László Bánffy. At the time, she was also recovering from a romantic relationship with one of the foremost opposition leaders of the Hungarian Reform period, the famous Miklós Wesselényi, her second cousin. In Wesselényi's case, it is probable that her journey abroad was partly motivated by the wish to escape from her ruined marriage and the tense political atmosphere in Hungary and Transylvania at the time (Cs. Lingvay 2006: 11). Another reason for leaving her family's estates must have been her ennui, the intellectual thirst for variety, culture, and inspiration. Wesselényi was an educated, well-read, and a highly independent-minded woman. She could speak French, German, and English fluently and also Italian and Romanian at a certain level. The fact that she undertook to travel in the small company of her eight-year-old daughter Jozefa and her friend Susanne Bois de Chesne (her daughter's Swiss governess), with only one male servant to travel across rough roads and amidst unfavourable winter conditions, reflects her firm resolution to escape from problems at home and the fervent wish to find answers to them in an inspirational artistic and intellectual atmosphere. For this purpose, she was willing to disregard accepted norms of Transylvanian and European high society, just as with her writing she was willing to transgress into a realm of travel writing where Western European women appeared more frequently, but where East-Central European women rarely tread.

1.1. Polixéna Wesselényi's *Travels to Italy and Switzerland*

When Carl Thompson stresses the need to re-evaluate women's writing and to recognize that there are no fundamental differences between the travel narratives of female and male travellers, he writes of certain "cultural constraints", which can be detected in women travellers' narratives and are responsible for the differences between female and "male-authored narratives" (2017: 132). Women travel writers were also aware of these culturally determined constraints. Wesselényi herself points out in the preface to her *Travels* that she has to contend against "the fashionable prejudice" of her country, according to which a woman should not write travelogues because "modesty forbids [her] sex to stand out from the rest with any other feature than beauty (Wesselényi 1981: 5).[2] Similarly to

2 All translations are mine from Wesselényi, Polixéna. 1981. [1842]. *Olaszhoni és schweizi utazás* [*Travels in Italy and Switzerland*], eds. János Győri and Zoltán Jékely. Budapest: Magvető.

BDD-A33023 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:10:53 UTC)

other European nineteenth-century women travel writers, there is a "disclaimer" in the preface (Mills 1991: 83) to explain to readers why she is writing her travel account even though she knows that she is transgressing into a masculine realm and has "little literary talent" (Wesselényi 1981: 5). Nor can she be regarded as a true artist. Wesselényi claims that she simply enjoys recollecting her memories and confidently stresses the role of emotions in her writing, her "female delicacy", which allowed her to "feel appropriately" in such cases (Wesselényi 1981: 5). She is thus arguing the case for female authority in travel writing behind the familiar mask of modesty and is warning readers that her book is not a socio-political economical travel narrative (like Paget's), and it was "not written for a scientific" purpose (Wesselényi 1981: 6).

Although at the time Wesselényi was regarded as a solitary traveller (even if she was accompanied by her daughter, a governess, and a manservant) who had to make her own decisions and suffer the uncomfortable stages of her journey, she considered travelling a challenge, an escape from the ennui which paralysed her at home. In society, however, it was not so pleasant to be without a male partner. Her position as a relatively young woman travelling alone without her husband was regarded as unusual, and this is the reason why she returns several times to what she found to be the greatest problem of her independence:

> It is not so awkward for a woman to travel alone, even if travelling is accompanied by irritations and boredom, especially in the civilized parts of Europe; but to appear in society and move about in it, is very much so; her solitary position, especially if time has not yet left its mark upon her features, is conspicuous and unnatural, and it seems as if everyone were placing the single woman under close scrutiny with their inquisitive glances; what is the reason for her being alone, why does she appear without a supporter or protector in the competitive marketplace of society? (Wesselényi 1981: 51)

Nevertheless, she accepts invitations even if it is embarrassing for her to appear at social events without a male partner.

Writing about women travel writers, Susan Bassnett emphasizes that although many of them wished to convey to readers the impression that they were capable of almost the same physical exertions as men, there were certain topics which they were more concerned with, such as "details of clothing, accounts of domestic life, or the inclusion of romantic episodes" (2002: 239). Preoccupations with her attire are a source of annoyance for Wesselényi. On one occasion when she takes a carriage to Duke Torlonia's ball and she is all dressed up with a "fan and a bouquet in [her] hands", she soon finds herself in a traffic jam full of carriages. She is annoyed that she should be held up by the traffic and anxious that any minute her

BDD-A33023 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:10:53 UTC)

"light, flowery dress for dancing" could be splattered with mud by the sudden jolts of the carriage (Wesselényi 1981: 61). Besides such concerns, more serious ones dominate; her patriotism and political ideals, her family and national pride, her religion are also emphasized. When Duke T— (Duke Torlonia) is condescending enough to chat with her and asks her about her family name, she cannot refrain from politely stressing that her name is a historical one. Simultaneously, she is also hinting to the Duke that he should not be so proud of his name and rank, since his father was granted the title by Napoleon (Jékely 1981: 446). Wesselényi is also shocked by what she regards as the relative poverty of the Italian nobility, by the emptiness of social gatherings and embarrassing practices such as collecting money from the guests after a major ball. Nevertheless, she is not averse to making acquaintances who secure her further opportunities to socialize.

Through a Hungarian consul in Rome, Wesselényi and her small company are received by the Pope. In amusing passages, she describes how she was particularly embarrassed when she found out that during the Papal audience even women were expected to kiss the Pope's hand. When she is finally received by him, she remains firm in her resolve not to conform to etiquette. As a proud Hungarian Protestant, "a zealous follower of Calvin", as she refers to herself, Wesselényi ignores the Pope's outstretched hand and simply bends her head to show her respect (Wesselényi 1981: 99). When the Pope inquires about the language spoken in Hungary, assuming it is German, she proudly contradicts him. But when the Pope refers to the political atmosphere after the dissolution of the Transylvanian Diet, taking it for granted that "tutto e tranquillo" [all is quiet], Wesselényi, out of politeness, does not contradict him to give way to her own heated opinion on national and political issues (Wesselényi 1981: 102). A few days later, she offers her cousin Miklós Wesselényi's book (*Balítéletek*), banned in Hungary by the Austrian authorities, to Cardinal Mezzofanti in the Vatican Library. Another instance which demonstrates her patriotism and her opposition to the Austrian rule in Hungary and Transylvania is the occasion when she visits the ex-king of Holland, Louis Buonaparte, Napoleon's brother, living in exile in Florence.

> Then he pointed to the sculpture of Napoleon and asked "Do you know who this is?" Whereupon Marchesa P. told him that I was a great admirer of the Empereur; to which I added, "and we women don't just admire him; I, for one, cherish his memory from the depth of my heart." He then earnestly grabbed by hand. "Do you really cherish his memory? So, there are people in Austria who don't hate him?" to which I answered somewhat drily, "I am Hungarian." (Wesselényi 1981: 227–228)

Napoleon was seen as a liberator rather than as an oppressor by Hungarians of nationalist-liberal convictions at the time. The sorrowful emotions about the

BDD-A33023 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:10:53 UTC)

political situation in her homeland under Habsburg rule, the anxiety over the future trial of her cousin Miklós Wesselényi by the Austrian authorities break through the descriptions of Italian social and political scene.

Allowing herself to be guided by Mariana Starke's guidebook, she enthusiastically visits the galleries and museums of Rome, Naples, and Florence. As Wesselényi was an amateur artist who studied painting from Miklós Barabás,[3] a distinguished Hungarian portrait artist, she describes the masterpieces with an expert eye, also giving voice to her appreciation or critical opinion. She takes care to single out those artworks which were created by women, such as Elisabetta Sirani or Angelica Kauffmann, although she finds them inferior to those of the great masters. In Rome, she marvels at the magnificence of St Peter's Cathedral and the Vatican Museum and indefatigably visits all the galleries. In Florence, she visits the Uffizi almost every day to see the great masterpieces of Raffaello and Perugino. Among her favourite statues are the alabaster figures of Niobe and Venus de' Medici. Besides describing the works of art through the eyes of an amateur artist, she also provides her opinion on the everlasting philosophical debate between utilitarians and artists and art lovers on the usefulness of art:

> Where can one draw the line between what is useful, necessary and delightful? Aren't there also moral necessities to consider? Doesn't the developing soul have immediate spiritual needs, just like the one that has reached a higher level of development? Born with senses and the ability to think, our artistic taste necessarily exists… Nothing is beyond usefulness and necessity if it awakens in us more noble sentiments of pleasure. (Wesselényi 1981: 222)

Music is also a source of artistic delight for Wesselényi. In Rome, she visits churches and attends long Catholic Easter church services, which she finds exhausting. But she praises the soulfully uplifting Miserere in the Sistine Chapel on Good Friday, "with its enormous harmony uniting heart and soul" (Wesselényi 1981: 106). One of her frequent companions on these visits is her future husband, John Paget. Wesselényi meets Paget, it seems, during the very first days of her sojourn in Rome in February 1835. Throughout the text, Paget is referred to as "N.". He becomes a frequent companion and accompanies her to most of the famous sights in the city (Jékely 1981: 391). He is by her side in Naples and Florence as well.

The passages in *Travels in Italy and Switzerland* where N's conspicuous presence can be observed also reveal Polixéna Wesselényi's high temper and free

3 Miklós Barabás became acquainted with his future wife, Susanne Bois de Chesne, Polixéna Wesselényi's friend and travelling companion, when the two women were in Rome, according to his diary (Jékely 1981: 391).

BDD-A33023 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:10:53 UTC)

spirit, occasionally, even rebellious nature. Anna Fábri also points out Wesselényi's "profound need for personal freedom and self-realization" (2002: 95). Ironically, she still has to rely on men to achieve her purpose. One occasion she relates has symbolic significance: there is an embarrassing situation when Wesselényi and Susanne, without paying heed to the gentlemen's warnings, climb up the crumbling walls of the Baths of Caracalla. Once up on the wall, however, they cannot get down and have to cry out for the assistance of the men (including N.) in their party. In a self-deprecatory paragraph, she describes the reckless spirit of freedom which led them "to leave the gentlemen playfully behind because they warned us to be careful" (Wesselényi 1981: 132). She mentions women's power over men but censures the thoughtlessness of women who put themselves into dangerous situations without a second thought for the gentlemen who would have to endanger their own safety by saving them. "This was such an occasion", she observes, "but after a brief scolding, which we had to endure with modesty, we were helped down" (Wesselényi 1981: 133). The word "endure" is a sign of silent protest and resentment. There are several similar scenes in the travel narrative when Wesselényi wishes to undertake dangerous exploits. She makes physically demanding excursions to the Italian and Swiss countryside, for instance, which was unusual for women in the period, climbing Mount Vesuvius with Paget or Mont Blanc with Paget's brother Arthur, when Paget has already left for Hungary. Wesselényi describes in detail these memorable adventures, especially the incident on Mount Vesuvius, when reluctantly, but out of necessity, she has to give up climbing to the top of the mountain on foot in the sweltering heat. She is utterly distressed when Paget has to obtain a "brancard"[4] for her. Nevertheless, when the men tell her that she cannot go to the edge of the crater on account of the poisonous sulphurous gases emanating from the volcano, she is determined to the point of wilfulness. When the guide tries to reason with her, saying that "it's not for women, we never take them there", Wesselényi's reaction is the following: "Hearing that it's not for women – which always arms me against such prejudice – my wish became a will and like a naughty child I became obstinate, and so we began to go round the double crater" (Wesselényi 1981: 184). The result of her obstinacy ends in her inhaling the vapours and losing consciousness. But at least she was able to achieve her purpose, to join the ranks of the very few women who climbed Mount Vesuvius.

Neither is Wesselényi to be dissuaded from visiting places unfit for the sensibilities of delicate women, such as Santo Spirito, the mental asylum in Rome. The description of the existing conditions in the institution offers a veritable documentary of the treatment of mental patients in that period. She visits the place together with N., where the deplorable situation of a middle-aged Scotch woman who has been cast in the asylum, seemingly without reason, stirs

4 *brancard* – a "comfortable leather chair" with a wooden plank for supporting the feet, carried by four persons (Wesselényi 1981: 180).

BDD-A33023 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:10:53 UTC)

her compassion. The woman begs the Englishman to intervene on her behalf for her release (Wesselényi 1981: 122–126). She claims that she is unmarried and has been abandoned by the father of her five children. After the visit, N. wins Wesselényi's admiration for doing all he can for his compatriot: making another visit and taking steps on the woman's behalf at the British consulate. Thus Paget's presence in Rome dispels her ennui, and she is able to enjoy herself. When it is time to move on when the spring season draws to its close, Wesselényi is also determined to go to Naples. But the road from Rome to Naples was full of dangers for travellers, especially for women travelling alone:

> I was in a great quandary amidst travel preparations; my manservant was loading a pair of rusty pistols; and I was turning over a pretty little Turkish dagger with a gemmed handle and bitterly ruminating over the adverse situation of solitary women when N. came to say goodbye. "So you are leaving tomorrow?" "I am, most certainly." "What do you wish to do with these deadly weapons?" "There is no need to laugh; we cannot go unarmed on such a dangerous journey." He continued to laugh and offered *en preux* chevalier to accompany us with his brother; and I was happy to accept his offer, promising myself an entertaining and carefree journey. (Wesselényi 1981: 147–148)

N. and his brother (Paget and his brother Arthur) provide the security for the two women and Polixéna's daughter. When at Mesa they have to stop and the ranting and dissatisfied postmaster makes a scene by cursing loudly and throwing the payment he received on the ground, threatening to shoot them, Wesselényi imagines a host of bandits emerging from hiding and attacking them. But "N's imagination was not so fruitful in picturing to himself such dangerous situations as mine was; he just laughed, disembarked from the carriage and picked up and pocketed the money" (Wesselényi 1981: 151).

Another "constraint" that Wesselényi is aware of, besides that of travelling alone, is the one that her own romantic imagination creates. She self-mockingly criticizes her love of contemporary romantic novels and their influence upon her own imagination and sensibility. N., the young but mature and rational-minded male companion, is there to check her sentimental outbursts. At one point in the narrative, she refers to J., accidentally (John Paget), instead of using the familiar "N." and relates a discussion between them that took place en route to Pompeii in a carriage. Their views clash on the difference between the beauty of the dream world of fiction and reality. Still being under the romantic influence of Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii*, Wesselényi shares her feelings of melancholy with the others about the difference between the lively descriptions in the book and the faded reliques they are to expect in Pompeii:

BDD-A33023 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:10:53 UTC)

> "I'm afraid that in my case reality will not match those pictures which the enchanting magic of the book has conjured in my soul. It's so wonderful to soar high into the regions of poetry. What is the use of poking about in the narrow and unfriendly world of everyday, or rather kitchen reality […]; it's of so little interest to know what kind of oven the ancients used to bake their bread in; or whether they kept their oil in wide or narrow-mouthed bowls." Letting my head drop to the side, and contented with my tirade, I had hardly lapsed into silence when J. burst into loud laughter. "Oh, I am sorry; I will not argue that everything is as beautiful [in the book] as you have described. Which German book did you get these ideas from? I wonder that – en parenthèse – such a sensible woman as you can take seriously such outdated sentimental musings and can repeat them with a straight face only because many regard these twisted sentimentalities as delicate and elevating. If the real had no other worth but that it was real: it would still be far above poetry!" (Wesselényi 1981: 188–189)

It goes without saying that Paget is on the side of the beauty of reality. This remarkable report of a conversation on a crucial Romantic artistic issue of the times (reality vs. art and literature), in which Paget's outburst sounds like a reprimand, also exemplifies the difference between the more "scientific" writings of male travel narratives (Paget's *Hungary and Transylvania* is a perfect example) and the more sentimental, self-effacing, and less "authoritative" texts of women travellers, which were expected to be "amateurish" (Mills 1991: 83). Wesselényi's text, however, even if sentimental, is rarely self-effacing. In Florence, she throws a small party; N. is also present when a hired musician finishes his song with a rhyme in their honour, guessing correctly that there is more than just companionship between the beautiful Hungarian lady and the English gentleman: "E viva le bella Ungherese,/E la generosa nazione Inglese!" (Wesselényi 1981: 258).

Anna Fábri emphasizes that Polixéna Wesselényi "shows a particular interest in the different fates, views and conflicts of women", which she shares with her readers (2001: 95). She is especially struck by the experience of unhappy married women; women who were forced to marry despite their inclinations or who found themselves unhappy in their marriage. Wesselényi is surprised when a lawyer explains to her that in the high society of Florence, for example, adultery is tacitly accepted, but only if the approval of the husband is obtained (Wesselényi 1981: 239). Such women can preserve their reputation. But if the husband disagrees, a woman keeping up an affair can be ruined. She is warned about being too friendly with Marchesa P., for instance. The Marchesa's lover did not win the tacit approval of her husband, as it was customary in Roman society, and first she was abandoned by her lover, then by her husband, and

BDD-A33023 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:10:53 UTC)

finally by society. She has become a social outcast who faces the prospect of social, financial, and moral decline. Wesselényi's landlady in Florence is another example; after being abandoned by her lover, she has no choice but to live in an unhappy and estranged relationship with her husband. Another young woman's case is different, and perhaps even worse; Seraphina, who Wesselényi visits at a convent, became a nun to take revenge on the man whom she expected to marry, but who married someone else instead. The revenge was directed at the man she loved, but it turned against herself; now there is no escape for her, and she is the only one who is suffering. Wesselényi dedicates long pages to the stories of these women, expressing her sympathy for them. Her compassion for female social outcasts and unhappy women reflects a free-thinking nature which questions the social norms that existed in Italy at the time and also expresses her unease about her own uncertain status within Transylvanian society as a future divorcee, even if there was more tolerance in such matters in her homeland.

During her stay in Switzerland, Wesselényi pays tribute to Voltaire, Byron, and Mme de Staël by visiting their homes. But her admiration for Mme de Staël, whose achievements rival those of "the foremost authors of her time" (Wesselényi 1981: 350), overpowers her feelings for Voltaire and Byron. According to Wesselényi, Mme de Staël was the only one who "had the strength in all of France" to express her own opinion and not to conform in a "servile manner" to Napoleon. "[W]hen crowned heads of state, scientists did not consider it below their dignity to beg for [Napoleon's] grace: then she, "a weak woman", was able to preserve her principles and the independence of her mind" (Wesselényi 1981: 350). The travel narrative ends fittingly with such musings in Mme de Staël's garden in Coppet, where the French author lies buried.

2. The afterlife of *Travels in Italy and Switzerland*: Polixéna Wesselényi and John Paget in Hungarian Romantic literature

Polixéna Wesselényi's divorce from László Bánffy and her marriage to John Paget, an English gentleman and travel writer, was the talk of the town in Kolozsvár (Cluj), Transylvania, in the late 30s and early 40s. Hungarians, however, were proud that an Englishman was willing to settle amongst them and especially that he was learning the language and slowly turning into a Hungarian landowner. Life and travel writing merged when the relationship between Wesselényi and Paget became transformed into fiction by two distinguished Hungarian novelists, in Miklós Jósika's *Az élet útjai* (The Ways of Life) and Mór Jókai's *Egy az Isten* (God is One). Baron Miklós Jósika, the first author to write historical novels in

BDD-A33023 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:10:53 UTC)

Hungarian, published *Az élet útjai* in 1844. He was acquainted with the couple's story and most certainly with Paget himself, as Paget's war diary from the 1848-49 revolution demonstrates (Madden 1939: 241). Unfortunately, *Az élet útjai* is perhaps Jósika's most neglected novel, archaic in language even at the time when it was written and full of romantic excesses. Nevertheless, for our purpose of seeing how a real-life relationship based on travel and romance inspired the imagination of an important contemporary writer, it is worth taking a look at the book and especially at what Jósika regarded as Paget's, or Lord Belford's most characteristic feature, the spirit of independence, which won the heart of Octavia, the character modelled after Polixéna Wesselényi.

In the preface to his work, Jósika tells his readers that the story that he is about to narrate is a "simple" story, "taken from everyday life" and that "there is not one word which has not been uttered already, not one person who has not lived" (1844: v–vi). Nevertheless, Octavia does not have many features that are similar to Polixéna Wesselényi's, except for her family background and social status, the hints that her marriage is not as harmonious as it should be, and the detail that she first meets her second husband, Lord Belford, in Italy. When she decides to remove herself from the world around her, however, she shows a strong will not to conform to the pressure of Transylvanian high society. Belford also shows an independent spirit; it seems that this is the main trait in his character that makes Octavia decide in his favour. The narrator probes Octavia's feelings concerning the Englishman she has heard so much about:

> Octavia did not regard the man's eccentricity and what others considered to be the most interesting about him to be his most notable feature. Since she herself possessed some qualities which hinted at a nuance of eccentricity, she did not regard this trait in others, as it is usually the case, to be so intriguing. Nevertheless, there was something about the man which must have had an effect on this woman – needless to explain to those who can understand such characters –, and this was his spirit of independence. On the basis of what she had heard about him, Octavia regarded Lord Belford to be one of those rare types of men who were firmly determined to be independent. (Jósika 1844: 242–243)[5]

Thus, Octavia and Lord Belford's relationship is based on the determination to be independent and true to their own nature. Although the story presented in the novel cannot be taken seriously as having been taken from "everyday life", it is probable that Jósika grasped the "truth" about the "real" Paget and Wesselényi and presented the free spirit of both through the prism of his fiction.

5 Translated by the author: M. P.

BDD-A33023 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:10:53 UTC)

The other celebrated Romantic Hungarian novelist who was inspired by Wesselényi and Paget is Mór Jókai. *Egy az Isten* (God is One), first published in 1877 and translated by Percy Favor Bicknell, as *Manasseh: A Romance of Transylvania* (1901), and later republished in 1910 as *Manasseh*: *A Story of the Stirring Days of* '48, is based on historical events which took place during and after the Hungarian Revolution of 1848-49.[6] Although the hero of the novel, Manasseh, a young Unitarian painter from Torockó, is only slightly modelled on Paget,[7] and Countess Blanka Zboróy cannot be regarded as the fictional resurrection of Polixéna Wesselényi either, there are some details in the novel which were inspired partly by the couple's romance in Rome and partly by Paget's heroism during the Revolution and the picturesque passages from *Travels in Italy and Switzerland*.

Manasseh, the protagonist, meets Blanka Zboróy in Italy, like Paget who first met Wesselényi in Rome. She is very young and has been married against her will to an Italian Prince. But she is disgusted by her elderly and cruel husband, and the marriage between them was never consummated. Now she is trying to obtain a divorce. In her *Travels*, Wesselényi mentions with great sympathy the young social outcast, Marchesa P., who took a lover although she had an influential but elderly husband. In many ways, Blanka is similar to the Marchesa, being a social outcast, and waiting for the Pope's permission to be divorced. She visits the sights in Rome and, like Wesselényi, admires paintings and churches. Like Wesselényi, she considers Miserere to be the most uplifting event during the Holy Week (Kovács 2020: 324–325). Manasseh is her most reliable companion in Rome, as N. (or Paget) is for Wesselényi. Like Paget, Manasseh is a Unitarian and a morally irreproachable person. But perhaps this is where any resemblance between the protagonist of fiction and the real-life Paget ends. In Jókai's story, Blanka falls in love with Manasseh, whom she can marry only if her first marriage is annulled and if she gives up her own religion and becomes a Unitarian herself. Together with Manasseh, they escape to Torockó, Transylvania, across a country torn by revolution and strife. Torockó is also surrounded by Romanian insurgents who have committed atrocities against the Hungarian population, partly upon the instigation of the Austrian government. The story of the couple's miraculous escape turns the novel into an exciting adventure story.

When the Hungarian Revolution in 1848 broke out, instead of leaving Transylvania, John Paget engaged in voluntary military service. In January '49, he was one among the small troop of men who saved several hundreds of survivors in the forests of Nagyenyed and fought courageously against the Romanian

6 See Kovács (2008a: 435–446) for a detailed account of the translation of Jókai's *Egy az Isten* or *Manasseh: A Romance of Transylvania*.

7 According to Zsigmond Vita, Manasseh's character was modelled on István Zsakó from Torockó (1975: 177).

BDD-A33023 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:10:53 UTC)

insurgents who outnumbered them (Kovács 2008b: 214). Jókai describes the massacre, the scene of devastation, and the suffering of those who survived; the escape of the population into the surrounding forests of the ransacked and burned Transylvanian towns of Zalatna, Sárod, and Nagyenyed. He also mentions the success of the small rescue team of which in real life Paget was a member (Jókai 1912: 3. 67–68, 302). Unfortunately, the translator abridged this passage (along with many others) in the English version of the novel, and only traces of the account of the massacre remain. Paget's presence in the novel is thus not prominent but important. The passages borrowed from Wesselényi's *Travels* describing the Roman atmosphere provide an important backdrop for Jókai's novel. Paget and Wesselényi's relationship, the union between an English gentleman and a Hungarian aristocratic lady, who were both travel writers, was considered to be so romantic and extraordinary at the time that two Hungarian famous authors, Jókai and Jósika, thought it worth fictionalizing and commemorating in their novels.

3. Conclusions

After their marriage, Polixéna Wesselényi, true to her name, settled into domestic life, playing the perfect hostess to the many visitors who happened to stop by at their comfortable country manor in Aranyosgyéres, Transylvania (Cs. Lingvay 2011: 19–20). During the Revolution, Wesselényi and her son Oliver were taken by Paget to Debrecen for their safety, while he returned to fight on the side of the Hungarian revolutionary forces. After the defeat of the revolution, they had to go into "exile", or, in Paget's case, home, to England for a few years. They also travelled in Italy and France and settled in Dresden for a short time until they were officially allowed by the Austrian authorities to return to Transylvania in 1855. When the Pagets finally returned to Gyéres in 1855, they had to rebuild their home. They found the place completely ransacked and all their books burned by Romanian insurgents during the Revolution. Although Polixéna prepared a second travel account of her travels in France and England, she never had the chance to publish her manuscript, which, along with her home, fell victim to the destruction. Wesselényi's ruined manuscript was found in the pond of the park (Cs. Lingvay 2006: 39). By this time, she had buried her first son, Walter Paget (1840–1843).

In the recollections of her visit to Transylvania in 1858, Lucy Tagart, who visited the Pagets, describes Wesselényi or "Mrs. Paget" as "a most interesting companion, well-read and highly-cultured, and an artist; the walls being covered by her paintings" (1903: 6). Only one painting has remained out of the many that she painted, a portrait of her second son, Oliver Paget, whom the Pagets lost in 1863 at the age of 22 as a result of a sudden and mysterious illness in Vienna. His death came as a shock to his parents for he was a promising and

BDD-A33023 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:10:53 UTC)

healthy young man who had married recently, leaving behind an infant daughter. Although very young, he had distinguished himself in the Italian revolution on the side of Garibaldi (Cs. Lingvay 2006: 40). Polixéna Wesselényi could never recover fully from the tragedy and never published any of her writings again. Her only surviving child was Jozefa (Bánffy), the little girl who can be glimpsed occasionally on the pages of her book.[8] Thus, *Travels to Italy and Switzerland* remains Polixéna Wesselényi's only work, but one behind which we can glimpse the intellectual and emotional portrait of a confident and free-spirited Hungarian woman writer, whose work, transcending contemporary cultural restraints, well deserves a place among the travelogues written by European women in the first half of the nineteenth century.

References

Bassnett, Susan. 2002. Travel writing and gender. In: Peter Hulme–Tom Youngs (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to travel writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 225–241.

Cs. Lingvay, Klára. 2006. Báró Wesselényi Polixéna [Baroness Polixéna Wesselényi]. In: Cs. Lingvay Klára (ed.), *Olaszhoni és schweizi utazás* [*Travels in Italy and Switzerland*]. Cluj-Napoca: Kriterion. 5–43.

2011. John Paget és műve [John Paget and his oeuvre]. In: *Magyarország és Erdély: Naplójegyzetek* [*Hungary and Transylvania: Diary notes*] by John Paget. Cluj-Napoca: Kriterion. 7–40.

Fábri, Anna. 2001. Hungarian women writers 1790–1900. In: C. Hawkesworth (ed.), *A History of Central European women's writing*. Basingstoke–New York: Palgrave. 87–109.

Jékely, Zoltán. 1981. Utószó és jegyzetek [Afterword and notes]. In: János Győri–Zoltán Jékely (eds.), *Olaszhoni és schweizi utazás* [*Travels in Italy and Switzerland*]. Budapest: Magvető.

Jókai, Maurus. 1910[?] *Manasse; A story of the stirring days of '48*. Trans. Percy Favor Bicknell. London–New York: Walter Scott Pub. Co. Internet Archive.

1912. *Egy az Isten* [God is one]. Vols. 1–3. Budapest: Franklin. Internet Archive.

Jósika, Miklós. 1844. *Az élet útjai*. [The ways of life]. Budapest: Heckenast.

Kovács, Sándor. 2008a. Adalékok Jókai *Egy az Isten* című regényének geneziséhez [Supplementary information on the genesis of Jókai's *God is One*]. *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 122(4): 435–446.

8 There are some notable personages among Wesselényi's descendants: her daughter Jozefa's son Bethlen András became the Minister of Agriculture in Hungary (1890–1894) and her great-granddaughter, Margit Bethlen, the wife of Prime Minister of Hungary Count István Bethlen (1921–1931), became a prolific writer and playwright in the 1920s and 30s.

BDD-A33023 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:10:53 UTC)

2008b. Kétszáz éve született John Paget, Erdély magyar honpolgára [John Paget, Transylvania's Hungarian citizen, was born 200 years ago]. *Keresztény Magvető* 114(2): 203–218. http://unitarius.uw.hu/dok/KovacsSandor-PagetJanos.pdf (downloaded on: 01.02.2021).

2020. Adalékok a Paget család történetéhez [Supplementary information on the Paget family]. In: Kolumbán Vilmos József (ed.), *Egyház, iskola, művelődés. Egyháztörténeti tanulmányok* 27. Cluj-Napoca: Kolozsvári Protenstáns Teológiai Intézet. 320–334.

Madden, Henry Miller. 1939. The diary of John Paget, 1849. *The Slavonic and East European Review* 19(53/54): 237–264. www.jstor.org/stable/4203595 (downloaded on: 02.02.2021).

Mills, Sarah. 1991. *Discourses of difference: An analysis of women's travel writing and colonialism*. London–New York: Routledge.

Paget, John. 1839. *Hungary and Transylvania; With remarks on their condition, social, political, and economical*. Vols. 1–2. London: John Murray. Internet Archive.

Tagart, Lucy M. 1903. Recollections of a visit to Transylvania with my father, the Rev. E. Tagart, in 1858. In: M. Lucy Tagart (ed.), *The Hungarian Unitarians*. London: Unitarian Christian Publishing Office. 1–7. Internet Archive.

Thompson, Carl. 2011. *Travel writing*. London–New York: Routledge.

2017. Journeys to authority: Reassessing women's early travel writing 1763–1862. *Women's Writing* 24(2): 131–150. https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2016.1207915 (downloaded on: 01.02.2021).

Vita, Zsigmond. 1975. *Jókai Erdélyben* [Jókai in Transylvania]. Bucharest: Kriterion.

Wesselényi, Polixéna. 1981. [1842]. *Olaszhoni és schweizi utazás* [Travels in Italy and Switzerland], eds. János Győri–Zoltán Jékely. Budapest: Magvető.

BDD-A33023 © 2021 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:10:53 UTC)