

The Rockefeller Foundation's Activity in Hungary

by Gabor Pallo

The Rockefeller family created several funds for philanthropic purposes in the first twenty-five years of this century: the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research(1901; later renamed the Rockefeller University), the General Education Board (1902), the Rockefeller Sanitary Commission for the Eradication of Hookworm Disease in the South (1909), the Rockefeller Foundation (1913), the Bureau of Social Hygiene (1913), the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (1918) and the International Education Board (1923). Though all of them have different names and goals, in the popular mind they frequently are confused and people fail to distinguish between them, often referring to the work of the different institutions as being the work of only one, the Rockefeller Foundation. Because the institutions that were active internationally - the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) and its International Health Division (IHD, 1913-1951), the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (LSRM) and the International Education Board (IEB) - shared the same vision, goals, and, often, personnel, in the following discussion, I will not always distinguish between them either, referring to them generally as the Rockefeller philanthropies.

The Rockefeller Foundation (RF) started its grant-making activity in about the most difficult period of Hungarian history. After the First World War, the Paris peace treaty deprived the country of about two-thirds of its territory and population. The loss of the war, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and the democratic revolution, followed by a short-lived communist regime in 1919, brought the country to a crossroads in its history, where its very survival was at stake. Foremost among the issues facing the country's leaders were how the nation would survive, how to start a new economy in a small country, and how to preserve the nation's identity and dignity. The struggling nation was thirsty for the philanthropic support that the RF could offer.

The long history of Rockefeller philanthropic support in Hungary began in 1920 and falls into several different periods. During the first period, 1920-1925, the RF tried to determine what fields to support and began to support public health. In the second period, 1925-1940, Rockefeller philanthropic support expanded into new fields and into new geographic areas. The third period of support, in the aftermath of World War II, was again a turbulent time in Hungarian history and in RF activity also. The last period of Rockefeller philanthropic support in Hungary that I studied was support given to the 1956 revolutionaries.

I. The beginnings, 1920-1925

RF activity in Hungary began quite soon after the foundation was established in 1913. The first steps were taken in 1920 as the RF searched for suitable forms of aid and for fields worthy of support. By that time, the hookworm studies have proved to be successful in the USA, and the RF extended its interest to other diseases, such as tuberculosis and malaria, and to foreign countries. It developed its early programs in agriculture and in medicine and public health.

At the beginning, medical care for children appeared to be an area in which the RF could provide the most effective support in Hungary. As its first tentative step, the RF helped to furnish Hungary with the most important scientific literature and journals in pediatrics after the war. In 1921 the RF furnished new instruments to the "Stefania" children's hospital, thus helping to bring its equipment back to its prewar level. Even in this early period, the foundation's procedures and organizational ability was remarkable. The first contacts went through the American Relief Administration of the European Children's Fund, which had an office in Budapest and was instrumental in mediating between the RF and the totally unknown circles of the relevant Hungarian community.

The procedures followed by the RF in these first years showed all the characteristics of the RF's style: to establish personal contacts with the most important figures of the targeted community; to survey in detail and in objective terms the field to be supported, including the sometimes very complicated personal conditions; to find persons upon whom the RF could rely as unofficial representatives; to find channels into politics and politicians, who were influential in helping to promote the issues of concern to the RF.

The first contact person in Hungary was Emil Grosz, professor of ophthalmology, then Janos Bokay, Nekam Sandor, professors of medicine, and Mr. Toth, state secretary. From the RF, F.F Russell and Selskar M. Gunn visited Budapest and established important personal contacts with the leading figures in the medical community. The choice proved to be very lucky.

In the early 1920s, committees were set up to organize the activity. The Laboratory Supplies Committee helped to support the renewal of laboratories in hospitals and clinics. The Hungarian Committee decided in the matters of the different fields of help, which included travel grants as early as 1923. The first grants were awarded by the International Health Board and included Bela Johan, a key person in later years.

During this period, another foundation created by the Rockefeller family also began to work in Hungary. The International Education Board (IEB), formed in 1923, placed agriculture at the center of its activity in Hungary. Its initial survey explored the weaknesses of that area. It concluded that since agricultural education was not satisfactory, modern concepts should be popularized. Some people suggested that the IEB establish new schools or university departments to teach students a higher level of agriculture, but the IEB decided to support the already well-regarded Veterinary School, which received IEB support until 1930. This aid contributed greatly to the development of an institution that is considered a success even today.

The IEB also gave travel grants and fellowships that enabled Hungarian students to study in foreign countries. Because the IEB shared with the RF a common interest in such fields as biology, biochemistry, and bacteriology, it is sometimes difficult to tell who received a grant from the RF and who from the IEB, but soil experts in Hungary can be thankful for the IEB's support of their discipline.

The IEB tried to reach the wider agricultural community and hoped even to reach the farmers. In 1924, the Board looked for an agency in Hungary through which it could channel money into agriculture. This was not easy, however, since one of the conditions for IEB support was that recipients of its grants must be totally independent politically, and agriculture, having been a most important branch of production in the Hungarian economy, traditionally had close ties to politics. A cultural movement called "Falu" (village) seemed to meet the IEB's requirements. Its goal was to raise the cultural level of the little backward villages with lectures, exhibitions, school programs, etc. This activity began in 1924 and continued through the decade, although the amount of IEB support decreased each year.

As early as 1922, the RF had established contacts in the most influential political circles in the fields of its interest. Klebelsberg Kuno, the Minister of Education, was the central figure in cultural politics after the First World War. He believed that Hungary should prove its resourceful character by a "cultural superiority." He was just the right political person for negotiating with the RF about the opportunities for support in Hungary.

II. THE MOST ACTIVE PERIOD

The RF's most significant work in Hungary began with an amazingly thorough survey in 1922 by Selskar M. Gunn that described Hungarian public health conditions, providing statistics and discussions of a variety of institutions and different diseases. The survey concluded that the weakest points of the Hungarian public health system were in nursing and the public health laboratories. The most important RF actions followed from these conclusions, and produced an interesting and complicated ramification.

THE STATE HYGIENIC INSTITUTE

The center of the RF's activity was the State Hygienic Institute (SHI). The planning of the institute started in 1924 and was completed the next year, but the SHI did not open until 1927. Throughout this period, the RF gave support for the planning, for the institute's construction and development, and later for its work and expansion. This institute is still in operation at its original site, and plays a central role in public health, though now with Hungarian funds.

Bela Johan, an excellent person, was appointed as the first director of the SHI. When Johan became under-secretary of health in the Ministry of Home Affairs, his successor at SHI was J. Tomcsik. Johan became the RF's closest and most reliable collaborator, and he was consulted in all important matters concerning the RF's work in Hungary, which grew wider all the time. SHI became a research institute with public health projects, a center of nursing schools, and a center of public health administration. It also was the starting point for all of the RF officers who visited the country for different purposes and became a center where useful information was received about locations, people and other matters of importance to the work of the foundation. By 1933 the Budapest SHI had become the best in the region, according to one report. Between 1925 and 1940, the institute received around \$370,000 in total support from the RF.

NURSING

RF aid to public health nursing started in 1925 as a consequence of Gunn's survey. Gunn had found that the nursing school in Debrecen in eastern Hungary was too small for the task. A more detailed survey found that nurses, being under the control of different churches and the Red Cross, were underpaid and uneducated. Since they play an important part in public health, their education has been increased.

In 1927 Johan became involved in the project, and the Budapest Nursing School was attached to the SHI. Although it is difficult to establish when the RF began to support nursing schools, it probably was in 1927 and included support for both Budapest and Debrecen. The RF kept an eye not only on the work and curricula of the schools, but also worked to improve the education of the staff. When they were in Hungary, RF officers visited the nursing schools and took an interest in their daily work during the late 1920s and through the 1930s; some officers even came to Hungary just to inspect these schools. There is no question that the RF performed an important service to the public health with this activity.

PUBLIC HEALTH DEMONSTRATIONS

The public health demonstrations were another activity of high importance. Public health demonstrations were carried out in centrally located towns in rural areas with bad public health and sanitary conditions. With the help of the RF, this program established small stations - sometimes consisting of only three rooms - from which public health officers tried to educate the population about the advantages of regular health screening (tuberculosis was a big danger); of modern, unpolluted wells; and of efforts to prevent different diseases.

Godollo became the most important place for such demonstrations. A new building was finished in 1930 and the local doctor became head of the station. He lectured the local community about infant care, school hygiene, tuberculosis, etc. The station soon received a Roentgen apparatus. Other demonstration stations operated in a similar fashion in Mezökövesd, Berettóújfalú, Vác, and Pécs; only the scale, the disease, and the names were different. Johan planned to extend this activity into northern Hungary, including Miskolc, but the worsening international economic conditions prevented the RF from providing the necessary support for expanding the program in the late 1930s.

Through these demonstrations, the RF reached the local population directly, while its support for education, though extremely significant, was not visible to the general population. The RF built a country-wide network of public health stations centered in Budapest, and the surveys of the different territories are unique sources for the social history and ethnography of Hungary. Without the aid of the RF, the work in these stations would have been impossible.

The RF also financed the Sanitary Reform Bureau in SHI. Its duties were: to assign the experts to special studies, to acknowledge the completion of these studies, to keep in

contact with the ministries, to promote public relations, to find candidates for fellowships, to prepare statistics and reports, and to review the budget. The Bureau served as an administrative center of RF operations in Hungary.

SCIENCE

A very effective part of the RF's activity in Hungary was its support of science and scientific institutions. RF support went to the University of Budapest, the University of Szeged, the University of Pécs, the Biological Research Institute in Tihany, the Technical University of Budapest (departments of organic chemistry and physics), and the State Chemical Institute. The first Hungarian research grant was awarded in 1926 to Elek Sigmund for agricultural research.

This type of assistance played an extremely important role in achieving many significant scientific results, best illustrated by the grant given to the University of Szeged. This university moved to Szeged from Kolozsvár (Transylvania) after the latter city was attached to Romania, but establishing a solid intellectual and financial footing for the relocated university proved to be a most difficult task. In 1930, Lauder W. Jones, associate director of the RF European office, visited Szeged with the Minister of Education, Klebelsberg. Jones collected information about the university's staff and equipment and met with the twelve most respected professors. In 1931 the RF agreed to grant the university a significant sum of money over a four-year period, provided that the Hungarian government also undertook to pay part of the expenses. Moreover, at the end of the four-year grant, the government would undertake the obligation of running the institution. To determine the allocation of the fund, a Research Council was established; it consisted of the local professors and its chairman was Albert Szent-Györgyi, a biochemist who had just returned from Cambridge. He was a very ambitious young professor who intended to establish a first-class center for biochemistry research, and he did his best to strengthen the contact between the RF and the university. In the next two decades he became the most successful and most prominent Hungarian scientist, and received the Nobel prize in 1937. Szent-Györgyi regularly reported to the RF on all important results he obtained in his lab.

Many very important projects were partly financed by the RF under the precondition of state participation. One of them was the support of the first ever Hungarian school in organic chemistry at the Technical University of Budapest, led by Géza Zemplén, one of the most outstanding scientists living in Hungary. The RF recognized his abilities in the early 1920s and granted him support for four years beginning in 1930. Some years later another Nobel laureate was educated in the Zemplén laboratory: George Oláh, who received the Nobel prize in 1994.

Experimental physics had great difficulty in Hungary, since it requires costly equipment. At the Technical University of Budapest a new school of molecular spectroscopy developed under Béla Pogány and his young, gifted assistant, Rezső Schmid, who received significant support from the RF on the recommendation of Robert Millikan of Caltech.

In the social sciences, the RF supported Zoltán Magyary's Institute for Research Administration in Public Administration, but this aid was given halfheartedly, mostly due to Magyary's high ministerial position under Klebelsberg, which enabled him to exert great influence on matters of science policy.

TRAVEL GRANTS AND FELLOWSHIPS

The travel grants and fellowships were perhaps the most visible aspect of the RF's activity in Hungary. I could identify in the files at least 205 people who received grants for travel or for scientific instruments before 1956. The largest number (75) worked in medical fields, and there were 19 nurses, 18 chemists, 5 biochemists, 6 biologists, 12 economists, 6 politicians and political scientists, 5 mathematicians, and 5 political scientists among them. The largest number of Hungarian fellows (69) received support during the period 1925-1930; fewer in 1920-1925 (27) and in 1930-1935 (29), and even fewer during 1935-1940 (22). But not a single grant holder could be identified between 1940 and 1956 in Hungary.

Many of the fellows became very important in their fields in Hungary and in the international scientific community. They include Imre Törö, Imre Haynal, Elemér Schulek, Aladár Buzágh, Kálmán Lissák, Bruno F. Straub, Kálmán Laki, Aladár Beznák and others.

Support was granted not only to the Hungarian scientists living in their homeland but also to those who lived elsewhere. The 1943 Nobel-prize winner, George von Hevesy, for example, received very significant support in Freiburg and later in Copenhagen, in the Niels Bohr Institute. The famous Hungarians who lived in the USA, like mathematicians John von Neumann, George Pólya, physicists Leo Szilard, and Edward Teller, also were grant holders, while chemist Laszlo Farkas and economist Thomas Balogh received help in Israel and in Great Britain, respectively.

III. THE POST-WORLD WAR II PERIOD

This period was divided sharply into two parts - the years immediately after the war, and 1956 - and each part had entirely different features. In the years between them, however, there is no sign of any RF activity in Hungary.

THE IMMEDIATE POSTWAR YEARS

Albert Szent Györgyi, who became the leader in reorganizing science in Hungary, renewed his contacts with the RF in 1945. His goal was for the RF to contribute to the reconstruction of science, to the replacement of lost laboratory instruments, to the repair of damaged libraries, and to continue the travel grants. Politics, however, intervened with each of these intentions. RF officers had difficulty obtaining visas. Moreover, the uncertain diplomatic relationship between the two countries prevented the RF from transferring the \$5000 it had granted to the Biological Institute of Tihany.

The RF took many steps to renew old ties and to gain information about previous fellows and about institutions that had received RF support before the war, the State Hygienic Institute among them. In 1948, RF representative J.H. Bauer visited Budapest and made a most informative survey of the damage done to the State Hygienic Institute and to the public health demonstration stations in Gödöllő and other towns. The damage, he discovered, was not very serious. Many fellows stayed in their old positions, others emigrated, including J. Tomcsik, Johan's successor at SHI. Some of them changed positions, like Béla Johan, who at that time was employed by the Phylaxia pharmaceutical plant and had difficulties under the communist regime. A few former fellows died or were lost during the war. In Tihany, Beznák, head of the institute, was removed to a minor position in Budapest in 1948. The new director, János Horváth, showed an interest in continuing the relationship with the RF. Aladár Beznák, who had been on friendly terms with the RF leaders and representatives, could finally leave the country and found asylum in the West.

THE 1956 REVOLUTION

RF operations concerning the 1956 Hungarian revolution were different from its previous activities mainly because they focused on those who left the country. The RF's refugee program helped individuals to begin a new life somewhere outside their homeland. This general humanitarian work was not a continuation of any earlier RF activity in Hungary. This humanitarian work was carried out in three different kinds of grants. First, the RF allocated \$600,000 in early December and made another allocation in late December 1956 to aid the refugees camping in Austria. Secondly, special support was granted to enable university and high-school students to continue their studies. This grant went to the Austrian schools that undertook the burden of educating these students. Thirdly, the RF gave special assistance to fleeing scientists and artists, such as Imre Lakatos and Karoly Lassovszky, to help them find their way in their new countries. This program lasted into the 1960s.

This part of the RF activity had so many ramifications and the archival material is so abundant that it is worthy of further in-depth study.

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