# Controversial issues from the life of the Hungarian-originated consort of the last khedive of Egypt and Sudan

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#### Abstract

Few know that Abbas Helmy Pasha, the last khedive of Egypt and Sudan, had a Hungarian consort, Countess May Török Szendrői, who was known as Djavidan Hanum after her marriage and conversion to Islam. Their love-based marriage and life, full of hardships and trials, provoked many speculations and, as a result, led to misconceptions about May. Controversial information has already appeared about her name, exact date of birth and origin. Here, our main goal is to dispel mistakes and misconceptions about her name, exact date of birth and origin by referring to scientifically accepted archival and documentary sources.

Keywords: Abbas Helmy II; May Török de Szendrői; Djavidan Hanum; May Puskás;

Tivadar Puskás

Subject-Affiliation in New CEEOL: History - Local History / Microhistory

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#### Introduction

The Austro-Hungarian community played a prominent role in the Egyptian political life in the second half of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century. Among them were many figures who were closely associated with the Egyptian Khedivial Court and had real influence on the formation of state policy. In our opinion, the most prestigious and prominent personality of all was the undeservedly forgotten May Török (1877–1968). The Hungarian Countess, who was born in America, officially grew up as the foster daughter of Tivadar Puskás¹ and was first the secret wife of the Egyptian Khedive, Abbas Helmy Bey,² between 1900 and 1910, and then officially became the *Khediva*³ of Egypt (1910–1913) after her conversion to Islam (Al-Naggar – Prantner – Fafka – Gloviczki – Pornói 2021,

<sup>1</sup> Tivadar Puskás de Ditró or Theodore Puskás according to English sources (1844–1893) was a well-known Hungarian inventor, telephone pioneer, and also the founder of Telefon Hirmondó.

<sup>2</sup> Abbas II Helmy (1874–1944) was the last Khedive of Egypt and Sudan between 1892 and 1914. After the Ottoman Empire joined the Central Powers in World War I, the British removed the nationalist Khedive and nominated the pro-British Hussein Kamel as Sultan of Egypt.

<sup>3</sup> The wife of a khedive.

5–6). She was also a famous pianist, an outstanding actress, a distinguished writer and painter who "chose Egypt as her place of residence because of her feelings for young Abbas [...]. Her close relationship with the ruler also provides a glimpse into the lives of Egypt's Europeanizing upper circles, where the polygamy<sup>4</sup> and promiscuous lifestyle of the khedive often lead to scandals due to the spread of monogamy." (Komár 2012, 91)

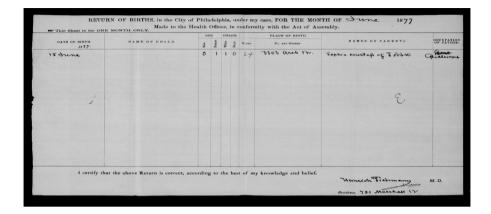
Only a few researchers have dealt with Djavidan's life, but they, too, have written only briefly, using relatively few sources. These include the doctoral dissertation of Krisztián Komár (Komár 2012, 101–104), an article by Dorina Márián and Zoltán Márián (Márián – Márián 2004: 26–29) and an extensive newspaper article by Egyptian journalist Samir Refaat. (Refaat 1994, 13)

The woman at the centre of this article, Djavidan, has lived a long life, fifty-five in German-speaking areas and thirty-six in five other countries around the world. However, despite her career, complicated family ties, and constant travels, it can also be said that many aspects of her life remained unclear and ambiguous, despite the fact that she was clearly at the centre of public attention at certain times. The exact name, date of birth, exact identity of the biological father, number of marriages and with whom she was married, among other things, are still disputed. In this work, we attempt to present the official name, exact date of birth, and hitherto obscure origin (legal and biological father) of Djavidan with proofs and documentation. To resolve these ambiguities, we used American, Egyptian, Hungarian, German and Austrian archival, documentary, and contemporary press sources previously unknown to the general public.

## Names of the Hungarian-originated consort of the Khedive of Egypt

Djavidan's name was written in various forms on the Internet on various Arabic, Hungarian and foreign language websites, in the press, and in scientific articles. For example, she can be found under the names "Marianna Török Szendrői", "May Török Szendrői", "Djavidan Hanum", "Zubeida Hanum", "Májuska", "Mary Török" and "May Török de Szendrő". In the West, the name Marianna Török Szendrő is the best known and most widespread, although she never officially bore that name. The reason for the misunderstanding in this case may be a translation error on the one hand, and the naming habit of noble families on the other. In fact, many of her first names were the same as her sister Marianna, with whom she was often mistakenly identified by various authors dealing with her biography. As for the name "Májuska", it was used in the documents issued by the Hungarian courts in the inheritance trial of Tivadar Puskás.

<sup>4</sup> Having more than one wife at the same time.

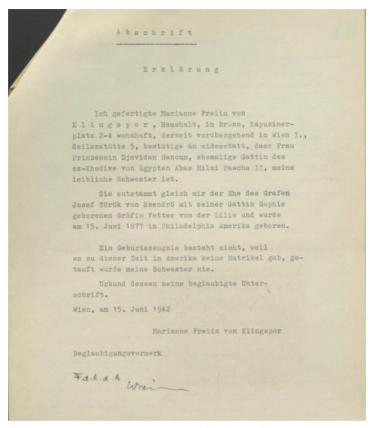


In addition, the name Mary Török is still popular in the Anglo-Saxon region, while she was formerly known as Countess May Török de Szendrő in the German-speaking countries. The truth is as follows: It can be clearly stated that she was called May in the close family circle and was renamed "Zubeida" after converting to Islam. Later, after her marriage, she received the elite name Djavidan Hanum ("Eternal Woman"). Being the wife of the Khedive, she was also referred to as Khediva. Finally, Djavidan Török can be read in her death certificate, while the name Djanan Djavidan was engraved on her tombstone in Latin letters.

Document issued by the Philadelphia Birth Register. The record shows the date of Djavidan's birth and the name of her mother (Birth registers, 1860–1903, for the city of Philadelphia 1860–1903).

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Death Certificate of Djavidan Hanum (Graz Registration Authority)



Marianne's declaration attached to the Death Certificate (Graz Registration Authority)

#### Controversial date of birth

According to most available data and sources about Djavidan, she was born in 1874 or 1877. Fortunately, there are many resources to resolve this conflict. According to the Philadelphia Birth Register, her mother, Sophie Vetter von der Lilie, was hospitalized at the Philadelphia Hospital, where she gave birth to her daughter on June 15, 1877. Djavidan herself gave the latter date as the date of her birth in her book *Harem Life*. Moreover, the date 1877 is also on Djavidan's Berlin Address Card<sup>6</sup> issued on June 23, 1920. The same date and place of birth can be found in the third point of Djavidan's death certificate. The latter document was accompanied by another confirmatory statement dated 15 June 1942, made un-

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see: Djavidan Hanum (1931): Harem Life. London; Prinzessin Djavidan Hanum (1930): Harem. Berlin. Translated by Saad Radwan, Dar Almada, Damascus, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> DJAVIDAN – QUEEN FOR A DAY: Videocollage von Heinz Trenczak & Arthur Summereder. In the 14 minute 25 seconds of the program we can see the Address Card.

der oath by Baroness Marianne Klingspor (Djavidan's sister). In this document we can find Djavidan's date of birth: June 15, 1877. This document also states that the parents did not baptise the child and claims that there was no state registry in that part of the United States at that time. In the light of the above, it is our view that Djavidan was born on June 15, 1877, in Philadelphia, USA.

#### Blood father's issue

In the preface to her book *Harem*, Djavidan mysteriously stated that "perhaps some readers want to know who Djavidan Hanum used to be in order to make a fair critique of her opinions and her outlook on life – perhaps to better understand her." (Djavidan Hanum 1931, 9) The questions raised are compounded by a pensive sentence: "... the accidental birthplace largely determined her fate. Later, in the old family house, this child of the New World enjoyed a new freedom because she was never subject to the yoke of conventional faith." (Djavidan Hanum 1931: 9) Whether it is not a spelling or an unfortunate wording is shown by the literal appearance of the quoted sentence in the 1931 English and German editions of the book and in the 1980 (Cairo) and 2004 (Damascus) Arabic editions of the book.

To clarify of the problem, it can be stated, first of all, that according to online and printed sources, Count József Török<sup>7</sup> and his wife, Countess Sophie Vetter von der Lilie,<sup>8</sup> were married on August 28, 1870, in a Roman Catholic ceremony at the Neu-Hohenwang Castle in Mürztal. However, the couple's relationship soon deteriorated, largely due to the husband's libertine. They finally separated in 1873, and in June 1881 they officially declared their divorce after Sophie converted to the Reformed Christianity. Both members of the couple later remarried.<sup>9</sup>

Mourning report of Count József Török. The document includes the name and family ties of Marianna, but does not include May and her younger siblings.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Count József Kristóf Török (1847–1909), was the former head of Ung County. The marriage to Sophia gave birth to Joseph Jr. (who died in 1898) and Marianna in 1874.

<sup>8</sup> Countess Sophie Vetter von der Lilie, Countess Zsófia in Hungarian (1851–1912). Sophia was burried in the Fiumei Road Cemetery, in Budapest, where Tivadar Puskás also rests. Sophia's tomb can be seen from the main entrance in the left of the two rows of arcades, on the north side of Gerle Sándor promenade (Budapest, Kerepesi út cemetery - II. Arcade line on the left, Á.B. 35)

<sup>9</sup> Sophie Vetter von der Lilie concluded a civil marriage with Tivadar Puskás in London in March 1882, and after the death of the inventor in 1893, she married with the painter, Károly Cserna in 1896.

<sup>10</sup> Országos Széchényi Könyvtár ,National Széchényi Library', Gyászjelentés ,Mourning Report', 1909.



For the reasons detailed in the previous chapter, it was revealed that Diavidan's date of birth was 1877, three years after her mother left her legal husband. On the one hand, this precludes the possibility that Count József Török - who is listed as her father in most official documents - was indeed her blood father. On the other hand, it can also explain disputes over the date of birth. In the writings mentioning 1874 as her date of birth, the authors maybe intentionally or carelessly wanted to indicate that Djavidan was conceived before her 'parents' separated. The latter is clearly evidenced by the Hungarian daily newspaper Az Uiság, which states that "Sophia's daughter, May, was born during her first marriage, through shortly before the divorce, so she is entitled to the name of the Count of Török by law."11 The author of the quoted article was helped in promoting this misconception by the fact that, as we have already alluded to above in connection with the use of the same first name, May was often confused with her sister, Count Marianne Török of Szendrő, who happened to have been born on 8 January 1874. And the fact that the sisters were indeed two separate persons is clearly demonstrated by the close family ties of Count Marianna Török of Szendrő.

The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) database provides additional valuable information to clarify the issue, more specifically to refute the biological paternity of Count József Török. According to statistical records and archival material, May's mother, Sophie, boarded the Neckar ship in Bremen, Northern Germany, on July 14, 1876, to travel to New York, where she arrived on July 21st. If we compare the dates of the voyage and May's birth, we can see that 329 days elapsed between the two dates (July 21, 1876, and June 15, 1877). The latter makes it clear that May's conception took place on U.S. soil. However,

<sup>11</sup> A khedive magyar felesége. Az Ujság, 9 February 1910. 13.

according to the data known so far, Count József Török never visited the United States of America during his lifetime, and Sophie (who was still officially his wife at the time) did not leave the country during the period under examination.

#### Tivadar Puskás's issue

János Pap's work on Tivadar Puskás, published in 1960, provides a valuable basis for the identification of Djavidan's biological father. The author mentioned in his book that he personally met Djavidan's middle sister before she left Hungary in September 1956. One of the questions that arose during their conversation about May was the unclear issue of fatherhood. Mrs. Lajos Gyula, born Mária Margit Teodóra Török - Margit Puskás (nicknamed Maggie) in Hungary - stated that her mother moved to Paris after being separated from Count József Török, where she accidentally met Tivadar Puskás. It is questionable how accurate this story is, which has remained in the family memory. In the absence of relevant sources, what has been reported raises questions about how and where they could have met "by chance" in the vast French capital. And it doesn't answer the even more fundamental question of when and after what detours Sophie moved there, where she lived alone, without a companion. For this reason, in our view, the members of the couple may have been in contact with each other even before Paris, so the meeting can be seen as the beginning of their life together rather than just getting to know each other. 12

However, the Paris meeting may be supported by the fact that Tivadar Puskás was in France in 1876, following his trips to Great Britain and Belgium, where he negotiated with local authorities about the latest telegraph machines and the construction of a telegraph network within the capital. Another interesting piece of evidence is the contemporary passenger list maintained by USCIS, which lists Tivadar Puskás as a US citizen under the name of Mr. Theodore de Puskas.

The documents clearly show that Tivadar Puskás negotiated in Europe on behalf of Thomas Alva Edison. After the discussions, he sailed from Le Havre to New York on a boat called France, where he landed on July 19, 1876, barely two days before Sophie's arrival.

<sup>12</sup> In line with our position, Attila Puskás, for example, dates the meeting of Tivadar Puskás and Sophie Vetter von Lilie between 1870 and 1872, when Tivadar was in Cluj-Napoca as an employee of the Waring Brothers & Eckersley Railway Company. Unfortunately, the author did not indicate the source of the information he provided. (Puskás – Csáky – Dr. Rajnai 2021, 36)

# New York, U.S., Arriving Passenger and Crew Lists (including Castle Garden and Ellis Island), 1820-1957 Immigration & Travel Information: Name: Mr. Teodore De Puskas Gender: Male

Ethnicity/ Nationality: American Age: 30
Birth Date: abt 1846

Place of Origin: United States of America

Departure Port: Le Havre, France and Plymouth, England

Destination: USA
Arrival Date: 19 Jul 1876

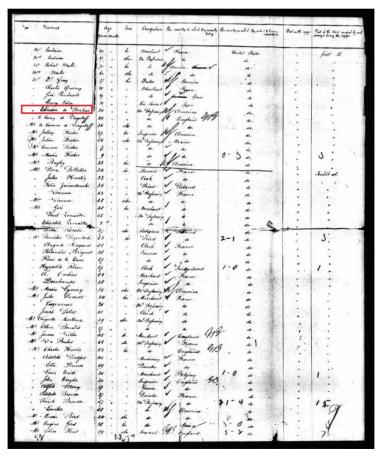
Arrival Port: New York, New York, USA

Ship Name: France

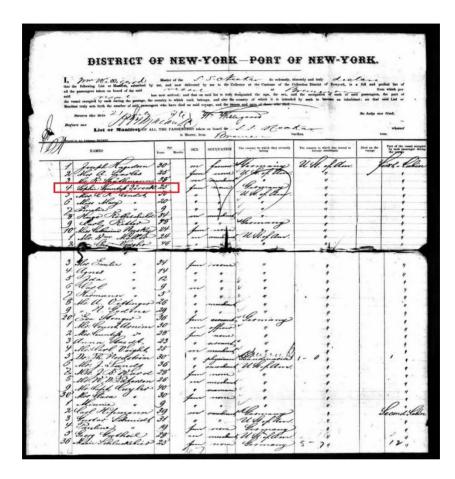
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Detailed information on Tivadar Puskás, a passenger arriving in New York (July 19, 1876)



Ninth passenger on the list issued by the Port of New York: Tivadar Puskás



Fourth passenger on the list issued by the Port of New York: Sophie, May's mother

The mere fact that Sophie and Tivadar were in France and then in the United States at the same time is not in itself conclusive evidence of Djavidan's origin. However, we find it thought-provoking that the couple lived together in the United States and May was born nearly eleven months after her mother moved to the U.S. land. Moreover, we found no indication in the sources that Sophie had an affair with anyone other than Tivadar between her arrival in the United States and the birth of May.

Another interesting point is that May was not registered after her birth. At that time, her mother was still officially the wife of Count József Török de Szendrő, who was therefore considered the legal father by European law and the Roman Catholic Church. For this reason, Tivadar Puskás could not officially give his surname to the child born out of wedlock. However, the lack of official registration did not mean that May did not use the surname Puskás when she was young. This is evidenced by her application for a U.S. passport, shown below.



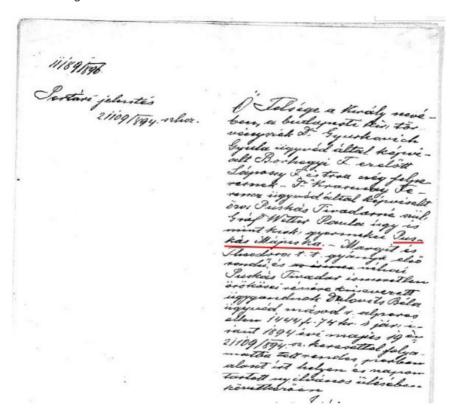
Puskás May's American passport application (National Archives and Records Administration)

The document, issued on November 12, 1895, clearly shows that May applied for the travel document in Budapest with the surname Puskás and as an American citizen. In addition to May signing the document, a witness<sup>13</sup> also confirmed that the facts stated in her affidavit are true to the best of his knowledge and belief. Among her younger siblings, Mária Margit Teodóra (born in 1881) and József (born around 1885) officially took the name Puskás next to Török Szendrői after their father's death in 1893. The youngest of them, Mária Teodóra Zsuzsanna (born in 1887) used the surname Ditró, referring to the noble ancestors of Tivadar. In their case, it cannot be ruled out that the inheritance contract concluded by their parents to secure the future of their children played a role in the use of the name Puskás. However, it is a fact that in a document filed in the Puskás's inheritance

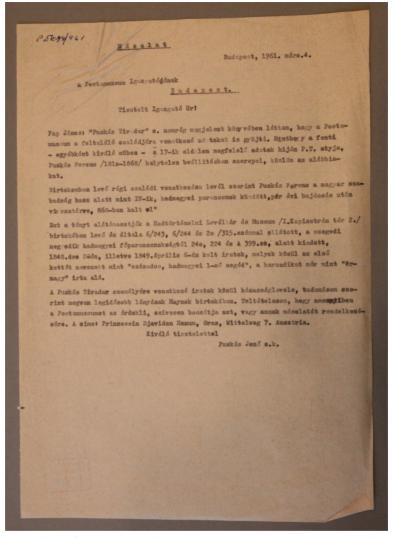
<sup>13</sup> The witness could not be clearly identified from the illegible signature on the document.

lawsuit and presented below, May and his sisters were listed with the surname of the deceased inventor.

During her lifetime, Djavidan never publicly named her biological father. In addition to a number of reasons, the Török de Szendrő surname may have given her the title of Countess, which, regardless of her actual origin, gave her access to the elite classes of Europe and greatly facilitated her position in the upper echelons of society. However, the truth could not be completely obscured, and the question of the identity of the biological father came to the fore several times, including in the inheritance lawsuits of Puskás and also in correspondence between Jenő Puskás and the Hungarian Postal Museum.



One of the documents of the Puskás' inheritance lawsuit, in which May appears under the Hungarian name Májuska (Budapest City Archives)



Letter from Jenő Puskás to the head of the Postal Museum. In the last paragraph of the document dated March 4, 1961, Jenő names May as the eldest daughter of Tivadar Puskás

### Summary

In summary, there is clear evidence of Djavidan's place and date of birth, i.e. that she was born in Philadelphia on June 15, 1877. We have outlined the various names that have appeared in the public consciousness, in the different sources and also in the literature about her, and we have successfully identified and refuted the related *intentional and accidental* mistakes in this regard. However, the biggest challenge for us was to identify May's biological father. Based on the arguments explained above and the supporting documents, we are of the opinion that there was a blood relationship (i.e. a father-daughter relationship) between the Hungarian inventor, Tivadar Puskás, and the wife of the last Khedive of Egypt and Sudan.

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