

TRANSFORMATIONS IN EMBODIED LIFECOURSES: HUNGARIAN WOMEN IN THE 1990S

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This paper brings together ethnographic data and scholarly material from three different areas of study: the effects on women of the political, social, and economic changes that occurred in Hungary throughout the 1990s; nostalgic discourse as a tool for the creation of collective memory; and food ways as markers of identities. The site in which I explore this intersection is the food sections of the two leading women's magazines in Hungary in the 1990s, *Nők Lapja* and *Kiskegyed*.ⁱ As women's magazines have been shown to do in both socialist (Attwood 1999) and capitalist (Ballaster, et. al. 1991) societies, these publications served as socialization tools for women who needed to find their place in the new political, social, and economic systems that developed after the socialist period ended in 1990. One way these magazines performed this function was to provide a new set of memories for women to draw upon in situating themselves in a capitalist society. I argue that these magazines used food preparation as a primary historical event that women needed 'to remember' in order to properly situate themselves and their bodies in a consumer democracy.

It has been said that Hungary completed the transition from socialism in ten months in late 1989 and early 1990 (Bruszt and Stark 1991). This may be true from the vantage point of macro-political processes, such as the formation of political parties and governments, but it is almost meaningless from the perspectives of the people living through the transition. As all of the ethnography and sociology from Hungary (i.e., West 2002; Andorka, et. al. 1999) and the other post-socialist East and Central European countries (i.e.,

Borneman 1992; Creed 1998) illustrates, many people enculturated into actually existing socialism have struggled with the transition to new systems. The reasons for these difficulties are multiple and include increased economic insecurities (Van Hoorn, et. al. 2000) and the disruption, and even abandonment, of the "ideal lifecourses" (Borneman 1992) laid out by and begun during the socialist regimes. It is the acceptance of these socialist "lifecourses," at least at some level, which has made the reconstruction of women's memories a necessity in the post-socialist era.

John Borneman defines "the lifecourse as a series of transformations in experiential meaning" as they relate to the classification of demographic indicators within society (1992:340, n. 22). When he speaks of the ideal lifecourse, he refers to "state strategies, embodied in powerful legal and political commentaries" that "set the aesthetic and ideational framework in which experiences are categorized and periodized" (1992:32). Of course, as Borneman recognizes, these discourses "are never ... able to uniformize the lifecourse of their citizens" (ibid). Rather, they provide a normalizing model against which individuals can, or are even expected to measure, evaluate, and name the experiences through which they define the self.

In my exploration of women's lives in Hungary, I borrow from phenomenology to argue that changes in ideal lifecourses, as defined by Borneman, are at best irrelevant, and at worst meaningless, unless they somehow enact a change in embodied experience, or what Mauss first referred to as '*les techniques du corps*' (in Csordas 1990:7). While transformative discourse of the ideal lifecourse at

the social level is certainly important in this process, as Borneman shows, without exploring the ways that this discourse is embodied by the population in question, the whole process of change is seen merely as a cognitive affair.

Women's Lifecourse in Hungary

Ideal lifecourses in all the socialist countries were largely focused on the attainment of "socially organized work" (Ferge 1979), so that men and women alike were considered societally (and socially) successful once they began contributing economically to the development of the socialist state. In both law and practice, the right to work in these countries became not only a privilege but also a necessity. In addition, in every venue, from school text books and activities sponsored by the Young Pioneers to women's magazines and on-the-job training classes, several generations of 'socialists' were enculturated into this system that placed socially organized work at the core of both masculine and feminine personhood.

While the "masculinization of Hungarian culture, which rejuvenated industrial production and fostered the implementation of social policies" (Kürti 1991:57), caused few problems for many Hungarian men, when it came to women, the socialists were often seen to be imposing an alien lifecourse. In fact, because of the lack of choice (Van Hoorn, et. al. 2000) and double burden (Corrin 1994), some Hungarian women continued to resent the fact that socially organized work was the only key to moral participation in the socialist state, the only available ideal lifecourse. Nonetheless, there is also some evidence to show that many women in Hungary did take these prescribed lifecourses seriously and use them to guide their life choices. For example, Martha Lampland (1990) has shown in her analysis of a series of essays written by Hungarian women under the banner "Work is My Calling," that at least some women during the socialist era strongly identified with the idea of themselves as laboring for the good of the community in socially organized work. Also, in her examination of the backlash against women in the latter years of the socialist era, Joanna Goven (1993) provides further evidence of the degree to which women in Hungary had begun to see themselves as workers outside of the home with something valuable to contribute to society.

With the demise of the socialist system in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the primary legitimating force captured by the new system and its representatives was anticommunism. This meant, among other things, the immediate elimination of the one-party political system with its limits on freedom of speech, religion and travel. It also meant the eradication of the hegemony of socially organized work, which saw the prompt demise of the moral necessity for women to work outside the home (although not necessarily the financial necessity). In place of communist work ideologies, the new state structure in Hungary attempted to follow the capitalist reconstructive path of West Germany forty years earlier (Gedeon 1995:441). Particularly in the first years of transition, the new structure fostered an "overall strategy aimed at the restoration of tradition" and the placement of citizens "into a hierarchically ordered, prosperous community held together by aesthetic appeals to a superior (traditional) authority" (Borneman 1992: 203). Part of the ideological baggage that accompanied this strategy was an essentialist view of gender that naturalized women's position in the home.

Although Hungarians willingly voted the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party out of power in 1990, over forty years of enculturation and memory building could not be destroyed by this event, no matter how monumental. In addition to changes in policy, the new system likewise needed to construct new ideal, embodied lifecourses for Hungarian citizens, particularly women, prepare them for these lifecourses, and provide normative support for those who make the 'ideal' choices. As they did in Russia at the start of the socialist period earlier in the 20th century (Attwood 1999), women's magazines in Hungary in the 1990s played (and continue to play) an important role in these processes. One of the most important functions they fulfilled was providing women with a series of 'invented' memories upon which they could draw in both imagining and actualizing the ideal, embodied lifecourse of the capitalist housewife. Through the use of nostalgic discourse these magazines attempted to create a collective memory of domestic, embodied labor that Hungarian women could use to imagine their own bodies and lifecourses.

Of course, these magazines' publishers were not self-consciously attempting to socialize

women into the role of the capitalist housewife; they were trying to make a profit. However, I do not believe the profit motive precluded this kind of socialization from occurring in this case. First, analyses of women's magazines in other capitalist countries illustrate that this medium developed around pleasures that must "be taken in the privacy of one's own home, and the bosom of the biological family" (Ballaster, et. al. 1991:164). It is not surprising that in Hungary these kinds of publications took on the role they had been playing in capitalist countries generally since the nineteenth century. Second, Hungarian women in the 1990s experienced tremendous social and economic changes. They encountered high-impact Western advertising, new kitchen gadgets, new food items, inflation, unemployment, and a large number of other factors for the first time, often without any idea about how to use or make sense of them (James 1995). Women felt insecure (West 2002) and pessimistic about the future (Millar 1994) and about their roles as women in this new society (Haney 1999). I propose that these magazines provided one familiar, comfortable place to which women could turn to try to make sense of the consumer democracy that developed in Hungary in the 1990s. Indeed, in my interviews with Hungarian women, most said that they read these magazines in order to learn something. Therefore, making a profit in this kind of publication was intimately linked with their 'educational,' or socialization, role.

Nostalgia

Before moving on to discuss the use of food images in these magazines, I need first to address the use of nostalgic discourse in the process of inventing collective memory. Christopher Lasch argues that nostalgia is the "ideological twin" of progress, and that while these two concepts appear to be somewhat contradictory, in actuality both entail the idealization of a time outside of an insecure, dangerous or otherwise difficult present (1990:18). Therefore, while Hungarians in the 1990s were imagining their future as full members of "Europe" (West 2000b), with all the historical, sociological, political and economic ramifications of that term, the natural flipside of this ideology of progress is 'to remember' a history that can serve as the basis for this imagined future. I found that these two Hungarian women's magazines were locating this history in the kitchens of contemporary

women's grandmothers and urging women 'to remember' this time and place as they prepared themselves for 'progress' away from socialism.

At the same time that nostalgia is intimately linked with progress, Renato Rosaldo reminds us that the memories constructed through nostalgic discourse are not neutral fantasies of an historic golden age, but fictions created by and for certain groups of people to justify, hide or smooth over a present set of power relations. Rosaldo himself addresses the concept of imperialist nostalgia, whereby "people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed" (1989:69) through "a pose of 'innocent yearning'" (1989:70) that "makes racial domination appear innocent and pure" (1989:68), as in the film *Out of Africa*. Changing the terms somewhat from his original thesis, I posit that a form of domestic nostalgia makes gender domination appear innocent and pure. For example, contemporary Hungarian women are being asked to abandon an ideal lifecourse focused on the attainment of socially organized work and to concentrate their energies on the private sphere of home and family. By providing a set of 'memories' of Grandma's home cooking for these women to draw upon, rather than laying out the pros and cons of the life of a capitalist housewife, these magazines make this kind of essentialized gender construct appear 'innocent and pure' rather than patriarchal and unfair.

Finally, as I have indicated above, it is important to note that nostalgic discourse does not necessarily rely upon actual memories of past events, but may actually create them. Deborah Lupton, in her discussion of the importance of food as "storehouses" of memories, reminds us that nostalgic discourse is "not dependent upon a happy childhood, but recreates the fiction of one" (1996:49-50). For most *Nök Lapja* and *Kiskegyed* readers the feelings invoked by the recipes and food articles will not come from a memory of childhood treats from grandma's kitchen, but will create a memory of perfect meals served up by the ideal grandma. At the same time, the creation of these food memories may not always entail what Jean Duruz calls the "good food myth" (1999:237). In her analysis of "remembered food cultures" from 1950s and 1960s Australia (1999:231), Duruz argues that both the "good food myth" and the "bad food myth" have their place in the creation of the past;

they “can both provide means to psychic comfort” in a difficult present (1999:238). In these two Hungarian magazines both positive and negative memories are likewise available for women to draw upon in ‘remembering’ the past and evaluating and planning for their own lives in the present and future.

The Magazines

In Hungary in the 1990s, the two most popular women’s magazines did not unambiguously advocate women’s complete seclusion in the domestic sphere. Many articles and some advertisements addressed the difficulties and rewards for women of working outside the home and finding a comfortable balance with domestic life. Nevertheless, there was also a significant push in both publications’ food sections for women to focus their time and energies on the home and family. In both magazines, women were regularly urged to cook meals for themselves and their families and guests in traditional Hungarian ways, rather than relying upon convenience and half-prepared foods (West 2000a). Even in *Kiskegyed*, where the majority of the articles relating to food and cooking concerned dieting (West 2000a), the diets always required women to spend a significant amount of time in the kitchen making homemade foods, rather than purchasing low-fat convenience and half-prepared items.

In addition to home cooking, both of these magazines also employed a nostalgic discourse of ‘Grandma in the kitchen’ to create for women a set of food memories to contrast with their own experiences. As in Duruz’s Australia, these magazines likewise created positive memories, in this case of an idealized time of homemade dishes, fresh ingredients, healthy bodies, and economizing. This is what I call the ‘good grandma myth.’ At the same time, these magazines also presented many articles and other features that focused on grandma’s life as being a difficult time of poverty, few kitchen appliances, and unhealthy eating habits and bodies. This is what I call the ‘bad grandma myth.’ I argue that both of these ‘memories,’ or more accurately myths, provide contemporary women with an understanding of their place in the particular form of patriarchy that has developed in consumer democracies. They learn that the ideal woman focuses much of her energy on home and family, as did the ‘good grandma,’

but at the same time she must work outside the home to allow her to purchase a wide variety of kitchen appliances and healthy and/or dietetic alternatives to their ‘bad’ grandma’s “sugar, lard and flour.”

In the articles that recreate an idealized past, or good grandma myth, Grandma’s food is presented as tastier, healthier, or cheaper than today’s fare. One example of this kind of discourse is in a 1994 article from *Nök Lapja* called, “Does the World Go Further With Potato Noodles?” This two-page article discusses a teacher training college that offers a variety of home economics classes, in addition to the regular curriculum. The final two paragraphs of the article are solely in the (wistful) voice of the author, Erzsébet Schäffer, following her visit to this college. She writes:

When I returned from Békéscsaba, there was a surprise waiting for me at home. Grandma had made hot food: it was potato noodles with cucumber salad. I adore potato noodles with cucumber salad. And I had never made them. Grandma gave me the recipe and I wrote down what was good and what was cheap (no. 16, p. 9).

Another example of this kind of discourse is in a *Nök Lapja* article from 1997 called “To Eat or Not to Eat?” (no. 28, p. 28), which addresses the dangers of industrially prepared foods. It says:

In former times it was so easy. Grandma cooked the spinach that grew in the garden, plucked the chicken under the mulberry tree and poured home made raspberry syrup into the grandchildren’s glasses. Today’s dead tired mother comes home and prepares instant soup in ten minutes, mashed potatoes from a box, drinks from multivitamin tablets, and for dessert she defreezes a fruit cake. Grandma’s lunch was made up of ten ingredients while a dietary chemist can only determine the content of modern, ready-made food.

Not only were Grandma’s recipes used to invoke memories of tasty foods and healthy bodies from the past, as these citations depict, but they were also used to show the ways that homemade cooking can also be an answer to Hungary’s decreasing standard of living in the 1990s. For

example, in a 1996 *Nők Lapja* article called, “What Can We Put in the Basket?” (no. 13), several different families are examined as case studies of the ways Hungarians are coping with increasing poverty. One of these families has turned to “Granny’s recipes” to help them make ends meet in the present (p. 4).

Articles presenting Grandma’s kitchen as an ideal time and place, and denigrating contemporary women’s abilities, were also published in *Kiskegyed* throughout the 1990s. For example, in 1996 this magazine ran a long article entitled “Cook Something Tasty” (no. 46, pp. 8-9), in which a number of famous women in Hungary and their daughters or nieces talk about their experiences with cooking. The whole article is introduced with a paragraph that decries the cooking abilities of today’s women. It says:

Why don’t young women today cook? That is an easy question to answer. First, because they can’t. And if they can, they don’t have the time or patience. Today’s mothers don’t cook either. Today’s grandmothers (women born in the 1930s) could cook. ... A generation is growing up - if they aren’t already grown - who can’t remember homemade tastes.

The interviews with the women and girls support this thesis. One of the daughters, a twenty-year old university student, says of her own abilities, “A young girl learns to cook if she sees her mother in the kitchen. I never saw this.” Many of the mothers interviewed for this article likewise spoke of kitchen knowledge as embodied knowledge that they themselves had never acquired. One woman, a Budapest actress, said: “I usually cook, although it’s not my favorite activity. My mother only made promises that later she would teach me certain meals. Unfortunately, she took her secrets, her recipes to the grave.” Finally, several of the women and girls described their grandmother’s cooking as an ideal they wish they could attain, but never will. One 21-year-old woman said, “I grew up on my step-grandmother’s cooking and became very picky because of that.” Another woman said that her “*pörkölt* (stew) will never be better than her grandmother’s.”

In addition to these women, Hungarian men also provide testimonials of their grandmother’s cooking in these magazines and

of embodied knowledge. For example, Béla Katona, a member of the Hungarian parliament, says in *Kiskegyed* (1998, no. 35, p. 26): “I learned my first [cooking] tricks as a child watching my mother and grandmother. Since then, of course, much has changed; for example, we don’t kill chickens at home anymore. But some things never change.” In discussing why his teacher training college had introduced home economics classes into the curriculum, as addressed above, the male director of this school likewise pointed to today’s lack of role models in developing women’s domestic skills, such as making sour cabbage, other traditional foods and natural remedies and cosmetics. His students will not be lacking in this area, whether they have a grandmother or not.

Throughout the 1990s, *Kiskegyed* also ran a fairly regular kitchen tips column which always began, “Granny knows everything. You only need to ask her to receive her advice. We did.” The piece would then provide the answers to between a dozen and twenty questions concerning such topics as the use of vinegar as a cleaning solution, the proper way to prepare a particular vegetable, or the ways that leftover meats, vegetables, bread or other foods can be used to make other dishes. *Nők Lapja* likewise drew upon the authenticity and authority of the Hungarian grandmother in some of its kitchen tips articles. For example, an article on making good pancakes begins with the definitive answer to this problem: “The good pancake comes from grandma’s old iron pan, in which no other foods are cooked” (1994, no. 28, p. 34). In another *Nők Lapja* “tips” column, Grandma is said to have the “recipe” for cooking up a medicinal concoction for tired and aching feet (1994, no. 4, p. 31).

While Grandma’s cooking is the most common source of this kind of nostalgia in these magazines, for the older generation of Hungarian women there are also articles that provide fond memories of Mother’s cooking. For example, in 1994, *Nők Lapja* published an article entitled “True Stories About Stone Soup” (no. 51, p. 37) in which four women tell stories from their childhoods in the 1940s and 1950s. One woman, true to the stone soup story, tells of her adventure in going round to each of the neighbors and gathering scraps of bread, vegetables and meat; her mother then put these ingredients together to make a delicious, homemade meal for the girl

and her seven siblings. Another storyteller in this article tells of her mother's difficulties just after the war in feeding her children.

Beans and vegetables were terribly expensive. Flour was cheaper than cornmeal. ... [Mother] felt that there was no choice. It's possible to make many things with flour, bread and potatoes. 'God helps those who help themselves.' She became very excited: she planned what she would cook. Potato soup, pasta soup, potato pasta, fried bread, pancakes, jam pasta, jam dumplings, fake goulash, fake meat soup (with squash instead of meat), French toast, potatoes cooked in their skins and everything else poor women of the 1950s served up. She flew up and set about to making lunch: it will be bread soup and fake grits pasta today.

The article ends by saying that the response to this theme was extremely valuable, presumably for teaching today's women how to save money and make due with cheaper ingredients in 'traditionally' Hungarian ways, so the editors were inviting other women to send in their stories and recipes from difficult times in their lives. From among the best ideas and most beautiful stories the editors will choose a winner who will receive a number of kitchen appliances.

Although this particular article does in some ways create happy memories of good meals and clever Hungarian women, it also begins to illustrate that the memories created by nostalgic discourse are not always of an idealized past. Clearly, the time periods that are being recalled in these stories also include tremendous difficulties and hard work for Hungarian women due to poverty and loss. The mother of one author had been left alone to care for two children when her husband fled to the U.S. ten years prior; he had never sent a penny of child support. Even the families that included two parents were all desperately poor, as indicated by their need to "make due."

This is not the only article from these magazines that contradicts the idealism of the nostalgia for 'good Grandma's' kitchen by depicting Grandma's food preparation as more difficult than that of contemporary women. A *Nök Lapja* piece from 1995 (no. 17, p. 40-1), "Housekeeping in the Past," argues that

Grandma worked "ten thousand times more" than today's housewife. The article begins with a description of food storage in the days before refrigerators and freezers. The author says, "My own grandmother lived in the city and didn't have a basement at her disposal, so she could only pickle raw meat and keep it for two or three days covered with a wet cloth." The article also describes keeping the fires burning in the coal or wood stove and having to make every dish, and even every ingredient, by hand, among other difficult tasks.

Finally, another contradiction to the good Grandma nostalgia appears in these magazines as an emphasis on the unhealthy aspects of traditional Hungarian cooking. One such article, "Half Sweet Holidays," teaches women how to prepare delicious Christmas treats without the "three basic foods that are on the forbidden list for today's healthy living." These three ingredients, "sugar, flour and lard," formed the backbone of 'bad' Grandma's cooking, and thus the 'bad' Grandma's body as well. A similar message is given to Hungarian women by Julia Kulik, a local television star who talks about how she shops, cooks and eats in a 1995 *Nök Lapja* article. She says that her own grandmother was "a round woman who was continually pestered by her family members for her weight" and that she herself has to exercise and watch what she eats to keep from suffering the same fate (no. 26, p. 40).

Conclusion

At first it seemed very odd that the same magazine that could glorify Grandma for her healthy homegrown spinach and freshly plucked chicken would, in a different issue, denounce her for her weight and her dependence on sugar and lard. However, this contradiction makes perfect sense when we remember that these narratives are not histories but "forms of myth-making in the present" (italics removed) (Duruz 1999:232). They are like fairy tales in which mother figures are both wicked stepmothers and fairy godmothers; neither image is correct on its own but together and combined with many other images they serve to introduce their readers to the pressures and possibilities of a woman's life. For Hungarian women, most of whom are being introduced both to capitalism's ideal housewife and the consumer society's love of purchasable items for the first time, these stories both idealize

and denigrate 'the past' in order to situate women in the present. On the one hand, the myth of the ideal Grandma provides a 'memory' of tasty, healthy, and economical food for today's woman to compare with McDonald's and frozen pizza. On the other hand, the myth of the denigrated Grandma provides an incentive for women to purchase new kitchen appliances, which are regularly advertised in these magazines, and go on a diet, which likewise often appear in these magazines, especially *Kiskegyed* (see above). The woman under consumer capitalism must embody both these idealized positions, homemaker and salaried employee, if they are to realize the attainment of the ideal lifecourse.

Finally, why food? We cannot take for granted or shrug off as irrelevant the fact that both of these magazines use food and food preparation as the primary historical events women must 'remember' to thrive in the present. Food articles are useful for the producers of these magazines, who want to make a profit, and for their readers, who want to learn something, for three reasons. First, food is a valuable tool to use in reconstructing identities because it is external matter that not only goes into the body, it literally becomes it. As such, the foods we eat must seem to be appropriate for the kind of person we are, or think we are. In Hungary, a form of "culinary patriotism" (LeBlanc 1999:246), by which such foods as *gulyás* and anything else made from *paprika* are appreciated for their Hungarianness (Kisbán 1989), is important. Having a tongue that knows what these dishes 'really' taste like is a sign of being a true Hungarian.

Second, in Hungary, as most everywhere else, daily food preparation is considered women's work. Having hands that can roll stuffed cabbage leaves that do not fall apart while cooking, or fingers that know what a pinch of salt feels like, are embodied markers of full female personhood. Indeed, women who do not do have such bodies and use them appropriately at least occasionally are considered morally suspect (West 2000a), just as their grandmothers would have been. Therefore, contemporary women reading these magazines would already have embodied experiences to which they could attach the emotions evoked by the creation of such nostalgic memories.

Finally, because of its appeal to all of the senses, food is often used to stir up and create memories through nostalgic discourse (LeBlanc 1999; Duruz 1999; Lupton 1996). While a clean, well-decorated home is certainly important to many Hungarian women, and both of these magazines offered features on these topics, neither them nor any other domestic art would be as useful as food and food preparation for constructing memory because they are not used by Hungarians to define themselves or others. Food is not only good to think, it is also good to remember, and, in Hungary at least, it is also good to think they are remembering.

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