

## PERSONHOOD ON A PLATE: GENDER AND FOOD IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF PROPER HUNGARIAN WOMEN

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This paper examines the ramifications for Hungarian women of the introduction into the Hungarian market since 1990 of convenience and what Hungarians call half-prepared (*félkész*) foods. My primary interest in these foods is the way they may be interrupting a discourse of household-based female personhood and its requirement of an ability to cook proper meals for men and children. As a window onto this discourse, I analyze the food articles, images and advertisements in the two most popular Hungarian women's magazines (with readerships of about two million each), *Nők Lapja* and *Kiskegyed*, between 1994 and 1999.<sup>2</sup> In addition, I draw upon 20 months of participant observation fieldwork in Hungary during 1993-4, 1996 and 1999 to discuss women's reactions to these magazines and the introduction of convenience foods and ingredients generally in that country.<sup>3</sup>

Cooking for Hungarians requires one of a set of standardized Hungarian dishes be prepared in recognized ways; it is not enough to create warm food for yourself and/or others to consider the practice to be cooking. The warm food must be named and prepared in a way that is familiar to other Hungarians, with little or no improvisation. For example, preparing foods such as stuffed peppers, *palacsinta* (crepes), and *főzelék* (cooked vegetables prepared with a sauce of sour or fresh cream, lard, salt and usually paprika) is cooking, while scrambling eggs and adding sautéed vegetables, cheese and herbs, is not. This is not to say that all or even most food preparation in Hungary is necessarily cooking. In fact, in my experience in the country, much of the food preparation at home is not really cooking at all but quick meal preparation, called in Hungarian *összeüt valamit* (throwing something together) or *falatkozik* (snacking), comparable to my scrambled eggs with sautéed vegetables, cheese and herbs.

Nonetheless, I argue that cooking contributes to the social and moral evaluation of full female personhood in Hungary, while throwing something together does not. In judging a Hungarian woman's personhood, or "moral career" (Harris 1989:604; and 1978), marriage and childbearing

are the primary criteria, but cooking, both as service to the family unit and as a moral activity in and of itself, is likewise evaluated. As a result, the married woman who does not cook is considered socially and morally deficient by other Hungarians. For example, in 1993, a female acquaintance of mine who was engaged talked about how she would have to learn how to cook for her husband, despite her lack of interest in it and his skill in food preparation. She assured me that her husband would continue to put together (not "cook"! ) his own meals while she was at work but that on weekends or when relatives came to visit she was the one who was expected to cook for them. It would look bad if she did not do it, she said, and besides, she would not feel good about serving snacks to her guests or letting her mother do the cooking for her. In preparation for the inevitable, she was in the process of learning from his mother how to cook her fiancée's favorite dishes.

### Hypotheses

Upon realizing the importance of "cooking" to the social and moral recognition of women as full persons, I became curious about the effect that the influx of convenience foods and ingredients Hungary had experienced since 1990 was having on women's personhood. As in Russia (see Sheffield and Liapis 1996), Hungary has seen a tremendous increase in both imports of HVP (high-value products) (ibid) and of domestic production of convenience foods and ingredients. In 1988, when I first visited Hungary, it was difficult to find any convenience food items, with the exception of powdered soup mixes and some canned meat products.<sup>4</sup> By 1994, when I was in my second calendar year of residence in the city of Szeged, I could occasionally find Uncle Ben's pre-made sauces in jars and the rare frozen pizza or entree. However, I knew no Hungarians who used these products regularly and only a few who did occasionally. By 1999, Hungary had experienced such an influx of products, stores and ideas from the West that there were few convenience foods I could buy in the United States that I couldn't find with some searching in Szeged. There were also convenience Hungarian foods, such as frozen fruit-filled dumplings that are not widely available in

the US. By this time, too, I found in my discussions with Hungarians, my inventory of grocery stores and my observations that Hungarians had begun to accept these products for regular use. This anecdotal evidence is also supported by the preponderance of convenience food advertisements in *Nők Lapja* and *Kiskegyed* in the late 1990s, the significantly smaller number of advertisements in the mid-1990s, and the lack of them altogether in 1989, with the exception of a walnut substitute made from sunflower seeds (*dejó*).

Some of the questions that guided my initial thinking with regard to this influx and its meaning for women's personhood were: What kind of reception have these convenience foods had in Hungary? Are Hungarian women using them to save time, regardless of the ramifications for personhood? Have Hungarian evaluations of personhood for women changed with the new political, economic, social and consumer contexts? Are Hungarian women's magazines, as a major (but certainly not only) source of gender ideologies, pushing women to continue cooking from scratch or advocating a more "modern" approach to cooking? How is the high value Hungarians place on their children being used in the discussion regarding the acceptance of convenience foods? How strong is the state's paternalism regarding women (see Corrin 1994:225) and the general antifeminist feeling (see Goven 1993) in the country in defining women as homemakers, wives and cooks rather than as agents outside the home?

Finally, I decided to approach this material largely as a question of ideology. I began with the hypothesis that, because of rising unemployment and the new paternalism, Hungarian women's magazines would largely be telling women to spend time in the kitchen preparing real cooked meals. This hypothesis is also supported outside the Hungarian context by both historical and sociological analyses of women's magazines in capitalist societies generally as developing 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; see also Beetham 1996 and McCracken 1993).<sup>5</sup>

I hypothesized further that the magazine articles would largely focus on the service aspect of cooking for husbands and families in order to encourage women to spend significant amounts of time on this kind of work. Therefore, I believed that I would find in these magazines many articles

on the necessity for men and children of home cooked meals. I did not think that the magazines would focus heavily on women's work for themselves because, during the socialist era, it was largely believed that women were selfish and cared only about themselves at the expense of men and children (see Goven 1993). In reaction to this belief, to the new paternalism of the state, and to women's continuing definition of themselves as mothers (see Haney 1999), I expected significant emphasis on women as housewives and mothers.

### Magazine Content

After looking at every issue of *Kiskegyed* between 1995-1998, *Nők Lapja* between 1994-1997, and some issues of each from 1989 and 1999, and keeping track of all food-related articles, images and advertisements, I found both similarities and differences in their approach to food and cooking. Almost every week, both magazines provided between one and six recipes. These recipes, while not all for standardized Hungarian dishes, would for the most part count as cooking in Hungary because the foods were all named and had specific recipes for people to follow. In addition, most of these recipes made no allowance for the use of convenience ingredients such as frozen or canned vegetables or "half prepared foods." In addition to these recipes, both magazines often contained some kind of article with helpful hints for the kitchen, from spicing up food with (homemade) sauces to how to shop in Hungary's new "hypermarkets." Other kinds of articles that appeared at least three times during the five years from 1994-98 concerned dieting, health, household and personal uses for food items, the cooking habits of some Hungarian celebrities (including recipes), how to use a microwave oven, and using food and cooking to improve your love life. Other articles were unique, such as preparing food for an overweight dog, statements by eleven different Hungarian women on how and when they learned to cook, and weighing the good and bad features of hamburgers, hot dogs, pizza and other fast food items.

Despite these similarities between the two magazines there were also important differences. I begin with a discussion of food and cooking articles in *Kiskegyed*, since they diverged most from my initial hypotheses. I found in *Kiskegyed* that the majority of articles were directing women to spend significant amounts of time in the kitchen; however, the reason only rarely concerned the welfare of husbands or children. From 1996

through 1998, *Kiskegyed* had articles that focused on cooking or food preparation for husbands and children only seven times, and for guests twice, while in 1995 there were no articles on cooking or preparing food for other people. In addition, in 1998, *Kiskegyed* ran a test on being a good mother and there was not a single question concerned with food or cooking! However, in 1996 and 1997, the same magazine ran a weekly contest on being a good housewife, in which they published a recipe with a component missing and contestants had to name the missing ingredient. Some examples of the kind of articles on cooking for children and husbands in *Kiskegyed* include how to cook a good weekend breakfast a day in advance, how to prepare for a child's birthday party by cooking and baking at home, two articles on how to cook meals that children can enjoy, and one on foods that increase male potency. The articles on cooking and preparing food for guests included preparing a good summer barbecue and making up your own sandwich spreads<sup>6</sup> to have on hand for drop-in guests.

During the same time period (1995-98), there were twenty-six articles in this magazine on women's diet and health-related cooking and food preparation, usually including recipes. Most of the diet-related articles were fairly straightforward and focused solely on weight loss, but some articles provided justification for the diet, such as losing a few kilograms before summer or after the Christmas holiday, and many provided a set menu for women to follow. The health-related articles provided cooking and eating tips for giving women more energy, helping them to sleep better, and staying young. There were also four articles on cooking and food preparation to improve a woman's love life. One such article argued that men are not attracted to women who are too thin or do not eat a full meal, which seemed very odd juxtaposed with the large number of articles on dieting, while two others talked about attracting a man through his stomach; one of these articles even argued that the woman who does not like "to cook" but instead serves soup from a package or frozen dinners is "the spinster type." Finally, what surprised me most were the thirteen articles on how women should prepare their own cosmetics, lotions, cleaning supplies, medicinal and herbal teas, and spices rather than purchasing these items.

While the majority of *Kiskegyed*'s food and cooking articles were largely focused upon women themselves, I found that *Nök Lapja*'s were not. Rather than articles on dieting and health for women, of which there were only three from 1994-

97, most food and cooking articles provided women with tips for how to use, prepare, buy and/or cook a particular food or ingredient; potatoes, carrots, bread, vinegar, pickles, garlic, mayonnaise, ketchup, soup, chicken, melon, chestnut puree, fish, mushrooms, and salad were all the focus of a "kitchen tips" article during this time period. In addition, there were also tips on making homemade baby food, wedding cake, fruitcake, pasta sauces, pancakes, and mayonnaise. While few of these "kitchen tips" articles specifically said that they were helping women to cook for families, when juxtaposed with the overtly self-focused articles in *Kiskegyed*, the service aspect of this work is manifestly clear. The inclusion of recipes serving 4-6 people also shows that these "tips" are concerned with cooking and food preparation for others. In addition, during these four years there were also fourteen articles on cooking for other people, which highlights the assumption that cooking and food preparation are service work for women. Examples of service-oriented food articles in *Nök Lapja* from 1994-97 include two on preparing and cooking for a children's party, three on making snacks and foods children will enjoy eating, one on cooking for children's health, and a variety of descriptions of cooking for families, holidays and guests.

Just as there were a variety of different kinds of food and cooking articles in these magazines, there were also quite a few advertisements from a wide variety of food companies. *Kiskegyed* averaged two advertisements per issue in the mid-1990s and four in the later 1990s. Many of these advertisements were for convenience foods, such as UHT milk, yogurt, candy, ice cream novelties and sandwich spreads; fewer were for half-prepared foods like frozen chicken entrees, dried pasta and sauce packages, or plain sauce mixes. The vast majority of food-oriented advertisements were for ingredients such as sour cream, margarine and other fats, sugar, spices and UHT milk.<sup>7</sup> However, this same pattern does not hold for *Nök Lapja*, which had a relatively stable average of around 2.5 food related advertisements per issue for the entire period covered. The content of these advertisements also differed from *Kiskegyed*'s with few ingredient advertisements, some convenience food advertisements, and a large number of half-prepared food advertisements.

Despite these differences, the argument presented in almost all the advertisements in both magazines is the same and related to food preparation and cooking as part of women's service to other people. Whether the advertised

product is a convenience food, such as pre-made pastry, a half-prepared one, such as a frozen entree, or an ingredient, such as sugar, the argument is almost always that women need these items to help them serve their families' food needs better. In *Kiskegyed* there was only one exception to this rule, an advertisement for muesli which depicted it as diet food for women. *Nök Lapja* had a few more exceptions, such as a series of oil advertisements, a yogurt ad, and a soy products ad that addressed women's health specifically; nevertheless, the vast majority of advertisements in both magazines were focused on the health, tastes, or convenience of people other than the woman herself.

Nonetheless, there are some interesting differences in the arguments of different kinds of advertisements regarding women's food service work. When the advertisement is for an ingredient, such as margarine, fat, milk or spices, the message is clearly that women should "cook" for their families regularly. For example, one margarine company ran a series of advertisements telling women they are responsible for their husband's health and that by using this margarine in their cooking they can perform that service well. One slogan in this series says, "The minutes you spend on this page can lengthen your husband's life;" another argues that cooking with this margarine just might be the secret to a good marriage; yet another says that by using this margarine "you can help your husband become a grandfather." A series of advertisements for UHT milk likewise uses women's responsibilities towards their families as their main selling point. One advertisement in this series has a woman talking about how she discovered the necessity for keeping UHT milk around the house; she wanted to bake something for her son because she wanted him to grow up big but could not because she was out of milk. A neighbor introduced her to UHT milk, which does not need to be stored in the refrigerator until it is opened, and she has kept some on hand ever since so that she can bake for her growing son at a moment's notice.

As might be expected, when the advertisement is for a convenience or half-prepared food rather than an ingredient, women's need to provide food for others is played off against their lack of time for this work. An advertisement for a soup mix tells women not to waste time in unnecessary work when the packaged soup is just as good. A series of advertisements for a brand of packaged pastries has a woman present a predicament similar to the woman from the milk advertisement; she wants to

provide pastry for her family. Instead of being out of a key ingredient, however, she has no time to bake. This brand of doughnuts and filled croissants is just the thing she needs since she can keep a relatively large number of them for when her life is very busy. Despite the argument in both the milk and pastry advertisements for shopping ahead of time and in larger quantities than can be done with fresh goods, the reasons for this shopping differ. While the milk woman's emphasis is on cooking for her son to help him grow up big, the pastry woman's emphasis is on providing something tasty for her children and husband. Nonetheless, the advertisers of almost all food products in these magazines, from ingredients to convenience foods, rely upon the taken-for-granted status of women as cooks, or at least food providers.

## Discussion

As my presentation of the articles in these magazines shows, the editors, writers and advertisers do advocate a large number of activities requiring women to spend a significant amount of time in their homes and kitchens, as I hypothesized. However, I did not expect the magazines to have such different frameworks for their arguments, with *Kiskegyed* focusing on women's bodies and feelings and *Nök Lapja* on women's service. Rather than telling women that men and children need them to stay home and cook proper meals, not just throw things together or use a half-prepared dish, the articles in *Kiskegyed* are telling women that they need to cook or be in the kitchen in order to improve their own looks (assuming, as they do, that thinner means better), health, home or love life. *Nök Lapja* is more straightforward, for when the food articles do not focus on particular items and their preparation, they focus on preparing meals for family, friends or children or on improving the appearance of the meals women already serve. Nevertheless, in examining the articles, images and advertisements in both magazines, I argue that I was correct in my initial hypothesis regarding Hungarian gender ideologies as continuing to define full personhood for women as achievable only in the private sphere and of cooking as an important facet of this evaluation.

This conclusion may seem surprising in light of the content of the majority of articles in *Kiskegyed*. Nevertheless, even in these articles women are being encouraged to work at home during their free time, rather than to join clubs or organizations, meet other women, or advance their careers or education. In calling upon women to

cook elaborate yet dietetic meals, prepare their own medicines, herbs, cosmetics and cleaning products from their gardens, and improve their love lives through cooking and baking, I argue that *Kiskegyed* is doing far more to define women's personhood as private than perhaps even the overt cook-for-your-family kind of articles do.

The articles on dieting are unanimous in their advice "to cook" lean meals at home; not one article recommends using "lite" convenience or half-prepared foods for lunches or dinners, although muesli was a common component of the dieter's breakfast. The helpful hints articles are similar in that if women prepare their own cosmetics or cleaning supplies they may be able to save money or make better quality products, but they will definitely spend significant amounts of time at home and in the kitchen. Finally, the articles on food and love are somewhat more ambiguous; one of them advises that women who can't bake may use a pre-made cake base to prepare a cake for a man she would like to attract. However, this ambiguity is easily explained in light of the argument that unmarried women do not need to be able to cook, yet. In all of the articles in *Kiskegyed* that address food and love for married women, the article and accompanying recipes do not allow for the use of convenience or half-prepared foods. I argue that there is an illusion of independence being offered to women in *Kiskegyed* in the guise of dieting advice, household hints and love tips. As one acquaintance said when I asked her about why *Kiskegyed* might emphasize dieting over family cooking, "Women buy these magazines because they want to know how to do things for themselves, they already know they have to work for others." Unfortunately, what they are learning is that remaining busy at home is the key to being a successful and complete woman.

This message is likewise presented to women in the images of food and cooking in both magazines. Almost without fail, quizzes and articles in both magazines regarding relationships and marriage show photographs of men and women eating a home-cooked meal together or women serving food to men, even when there was not a single word in the article or quiz about cooking or eating. I was less surprised to find these images in *Nők Lapja*, given the content of most cooking and food articles, but I was surprised by the great number of images in *Kiskegyed* showing women in a service role when it comes to cooking and food preparation. Nevertheless, if, as I argue, marriage, children and cooking remain integral to

women's personhood in Hungary, then these familiar images might serve as a bridge between women's service expectations of themselves and others and their desire to do something for themselves, as evident in their purchase of *Kiskegyed*. I argue that the "good housewife" contest that ran for nearly two years in *Kiskegyed*, in which contestants had to name the missing ingredient, likewise provides a way for women to do something for themselves, such as show off their skill and perhaps win a prize, at the same time that they are doing what is expected of Hungarian women with regard to cooking for their families (the recipes were usually for fairly standard Hungarian dishes, such as stuffed peppers or chicken stew with paprika).

In addition to the articles and images, I argue that the majority of advertisements in these two magazines likewise reinforce an image of women as responsible for cooking and food preparation for others. Despite the fact that a focus on women themselves in the articles in *Kiskegyed* has made that magazine the number one women's magazine in Hungary, most advertisers do not seem to believe that Hungarian women will purchase items purely out of self-interest. Indeed, more advertisers in *Nők Lapja* than in *Kiskegyed* (3 versus 1) focused their advertising campaigns for food items on women themselves. What these few exceptions show is that it is entirely possible in Hungary to focus an advertising campaign for a food item on women's diet, health or taste, and thereby appeal to the same desire in women that moves them to purchase *Kiskegyed* in great number. However, most advertisers choose to appeal to women's service role instead and thereby reinscribe this role as central to the evaluation of Hungarian women generally.

Finally, I need to discuss the way Hungarian women are reacting to the onslaught of convenience and half-prepared foods they have experienced in the past ten years, the related messages in these magazines, and the connection with female personhood. This is a very difficult issue to address since differences in class, age and residence (urban or rural) play such an important role in determining people's consumption habits. Nevertheless, in speaking with a variety of women from different backgrounds and of different ages, although all from the southern border city of Szeged, I did find some similarities. First, almost all women do use convenience or half-prepared foods, at least occasionally.

One older woman (77 years old) living on a very low fixed income said that she uses these products when they are cheaper than it would be to make the food from scratch; for example, she uses pudding mix in the winter when eggs become very expensive. Several other retired women and stay-at-home mothers likewise said that they use these foods occasionally, when it is cheaper to do so. Many women who work outside the home and have school-age children use these products fairly regularly during the week when they have little time for cooking. Many women also told me that they were curious about these new food items and have tried some of them; most both rejected some foods due to cost or taste and continued to buy others because they were different from things they could make at home, were easy to prepare or serve, and/or because their family really liked it.

The second similarity I found is that married women with children and widows try to avoid convenience and half-prepared foods in favor of "cooking" at least once per week. What this means for most women in this category is cooking a real meal for themselves<sup>8</sup> or their family on either Saturday or Sunday.<sup>9</sup> Even younger married women, who may eat a weekend meal cooked by their mother or mother-in-law, will often cook on the other weekend day. The reasons Hungarian women give for cooking at least once per week indicate that it remains an important category for the social and moral evaluation of women as full persons. For example, one woman said that her family would be disappointed in her if she didn't have something cooked for them on Sunday. Another said that she felt badly about taking her child to McDonald's or just throwing together a snack for dinner throughout the week and liked to cook Sunday lunch when she had time. A widow who cooks every Saturday for her son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren had to pause for a moment when I asked her why but finally said that it's what mothers do and just because her son lived in a different neighborhood, he was still her son.

### Conclusions

I believe that convenience and half-prepared foods have made significant in-roads in Hungarian ideas about eating, but not cooking. Indeed, an article that appeared in *Nők Lapja* in 1997 made the claim that a quarter of the food eaten in Hungary is industrially made (Editor, no. 28, p. 28), a figure that I believe has probably gone up in

the subsequent two years. My own observations in grocery stores in Szeged, my conversations with women about their cooking and food preparation habits, and my reading of food advertisements on billboards and in women's magazines all indicate that these kinds of time-saving products have been embraced by Hungarian women when cost, taste, convenience and/or curiosity are taken into consideration.

Nevertheless, I argue that cooking remains an important category in the social and moral evaluation of Hungarian women's personhood, despite the relative importance of convenience and half-prepared foods in most Hungarian households. Many articles in both *Kisbék* and *Nők Lapja* continue to advocate "cooking" over snacking, throwing something together, or using convenience or even half-prepared foods, even if that cooking is only for the woman on a diet. Also, most images of food in these magazines, when they aren't of raw fruit, support the ideas that eating well and proper service to husband and family imply home cooking. Even the majority of advertisements for food ingredients in the two magazines direct women to cook properly for their husbands and families. I also found in talking with Hungarians that a married woman who can't or doesn't properly cook for her family at least occasionally is deficient. She both feels like she has failed her family and is evaluated as having done so by others.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, women's personhood in Hungary today remains ideologically circumscribed by the context of the household, despite the relaxation of some cooking rules. While some sources of Hungarian gender ideologies may be encouraging women to pursue more public domains of recognition, almost every feature of the two leading women's magazines in Hungary (with a combined readership of two-fifths of the Hungarian population) is clear on the view that a complete woman is a woman at home. Indeed, new household tasks, such as dieting, making homemade cleaning supplies and cosmetics, and cutting vegetables into the shapes of flowers are being advocated by these magazines to keep women from using the spare time created by convenience and half-prepared foods to engage in activities outside the home.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> I wanted to look at a wider variety of magazines and for a longer span of time; however, these were not available in Szeged. Indeed, my collection of *Kiskegyed* is missing all of 1994, of *Nök Lapja* all of 1998, and most of the issues from 1999 were unavailable for either magazine. In addition, while in Szeged during 1999, I

purchased and looked at a much wider variety of women's magazines and discovered that they did not differ significantly from *Nök Lapja* and *Kiskegyed* in their focus on food and cooking. At the time of writing, *Kiskegyed* has nudged out *Nök Lapja* as the most popular women's magazine in Hungary.

<sup>3</sup> I was aided in my research in 1993-4 and 1996 by fellow anthropologist Michelle Landers and in 1999 by my fantastic Hungarian assistant Réka Monika Cristian. While I was in Hungary she provided tremendous help in dealing with a sometimes-unwilling library staff, helped me to sort through all the magazines, and provided interesting insights into Hungarian cooking. She also spent a very long time summarizing or translating all the magazine articles and advertisements. I would like to express my gratitude to her for these efforts, and to her and Robbie for their hospitality.

<sup>4</sup> There were a variety of locally produced sweets, sodas and chips for snacking; I am referring here to meal items rather than snack foods.

<sup>5</sup> For an interesting comparison with socialist societies, see Attwood (1999).

<sup>6</sup> Sandwiches in Hungary are generally not the two slices of bread with filling in the middle that they are in the US. They generally consist of one thick slice of bread covered with a thin spread of margarine, butter or a flavored topping with cheese, sour cream or yogurt as its base, and then topped with thin, decorative slices of yellow pepper, tomato, meat or cheese. It was this kind of flavored spread that women were being instructed in how to prepare, despite the preponderance of advertisements for this very product in the same magazine.

<sup>7</sup> I include UHT milk as both a convenience food and as an ingredient because its advertisements clearly focused on both these uses.

<sup>8</sup> Some widows do this cooking for themselves, though many have their adult children over for a weekend meal.

<sup>9</sup> Some advertisers are aware of this trend in Hungary. For example, one Knorr soup mix advertisement uses a bold font to create a word play in their text that illustrates that Knorr is soup for weekdays. They, like their female audience, are fully aware that weekend soup is homemade.