Turkey Backbones and Chicken Gizzards: Women's Food Roles in Post-Socialist Hungary

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Available online: 01 Dec 2010

To cite this article: Lisa Pope Fischer (2010): Turkey Backbones and Chicken Gizzards: Women's Food Roles in Post-Socialist Hungary, Food and Foodways, 18:4, 233-260

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07409710.2010.529018
Turkey Backbones and Chicken Gizzards: Women’s Food Roles in Post-Socialist Hungary

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This article looks at soup-making as a lens to view the impact of societal change for Hungarian pensioner women. Food as a practice illustrates agency: strategies and tactics used in time and space to communicate meaning for people in everyday life. During the socialist period, women endured frustrations of long lines and scarce resources. In the post-socialist era, their heroic clout as food providers is diminished by the introduction of a market economy. Nevertheless, the survival skills learned in the socialist era allow them to adapt to the new era of high inflation and high unemployment. I use descriptions of one woman to connect personal experience to historical and political change. This article makes two main points—first, to look at food practices developed during state socialism that carry over and adapt to the post-socialist condition; and second, to illustrate how this impacts gender and agency of elderly Hungarian women.

In the hot summertime, the windows of every apartment are left open in hopes of a cool and soothing breeze. Long, white lacy curtains furl in and outward with each passing gust. It is on these days especially that one feels the communal nature of the Sunday brunch. Familiar smells of húsleves (a consommé meat soup served with noodles and vegetables) and rööttott hús (thin fried meat cutlets) waft through the air, reminding everyone of the familiar meal they will soon be eating. At noon, the radios blare the state-run radio program entitled “Music for a good lunch” that starts with a recording of the noon bells clanging and fills an hour with traditional Hungarian songs to accompany the afternoon family meal.

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Food acquisition and preparation is an everyday practice that expresses appropriate norms and behaviors. I jokingly nicknamed Ica néni (Aunt Ica) the “Leves Király” (the Soup King) as she makes amazing soups. Húsfőleves (meat soup) is a clear soup that can be made with beef or poultry, but more commonly chicken. The women of my study developed an understanding of the world around them within a Socialist society. Now this frame of reference used to define oneself is gone. New societal issues arise in post-Socialist societies that influence their way of being and their understanding of themselves. In post-socialist Hungary, Ica néni’s soup-making is a lens in which to view the impact of societal changes for elderly women.

I first met Ica néni in 1993 and make regular hungry visits to her house at least once a year, hoping to be served her delicious soup. Ica néni, born in 1933, is a widowed retired pensioner living in post-socialist Hungary. Though from the countryside (50 miles from the Romanian border), she is not from a peasant family. Her father was a carpenter who built frames for roofs. She referred to her mother as a “kalapos kisasszony” (a young lady who wore hats). Ica néni had three sisters and two brothers. Being the youngest daughter, she was pampered as her older sisters assisted their mother with domestic chores such as food preparation, cleaning, and feeding the chickens. She proudly stated that her only job was to fill her father’s pipe when he got home. Despite living in a small village house, the yard was filled with Jonathan apple trees, a small vegetable garden, and a few chickens. Still, her family was not wealthy. Though she did not mention the depression and war years, certainly this period put a strain on her family. There are certain foods she associates with the struggles her family had in her youth, such as cheap brown bread, meals without meat, and eating plain boiled potatoes for dinner. In 1953 Ica néni took the bold move to immigrate to Budapest alone. She met and married her husband (Gyuszi bácsi) in 1955 and had a son (Gyuszi) shortly before the 1956 revolution. She lived with her parents-in-law for five years before being able to move into a separate apartment in the same building. In 1966 their building was torn down to build a hospital. Her parents-in-law moved to an older building in the 8th district while she moved to newly built Communist-style panel apartments in the 22nd district. Her mother-in-law had been the primary cook and taught her to prepare the dishes that Gyuszi liked. Ica néni retained, however, a taste for dishes she loved in her youth. Her favorite was small, tightly rolled stuffed cabbage in a red sauce. Now separated from her natal family and mother-in-law, she became the primary cook in the household. Lacking a secondary education, she always held low-skilled jobs: cleaning a hospital and school, assembling plastic parts at home, delivering food on foot to invalids. Her only son emigrated to the United States in 1980. He became part of my research on Hungarian migrants in 1993 (Pope Fischer 2003, 2005). After her son left, her marriage dissolved as each blamed the other for their son’s departure. Though never legally divorced, she has lived alone.
since 1985. After the fall of Communism, residents such as Ica néni were allowed the option of purchasing their state-owned apartments for a modest price. Her husband lived with a long-term girlfriend, Anna néni, until his death in 2004. Though Ica néni’s refrigerator is often full, she struggles to make due on a limited pension. She does rely on social services from the government to help sustain her. In Hungary, there is a high rate of widowed pensioner women experiencing losses of social support during the post-socialist period. As a result, Ica néni is nervous and makes every effort to conserve.

This is a qualitative research study based on a person-centered approach (see Hollan 2001; Kleinman & Kleinman 1991). I began research in Hungary in 1993. As I formed connections with Hungarians in California, I transported letters and gifts to their parents back home. As a result, I became acquainted with five elderly pensioner women. These women were not my initial focus, but I became concerned with their struggles during this post-socialist period. Gradually, I started a long-term collection of person-centered life histories with these women. I initially would ask them to describe their life and, based on their responses, would create more semi-structured interviews. Topics included descriptions of their lives, the jobs they held, domestic work, their families, and the differences between the socialist and post-socialist periods. Typically, I would visit their homes, often sitting in their kitchens, with tape recorders and, more recently, a video camera. Though I received informed consent, most of these women tended to stiffen when recorded. Their usual vibrant conversations would stop once the recorder or camera was on. In addition, as DeVault noted, “Tasks such as planning and managing the sociability of family meals are also invisible, and since maintaining their invisibility is part of doing the work well, people are often unable, or reluctant, to talk explicitly about them (De Vault 2008: 242).” Hence unstructured interviews and participant observation were methods that worked well in the study of this “invisible” everyday culture and practice. I have gone shopping with these women, attended church with them, and with Ica néni I was able to learn how to cook. Over the years, I began to form a special bond with Ica néni, and she kindly welcomed me into her family. She allowed me to prepare and share meals with her. This was a unique and special opportunity to gain firsthand experience of everyday life. With Ica néni, it was better to actually go shopping, to actually do cooking, than to sit down and talk about it. When I tried more formal interview techniques with her, she would simply smile. She could not explain how to cook; she had to do it because it was more instinctual, based on experience. I wrote summary field notes based on these experiences. Because of my special connection to Ica néni, and in part due to a desire to pay homage to her, I have chosen my interactions with her as focal points for discussion.

Ica néni’s story illustrates how senior women use tactical coping mechanisms learned during the socialist era to adapt to new economic uncertainties.
Women's food preparation is an ordinary practice that is useful for understanding the tactics agents use within the confines of societal cultural strategies (De Certeau and Girard 2008: 68). This article looks at the transforming nature of women's resourcefulness initially developed in response to socialist material shortages and now in response to eroding financial means. The post-socialist restructuring creates economic difficulties for some, particularly elderly pensioner women, as they face declining resources and increasing cost. I use brief descriptions from Ica néní's food preparation perspective as a springboard for discussion of personal everyday life. This article makes two main points—first, to look at cooking practices developed during the socialist era that carry over and adapt to the post-socialist condition; and second, to illustrate how this affects gender roles and agency of elderly Hungarian women.

SOCIALIST ERA CULTURE APPLIED TO THE POST-SOCIALIST CONDITION

One day I was helping Ica néní in the kitchen and she opened her refrigerator. It was so packed with food that the small light bulb in the back could not shine through. With a mischievous smile she proudly stated where she got the food. The neighbor upstairs brought the grapes from her weekend property outside Budapest. The kefir yoghurt she took from her work at an elementary school. The children would often leave some food untouched and she would stick it in her apron pocket when she cleaned the room. The small foil wrapped triangular slices of processed cheese and the box of grape juice was given to seniors from the community home care center (Házi Gondozás). Her son had given her some Hershey chocolate bars from America a year ago. There were eggs, milk, Rama margarine, and soda water she had bought cheaply at Tesco supermarket and lugged across town by bus and foot. There was a box of small metal capsules used to make seltzer water, something she had not done for years but kept on hand just in case. A small portion of unwrapped goose liver I had bought her as a gift two weeks ago had shriveled and dried. She was allowing herself a small portion each day. Of course there was a pot of soup and some pasta. Some of the food looked spoiled but she refused to throw it out as she still intended to eat it. She did not want to waste anything.

Ica néní's refrigerator illustrates the strategic ways she obtained food. During the socialist era, people needed to find innovative ways of obtaining food. The socialist period impacts cultural experiences today, but it is important to understand both the particular Hungarian context as well as commonalities among former communist countries.
Socialist Era Culture

Though there were various levels of control, Communist rule in Hungary lasted from 1945 to 1989. After a 1956 revolution against Communist occupation, Hungary was treated with kid gloves. Government restrictions were loosened, leading to “Goulash Communism” from the mid-1960s to mid-1970s. In the later period preceding the collapse of Communism, Hungary was at a political and economic standstill. During this stagnation period, the socialists’ ability to maintain control of distribution weakened. The economy did well, in part due to an underground second economy but, as was typical in Communist societies, the variety and availability of goods was limited (see Andorka and Harscsa 1999; Szakály 1994; Ehlrich and Révész 1995; Szelenyi 1988). This is the period of Ica néni’s youth through adulthood (12–56 years of age). Though each post-socialist country experienced Communism differently, there are common themes and practices that create shared understandings. In theory, the Communist aim was to create an equal society by eliminating private ownership of property. Socialism was a way to attain the Communist utopian goal of an equal society.

There tended to be a dysfunctional economic structure. Economic growth was based on state quotas set by the government. Industry was expected to produce an amount determined by the state rather than consumer demand. The government put more emphasis on heavy industry to create more jobs to satisfy the goal of employment for all citizens. State control also tried to rid any form of market economy. Socialist society’s power lay in the ability to redistribute goods; hence there was a need to control resistance if the system were to work. The aim was to maintain single party control. (Verdery 1999; Stark and Bruszt 1999)

The state’s power lay in its ability to control the means of production, however, the state was unable to control its citizens’ ability to resist and sabotage. State quotas were unmet due to material shortages that led to hoarding materials and unauthorized systems of exchange. State quotas did not meet consumer demands, forcing consumers to obtain goods through alternative means. The hoarding of labor to meet state requirements contributed to a poor work ethic. The state’s attempt to maintain control led to surveillance and censorship. The private sphere was a venue for a personal voice, yet it too was hindered by surveillance by one’s employer, or even closer to home, by one’s neighbor (Verdery 1999; Stark and Bruszt 1999). The following sketches skills adapted in response to the socialist condition.

Socialist Skills: Strategies to Obtain Limited Goods

In the 1980s Ica néni would sometimes take the excess fruit from the family weekend property to sell on the street. She also traveled to Turkey
several times and smuggled back some gold jewelry she had sewn into the hem of a coat. This small-scale second economy was technically not legal but so commonplace that no one passed judgment. The food she took from her work would not be seen as a crime. She would often tell me, “It is not a sin to pick a flower” (even if it came from the neighbor’s yard).

Ica néni’s case shows that limited goods might be obtained through questionable means. Individuals make sense of and tactically maneuver within the restrictions of a socialist society. People in the food industry often had to improvise and develop creative coping mechanisms due to the shortages of supplies (Buechler and Buechler 2005: 263). In terms of food acquisition on an everyday basis, there were often shortages of goods in stores, and, when there were important items available, there might be long lines to obtain them. People developed strategies to deal with these restrictions via networks of exchange including under the table transactions, personal favors, reciprocity, and hoarding.

Developing informal “under the table” networks of exchange was an important trait during the socialist period. Caldwell found,

“Russians who wanted to set themselves apart from their neighbors resorted to channels and strategies that existed outside the officially legal realm. Exchange transactions through extensive informal networks thus became another important means to access for both everyday necessities and periodic luxuries, while black market traders who sold goods that had been smuggled across the borders or traded from foreigners offered another avenue for creative consumption (Caldwell 2002: 299)”

To some extent these “illegal” transactions were not necessarily seen as crimes as they were part of people’s daily strategies to obtain limited resources (see Wedel 2001). In Russian, “blat” was, “roughly, the use of social connections to obtain commodities, services or other privileges (Patico 2002: 346).” In Hungarian, the term “protekció” plays a role in the distribution of goods and is linked to personal influence and favors. It can refer to under-the-table payments or “tips” to influence a decision or service. It relates to the ability to have the connections or ability to obtain resources that may or may not be technically legal (see Lampland 1995: 262; Bell 1984: 150).

Daily practices to procure food during the socialist period often relied on social networks of exchange and reciprocity. Networks of exchange were needed in a society that created obstacles and scarcities. It was normal for consumer practices to be a collective familiar experience. Word of mouth and social connections were important. If one person needed a particular item, a friend or relative might know someone who had it (see Caldwell 2002: 299).
Hoarding goods was one strategy to deal with limited goods. People would stock up on goods in case supplies would be limited later. “The unpredictability of market supplies and episodic scarcities prompted shoppers to buy up goods when they were available and store them for the future” (Caldwell 2002: 299). These goods might be traded for other needed resources. Hoarded items provided a security net and could be used to form connections with others.

POST-SOCIALIST APPLICATION OF SOCIALIST ERA CULTURE

I took Ica néni shopping to buy the ingredients for the soup the Friday before the Sunday meal. She compliments me for knowing where to find the least expensive carrots, “Úgyes vagy” (“How clever/skillful you are”). She sees a Savoy cabbage leaf on the floor and snatches it up. She gives me a guilty but satisfied smile. She explains, why buy a whole cabbage when you need just one leaf to season the soup. Her son hates when she scrounges for food like that or asks a vendor for the throwaway vegetables for free. He would rather pay for these items. Since emigrating in 1980 he sends her American money. Still, living on a limited pension, she relishes in her ability to get food for free, such as apples from the neighbor’s yard or the free food she collects from work. Later, we found that she stashes the American money in a drawer unspent. She reasons she will use it in an emergency. Today we are buying the ingredients for soup and I will let her get away with her free cabbage leaves—her son does not need to know.

Ica néni’s shopping techniques indicate the difficulties elderly women face in post-socialist Hungary. In 1989 the collapse of the Berlin wall symbolically marked the fall of Communism and the beginning of an open and free society based on a market economy. This period is often referred to as “the transition.” It is not necessarily a clean transition to capitalism because many characteristics of the old socialist system adapt and change to the new market economy. There are many commonalities in post-socialist societies, such as a rise in disparities between people and feelings of disillusionment (FEANTSA 1: 2003; Kolosi 1992; Szántó and Tóka 1992; Szalai 1992; Győri 1992).

Post-Socialist Era Culture

Post-socialist society presents new challenges for Hungary’s elderly. With low birth rates and extended life spans, Hungary is an aging society (Velkoff 1992). Wolf suggests as they reach old age, “They have fewer living children, on average, than do preceding elderly cohorts; with relatively few children,
the traditional norm of providing support for one’s older parents is strained and cannot be fulfilled, and this leads to an increased incidence of independent or isolated living patterns for the elderly” (1984: 316). As women’s life expectancy exceeds men’s (75.6 compared to 67.1), most of these elderly living alone are women (Wolf 1984: 317; Rurik 2003). These women outlive their husbands and receive a smaller pension because they tend to work less than men during their adult lives. The income of pensioners in the early part of the transition was stable yet decreases later, leading Verhoven and colleagues to contend that retired people are part of the “losers” of the transition (Verhoven, Jansen, and Dessens 2009: 112–113). Social inequality has been particularly difficult for women and the elderly (Fodor, Sata, and Toth 2006). In a study of elderly Hungarians’ nutritional habits, most prepared meals at home, with the biggest meal at lunchtime. Their diets tended to be high in salt and many (44%) used lard in their cooking. They had irregular consumption patterns: low meat intake and not enough fruits, vegetables, and dairy (Rurik 2003). Meat soup (bülsleves) is the preferred food of the elderly and lower class, suggesting that it can be a generational and class marker (Kapitányi 1999). Hence a woman of Ica néni’s age, generation, class, and gender should know how to make it.

The growing rate of inflation, coupled with unemployment, strongly affects elderly women. The socialist state no longer provides employment and new foreign capital often requires new skills, such as English and computer technology. Those able to adapt to the new market economy are doing well; however, elderly pensioners are often left behind. Pensioners live on a limited income, and many fear poverty (Kolosi 1992; Szánto and Tóka 1992; Szalai 1992; Győri 1992).

“Under the one-party state system, salaries were established on an extremely low level, but the paternalistic socialist state added many social benefits to them: cheap rent; state-subsidized transportation, sport and cultural services, utility and food prices, even haircuts; low-interest loans; free health care; and drugs. All these have gone. Within our institutional care of the elderly there is, however, a system of providing one free meal a day, subsidized by the local government for those retired people whose pension is very low and who are not in social homes. Many aged people live on the cheapest food that is available. One wonders if such poverty can ever be accepted and tolerated with dignity.” (Blasszauer 1994: 15)

Gradually, the perks of the state socialist system are taken away. The government can no longer afford to have a school in every village, or to have a post office in every neighborhood, or to provide housing for everyone. The free public hospitals are full and consist of low-paid doctors still expecting “tips” from patients.
Elderly women struggle to live on a small income in this new, more expensive market economy. Meat can be expensive; however, Ica néni can afford to buy poultry backbones from the butcher to make soup. She will take advantage of a free cabbage leaf found on the floor. Her food preparation takes on new challenges and difficulties presented by a post-socialist society. Coping strategies she learned during the socialist period prove useful during the post-socialist period.

Post-Socialist Skills

Ica néni asked me to bring some chicken parts (csirke aprólék) for the soup, and I thought that would include the skin and chicken head. When she saw what I brought she shook her head and said this is only good for the stray dogs outside. I felt very small and foolish at that point. On another occasion I brought a turkey backbone, but Ica néni said it was too small. She shook her head as she looked at the bone and kept repeating, “This is not a problem. It is no trouble” (“Nem baj, Nem baj”). The fact that she mentioned the small size several times followed by a “Nem baj” means it did matter. It was her polite way of complaining and letting me know I had bought the wrong backbone. The knowledge of knowing what is appropriate food for cooking can be a form of authority. Though the soup is made from the cheapest of ingredients (leftover chicken scraps, turkey backbones, scrounged-for vegetables), her ability to prepare it made Ica néni proud. When I once told her she was the “soup king” she was so pleased that the nickname stuck. She made a huge pot on the weekend and if anyone stopped by for a visit during the week she was quick to offer it. The ability to be hospitable is a valuable skill that creates reciprocal bonds and allies particularly for those in need of a favor or assistance from others.

Ica néni has the knowledge and skill for obtaining appropriate yet inexpensive soup ingredients. In the post-socialist era, there are more varieties of goods available than ever before. Unfortunately, with inflation and a limited pension, these goods are too expensive. During the socialist era, the state played a role in limiting material goods, and now in the post-socialist era, elderly pensioner women simply cannot afford to buy resources. With marketization, buying inexpensive yet quality goods is a challenge with many obstacles (see Patico 2002: 345). Today, one needs to have the ingenuity to make use of what one has, to be aggressive, strong, persistent, and to develop social networks.

POST-SOCIALIST STRATEGIES: NO WASTE, FORCEFULNESS, AND PERSISTENCE

Making use of what one has was an important trait in the socialist era, when supplies were limited; now, during the post-socialist era, many simply cannot
afford to waste. Ries notes that in Russia there was an unspoken frugality embodied in everyday labor (2009: 186) and a science of frugality linked to memories of wartime survival strategies (2009: 195). Many Hungarians grow fruit trees in their yards or weekend properties, and rarely does the fruit go to waste. Fruit is eaten fresh or prepared for storage by being cooked into jam or syrups. Excess fruit is exchanged with friends and relatives, or for those really resourceful, they sell it on the street. Rotten fruit can be fermented into homemade brandy (házi pálinka). Preparing fruit for canning or for brewing is a long process and yet it allows for valuable resources to be preserved.11

Physical strength is a necessity for those on a limited income to transport resources. Most people go shopping every day and the average pensioner travels by foot, bus, metro, or streetcar. I see women carrying huge bags or baskets filled with heavy items such as potatoes and apples. Sometimes people travel to their weekend properties and cart home bags of fruit from their trees. Not only may they have to walk some distance to the bus stop, but they also must manage these heavy and bulky bags on a crammed bus. The younger generation is becoming more accustomed to the capitalist form of shopping: you go to a large market once a week, load your shopping cart with goods, and then pack them in your car. There are more and more Western-style supermarkets in Budapest; however, these stores tend to be more expensive. Considering the value of a good deal, seniors prefer to shop at the less expensive stores and may even travel a great distance in order to get a better price. Huge new discount markets, such as Tesco, have been built in the outskirts of Budapest. These hypermarkets offer less expensive basic foods such as bread, eggs, and milk. Seniors are willing to spend the time and effort despite enduring crowded mass transportation.

Sheer aggressiveness allows individuals to gain the resources they need. Many times I have been physically pushed aside as an elderly woman bustled her way toward a vendor (see also Caldwell 2002: 299). Typically, this occurs when there is an especially good price on an item and a crowd has gathered. When there are limited goods, things do sell out. One may need to be aggressive in order to get anything at all. The elderly are used to the socialist era of limited resources and are willing to use force to get what they need.

Persistence is a virtue in a society filled with the residue of socialist-era bureaucratic inadequacies. Getting official paperwork done often involves long waits, long lines, lots of paperwork, misinformation, and in some cases “tips” (protekción). People learned to continue steadily despite problems or obstacles in the socialist era because eventually they may succeed. In the post-socialist era, the idea of “customer service” is taking a while to catch on. McDonalds must train their staff to be friendly (Caldwell 2005). Storekeepers are not necessarily helpful, leading to bureaucratic-type frustrations. If you need a particular item and have a limited amount to spend, you can check around. This can involve time and travel because you may have to check several stores to find what you need. Persistence is a valuable trait.
POST-SOCIALIST STRATEGIES: SOCIAL NETWORKS

Ica néni proudly posed for a photograph in a fur coat she had bargained for from a neighbor. When she needed some plumbing work done she used the same person her neighbors used. Her son’s long-time friend Ádám painted her apartment. He trained to be a painter in the state trade school. Many of his clients are elderly women because he is sensitive and offers them a good price. All his clients are obtained through word of mouth. Ica néni told me where to buy chicken and backbones for soup. When she shops, she tends to go back to her favorite vendors as she trusts their prices and quality of merchandise. With some there may be idle gossip and chitchat.

Ica néni’s illustration indicates that those with limited means must resort to social networks for assistance. In addition, there is a feeling of familiarity and trust. Social networks developed in response to shortages of goods in the socialist period and these networks of exchange continue today in the post-socialist period (see Caldwell 2002: 299). Neighbors still share foods grown on their weekend properties. When someone needs an item or a resource, one asks his or her family, friends, or neighbors for advice. People will share information about where to buy the least expensive goods or who provides the best service.

Forming social networks with vendors is an important skill for those with limited resources in the new market economy. Caldwell states,

Informal transactions depended on the integrity of exchange partners who could offer personal guarantees for the quality or reliability of the goods, services and information that was transmitted through the networks. The social relations became powerful forms of currency in the socialist economy, both as means to procure and exchange goods, and as means to evaluate the worth of the goods and the information that flowed through the transactions. This emphasis on social networks as a necessary component to everyday life has continued into the present period (Caldwell 2002: 299).

There seems to be a common assumption that the vendor may try to cheat you by overcharging or giving you inferior products. Hence there is a need to carefully watch the vender and to challenge any discrepancies. In a huge Budapest marketplace filled with small vendors (Vásárcsarnok), there is a scale located at the entrance where people double-check the weight of their purchases just in case the vendor overcharged them. In addition, the vendor may give incorrect change. Having the ability to develop a rapport and trust with the vendor is an important skill. At most stands, one is not allowed to touch the items being sold. The vendor selects the fruit or vegetables and weighs them. This entails a matter of trust because the vendor can sneak in
lesser-quality items such as bruised or overly soft fruit. In some cases, one can develop a relationship with the vendor. They know you and treat you as a special client. Ica néni is willing to travel across town to purchase food from particular vendors who she knows and trusts.

Social networks in shopping provide a sense of familiarity that elderly people prefer. In some cases, there has been a backlash against Western “foreign” foods, reflecting uneasiness with the transition: “Thus, the impersonal and disinterested nature of capitalist economic systems characterized by immediate transactions and regulated by anonymous market ‘forces’ is at odds with a socialized system of consumption that works precisely because of the personal connections and sentiments that flow through it.” (Caldwell 2002: 315). In Ica néni’s case, the size and vast variety of items available at Western-style hypermarkets are overwhelming for her, especially compared to the old Communist lack of merchandise. There is less personal connection to the vendors in the new larger markets, and shopping itself has become more stressful to her both emotionally and physically.

With increasing inflation, many seniors resort to hoarding essential goods. I have seen cabinets filled with bags of flour or sugar as they had heard on the news the price was going to rise. In 1996 many of the stores would have layers of price stickers. You could peel off one by one to see the daily increase in price. Elderly women continue to hoard goods not because they might become unavailable but rather they hope to stock up on goods before the prices rise. Furthermore, extra resources could be traded or shared with one’s family or friends in exchange for something else. To paraphrase Richard Lee, it is not simply the things that are being traded, but social connections and obligations are built with people.

CHANGING FOOD PRACTICES’ IMPACT ON GENDER AND AGENCY FOR ELDERLY HUNGARIAN WOMEN

Ica néni proudly claims her kitchen is “French modern style.” It is extremely small yet efficient. She lives in a “panel” apartment that is a typical cement gray communist tower. Her kitchen fits in a narrow hallway between the front door and the living room; the built-in table folds flat against the wall and the folding doors enclose the kitchen. I am still amazed that her small family of three was able to sit and dine in this compact space. Yet, I have never seen the kitchen ever “put away.” It consists of a very small sink, with perhaps a foot of counter space, and a two-burner gas stove. The oven is so small that roasting a whole small chicken barely fits. It reminds me of my childhood toy “Easy Bake Oven,” and yet Ica néni is capable of making bountiful feasts despite the Lilliputian size kitchen. Ica néni tells me that during the socialist period, there was a neighborhood communal kitchen/restaurant where families were encouraged to eat, hence there was no need for a large kitchen, the
architects reasoned. The front door has a windowed hinge where food could be delivered and received without having to open the door. Most people in her building have nailed these hinged doors shut for security, and she said she never used them for their intended purpose. The communal restaurant closed down in the 1970s and still stands empty and unused today.

Ica néni’s example shows how she reworked socialist-designed spaces to assert gender roles and independence from the state. Gender role construction was influenced by the socialist system and female agency. Cooking is considered a necessary and valuable skill that affirms gender roles. In Hungarian there is an expression, “Most már férjhez mehetsz” (“Now you are ready to become a wife”) that is said after an unmarried woman cooks something well. It is supposed to be a compliment that she cooks well enough to become a wife. Cooking is marked as a gendered occupation. A women’s ability to feed her family and her place within the private domestic realm is associated with gender role construction.

Socialist Gender: Cooking and Defining Gender

The problems that arose during the socialist period changed gender roles. During the socialist period, the message was to create an equal society; however, in practice this did not happen. Katherine Verdery (1999) argues that the socialist system pushed for a labor-intensive industrial program that needed labor regardless of gender. Gender equality was not so much a moral issue but rather necessity for labor. The state tried to facilitate the needs of working women by providing the option of communal eating, maternal leave, abortion, state-run childcare, and decent working conditions (see also Haney 2002). Women were still expected to take care of household duties, such as housecleaning, childcare, and food preparation, leading to the “double” or “triple” burden of wage labor and domestic labor (De Silva 1993; Eihhorn 1993).

Older women became associated with household tasks that gave them a sense of importance. Retired people living on pensions were left at home to care for children and deal with food preparation. As these senior citizens were mostly women, the task became feminized and yet it did give value and credence to elderly women (Verdery 1999: 64–65). Much like Hungary, in Russia, Randall Mack says, “In a multigenerational household, the grandmother may assume the bulk of the cooking chores and the wife and children assist in the preparation” (2005: 105). The value of elderly women was especially pertinent during the socialist regime but is also linked to redefining the private sphere.
Socialist Impact on Gender in Public/Private Spheres

Understandings of the “female” private sphere were altered during the socialist era. In Hungary after the 1956 revolution, trying to soften a hostile population, the government made gradual yet uneven improvements to the quality of life. Housing was a special problem as the lack of available apartments forced parents and grown married children to live together in often cramped spaces. Fehérvary suggests, “The socialist period exacted a high toll on friendships, family relations, peace of mind, and finances, longings for those heterotypic spaces persisted (383).” Fehérváry notes, “The state retreated from private family life—allowing the development of what came to be idealized as an apolitical and sacred domestic sphere’ opposed to the politicized public sphere of the state” (2002: 384). The home could be a space for affirming kinship networks and social groups (Pine 2001).

As the public sphere was dominated by the state, individuals preferred to identify with the private sphere. Western feminists have often been perplexed by the seemingly apathetic responses of their Eastern European sisters. Part of the reason is a cultural difference in understanding of the public/private spheres. One initial aim of Western feminism was to free women from the kitchen, to free them from the domestic household sphere to allow for career opportunities. The socialist aim already did this by mandating work for all. As a response against the state, many women refused to lose their connection to the domestic sphere.

The act of food preparation not only was associated with women’s maternal and domestic identity, but also could be used as a source of empowerment to manipulate resources from the state welfare system. At first the state de-emphasized gender differences as women were encouraged to enter the “male” public/work sphere. A woman’s choice to stay home was a subversive act. The state portrayed women who stayed at home as isolated and not fully human (Haney 2002: 122). By the 1970s, with a concern over low birth rates, state ideology emphasized work and motherhood as a social responsibility (Haney 2002: 122). The state criticized idle housewives. Though women liked the economic independence and connection to other women, they did not identify with their work outside the home (Haney 2002: 126–127). Their sense of self came from children and families associated with the domestic private sphere.

In their kitchens, they remarked that they could feed their children healthier food if they had the resources. “I do all I can to give the little ones the nutrients they need,” a mother explained in 1969. “With a few extra forints, I could offer meat occasionally; children need meat, you know.” When they discussed recipes, female clients talked about how they longed to cook with “real” ingredients. As one mother joked in 1976, “My boys know it as stew, not beef stew, because they have never seen meat in it. This is a tragedy.” (Haney 2002: 139)
Women identified with the domestic sphere and could justify their welfare claims in terms of food production for their families.

Socialist society used architecture to shape their political agenda, such as creating small kitchens to encourage a communal society. Nonetheless, individuals reworked these spaces to create their own identities. Caldwell notes that

Public dining in communal kitchens, workplace canteens, and state-owned cafeterias and food shops was envisioned as an opportunity to instill in Soviet citizens socialist values of social and economic emancipation, egalitarianism, and collective responsibility. Despite the state’s intentions, however, public dining never replaced completely the family kitchen and ironically the kitchen became valued as a safe space where close friends could interact away from the prying eyes of the state (2002: 300).

The socialist aim was to liberate women from the domestic realm by creating a collective or state food production (see Goldstein 1996). Women would not need big kitchens to cook. As Fehérváry notes, “The state-socialist kitchen became one of the most reviled and ridiculed features of state planning, coming to symbolize socialism’s detrimental effects on the Hungarian family as it effectively prevented—as the modernist planner had intended—simultaneous seating of the extended family for dinner.” (2002:391) Despite the state’s attempt to spatially manipulate personal experience women resisted these communal spaces and preferred to create family spaces at home.

Opposition to the state reinforced the private sphere and emphasized the importance in the family (Verdery 1997: 80; Lampland 1991: 462–463). Whereas state socialism stressed the public sphere of social production, women identified with the private domestic sphere (Haney 1994: 114–115) The socialist aim was to emancipate women by putting them in the public sphere and by emphasizing their role as workers. Yet Haney suggests there was an ideology of difference:

On the one hand, it was a rejection of the claim that women could obtain full human subjectivity through the world of work and politics—these were men’s domains, the férfi világ. On the other hand, it was a celebration of the fact that women had their own ways to become fully human—through their homes, families and relations with other women that constituted the women’s domain, the női világ. Hence, they were not the vanguards of the party or work force but Rather the vanguards of the home (Haney 1994: 126).13

Women’s feelings of self worth came from their children and family. Women identified with the private sphere counter to the state agenda. (Haney 1994: 127–132)
Post-Socialist Gender: Cooking and Defining Gender in a Market Economy

After one Sunday meal we decided to go on a walk. We ran into one of Ica néni’s neighbors, who casually asked what she had prepared for the Sunday meal. “Húsaleves és tőltött káposzta (meat soup and stuffed cabbage),” she claimed with a smile. I thought I misheard her because I was sure we had just eaten bableves (bean soup). Why had she lied? Ica néni had prepared bean soup for Sunday brunch because her son begged her to make it. When the neighbor asked what she prepared, she lied because bean soup, though really tasty, is not an appropriate food for Sunday brunch. It would have been an embarrassment for Ica néni if the neighbor knew she had only prepared bean soup when the traditional fare would be meat soup and fried chicken or pork cutlet, or in special cases rolled cabbage stuffed with meat.

Ica néni indicates the link between food and societal customs. Elderly women’s formative years from youth to adulthood were spent during the socialist era. The society has changed. The reference point for framing their identity in terms of socialist society is gone. Adhering to a domestic identity in terms of family and home no longer carries the same anti-socialist value. Shifting to a market economy has influenced gender roles as elderly women adjust to the difficulties of the post-socialist condition. Pensioners seem to adhere to norms set in their youth.

Gender Roles as a Response to Post-Socialist Condition

Though once glorified for their culinary feats despite state challenges, the status of older women is less valued today. The concept of equality of women was associated with the socialist period. With the criticism against things linked to state socialism after 1989, there was a strong adverse reaction against women’s equality (DeSilva 1993; Kiss 1991). Some suggest women’s positions in society have gotten worse, as indicated by high unemployment, a return of patriarchal gender assumptions, and a rise in inequality (Einhorn 1993; Funk and Mueller 1993; Haney 1994; Hauser 1993; Rai et al. 1992; Szalai 1991). The measures put in place by the socialist system to equate women have been undermined during the post-socialist period with a rise in antifeminism and a rise in pronatalism. (Verdery 1999: fn 76). Verdery argues that the socialist system made men be perceived as “weak wimps” due to socialist mothering. This undermined the male family head by giving credence to women (1999: 80–81). During the post-socialist era, bourgeois family norms have reemerged. Household duties not only are feminized, but they no longer carry the significance of personal empowerment counter to the socialist state (Verdery 81). This certainly has affected the prior heroism
of the senior women whose anti-state status is withering in the post-socialist period.

POST-SOCIALIST PUBLIC/PRIVATE SPHERE: FROM ANTI-STATE STATUS TO UNEASE WITH MODERN CHANGE

I audaciously bought and used a Cuisinart-type machine for the kitchen—a machine that Ica néni looked at with disdain, as if I were cheating the process of kitchen prep work. On several occasions Ica néni would make flip sarcastic remarks related to my use of the Cuisinart, what she called, “a gép” (the machine). I offered to buy a machine for Ica néni but mechanical devices confuse her. She finally conceded to having a microwave to reheat leftovers.

Ica néni’s resistance to change may be reflective of the uneasiness with the new “modern” capitalist society. The private sphere came to represent something outside of the socialist state, but now the socialist state no longer exists. Haney suggests, “It is clear women’s previous strategies have been undermined given the new institutional forms of domination. Quietly retreating into the home or simply “living truth” no longer has the potentially counter-hegemonic implications it once had” (Haney 1993: 145).

In the post-socialist era, there has been a growing divide among generations that seems to devalue older women’s roles. As post-socialist societies opened up, Western culture infiltrated with new material goods, religions, and media. Some younger generations perceive this Western culture as novel, modern, and progressive. This has led to some conflict with the older generation that holds onto imagined traditions and values (see also Pope Fischer 2008; Lankauskas 2002). Many elderly women cling to their cooking styles and resist change. They value the old way of doing things even if it takes more work. Randall Mack argues that

A great part of her day is spent at the market looking for products, preparing raw ingredients, cooking, and cleaning. Without the convenience of electric kitchen appliances, Russian women exert tremendous effort in basic kitchen prep work (2005: 108).

There is an element of work, labor, and suffering involved in cooking preparation that heightens older women’s sense of self-worth.

During the post-socialist period, there is an “imagined” ideal of the West that has impacted the domestic sphere. People have reworked spaces to fit current issues and concerns to create “imagined” domestic spaces (see Caldwell 2005). Small kitchens are not so unusual in Hungary, though today many remodeled apartments boast “American-style kitchens,” meaning they are spacious and have Western-style amenities. Fehérváry suggests these
remodeled kitchens reflect an imagined perception of the West as more modern. “They epitomize attempts to create heterotopias of normalcy with a not-normal local world and yet, with their high-tech hygiene and postmodern décor, incorporate Hungarians into an imagined world and lifestyle beyond Hungary’s borders” (Fehérváry 2002: 394). The imagined perception of the West is associated with modernity, whereas the things connected to Socialist Hungary are associated with being traditional, nostalgic, and backwards. To be part of the “modern” West is then to be perceived as “normal.” However, this imagined modern “normalcy” can be strange for the elderly.

In the post-socialist era, senior women appear to hold on to their “traditional” kitchens and domestic roles. Several of the elderly women I know have had their kitchens remodeled, yet interestingly they retained their old style. Erzsika néni lived in an apartment with no bathroom. She shared a communal water closet down the hall. Her daughter paid to renovate a small bedroom into a large bathroom. Erzsika néni had always slept in the living room and the bedroom had been her daughter’s room. She uses part of the new bathroom as a pantry to store her many jars of homemade preserves. Though a new tile floor and sink were installed in the kitchen, she insisted on keeping her 1940s gas stove. Other than the new floor and sink, the kitchen looks much the same. Ica néni’s son also fixed up her apartment. She chose the carpet, wall color, and tiles. Like Erzsika néni, the kitchen is much the same, only with new tiles and a new counter. They did not choose to have the huge American-style kitchen with modern appliances. As Lankauskas (2002) suggests, there may be a generational difference of opinion. The youth may prefer Western ideals because it is perceived as modern, whereas the elderly assert a resistance to change.

CONCLUSION

Ica Néni’s soup recipe:
2 turkey backbones
Chicken neck, wings, gizzard, heart, kidney
A little sunflower oil—2 tablespoons
4–5 thin peeled whole carrots
3–4 thin peeled whole parsnips
2 Savoy cabbage leaves
$\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ peeled and sliced kohlrabi
$\frac{1}{5}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ peeled and sliced celery root
2 peeled potatoes
1 small whole onion
2 peeled whole garlic cloves
*1 small to medium whole tomato
*$\frac{1}{2}$ cauliflower
*One whole small dried hot pepper
Turkey Backbones and Chicken Gizzards

2 teaspoons vegeta (a salty mixture of herbs and spices)
\(\frac{1}{3}-\frac{1}{4}\) teaspoon paprika (just for color)
Several chopped sprigs of Italian parsley
Salt and pepper to taste

I asked Ica néni if she could teach me now to make huśleves. She seemed pleased that I would want to learn but also perplexed that I did not know how already. She rattled off the ingredients and told me to put them in a pot, slightly brown, add cold water and let gradually simmer. After the water warms skim off the foam that rises. Ica néni would get up early on Sunday, serve her family breakfast, and then leave the soup over a very low flame while she went off to church. After approximately four hours on a low simmer, she sieves the broth and separates the vegetables for the noon lunch. Ica néni likes the turkey backbones because she believes it gives the most yellow color. These are readily available at most butcher stands. She typically makes fried chicken the same Sunday, so she throws in the neck, heart, gizzards, and chicken wings into the soup. I tried Ica néni’s recipe several times at home and it just never came out correctly. First, she forgot to tell me to add some vegeta, a vegetable salt seasoning and, of course, a tomato and a few potatoes. I have tried to observe her while she cooked, but she does not measure. She adds a pinch of this and a handful of that. She just knows what it is supposed to taste like. She never follows a recipe. I finally resorted to referring to the Horváth Ilona’s Szakácskönyv, a widely used basic Hungarian cookbook (1997). The recipes, like Ica néni’s, however, tend to be more general and vague. They are short, to the point, and tend to assume you have a general understanding. One recipe states to use vegyes leveszőldség, mixed soup greens. However, how are you supposed to know what are these “mixed soup greens”? The recipe does not specify how much of each vegetable nor whether they should be peeled or chopped. It simply states to add cleaned vegetables. It is assumed that people know. Cooks might also want to keep their recipes a secret in order to retain accolades for their good food. Ica néni prides herself on the crystal clear, yellow soup, “mint az olaj” (like the color of sunflower oil). It is garnished with fine noodles or galuska (dumplings).

Cooking chicken soup for Ica néni informs her identity as a senior Hungarian woman, yet also illustrates the power and oppression of society. In the socialist period, everyone shared a common misery because everyone faced limited resources. The changes in the ability to acquire and prepare food from a socialist society to a market economy have affected Ica néni’s personal experiences and practices. In both situations, she had to struggle with acquiring limited resources: in the socialist period merchandise was limited; in the post-socialist period, she simply cannot afford to buy goods. Hoarding and systems of reciprocal exchange (legal and illegal) became part of people’s everyday experience. Using her wits, she learned the importance of personal social connections, aggression, persistence, and strength.
Cooking can affirm gender roles and women’s place in society, but culinary skills can also give her authority within the household. It may take extra work and labor to attain and process food, but it was necessary for the household economy during the socialist era and is now necessary for an elderly woman living on a small income. Food preparation adds to their feelings of heroism and the ability to overcome challenges.

Making chicken soup illustrates the ability to make something from nothing and is one way to look at the effects of post-socialist change on senior pensioner women. Gender roles were constructed partly in response to the state system. During the Communist era, women who held full-time positions in the labor force continued to be defined by their household work rather than their work outside the home, adding to privileging the domestic sphere over the public. Despite the difficulty of working in small spaces, despite the state’s efforts to encourage communal eating, women preferred to cook at home. It was a matter of taste and personal satisfaction to affirm the personal private sphere in contrast to the state. To glorify the domestic sphere was to critique the socialist system. During the post-socialist era, retired female pensioners no longer fulfill a necessary socioeconomic niche once revered in the socialist period, yet they are prepared for the challenges in the capitalist era. As the younger generation adheres more to a Western capitalist economy, they want houses in the suburbs, they want large American-style kitchens, and they want convenience. They have the cash to do so. During the post-socialist period, older people prefer the old way of doing things despite the extra time and effort. For the elderly, hanging onto the past ways of doing things can be an act of resistance to a market society that has been unforgiving. Many pensioner women are now losing their clout; however, they have gained the survival skills learned in the socialist era that allow them to adapt to the new era of high inflation and high unemployment. They are still able to manage despite limited incomes and the inability to afford resources. The transition has been particularly hard for Ica néni given her working-class background, age cohort, and gender. However, Ica néni is still the leves király (the soup king). When it comes to making soup, hers is still the best.

NOTES

1. This study was presented at the American Anthropological Association meetings in San Francisco, California, 2008. I would like to thank the encouraging comments and suggestions from the people who attended this panel. I owe a great deal to the Fulbright Association for funding my research in 1996–1997. I appreciate the nudges and advice from my core writing group: Jean Kubeck, Sean MacDon-ald, Eric Rodriguez. I would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions and remarks.

2. Soup can be eaten alone or as a first course to a meal. Soup is a common staple associated with family meals. Meat soup in particular is commonly served for family Sunday brunch.

3. “Jó ébédhez szól a női.”
4. Néni literally translates as “aunt,” but it is used as a sign of respect when a younger person addresses an older woman. Bácsi translates as “uncle” and is used as a sign of respect when talking to an older man.

5. Please refer to Appendix for brief descriptions of all respondents mentioned in this article.

6. Please refer to Appendix for brief descriptions of all respondents mentioned in this article.

7. Házi Gondozás is a state-run center that allocates social services and advice. They run the Hungarian version of “meals on wheels” (though food is typically delivered by bus and foot). They have information about state-run institutions and hospitals. They can send a social worker to check up on an elderly person.

8. Tesco is a large Western-style supermarket. It is a British-owned retail market that sells a wide variety of products including clothing, electronics, and food. They sell inexpensive fresh baked bread. Unlike the old state-run stores, Tesco stores are typically huge and offer a wide range of options and choices with the convenience of being open 24 hours. On weekends, they often have free food samples. They have wheeled shopping carts, and give free plastic bags. Most Hungarian stores were too small for shopping carts, and the customers had to bring their own shopping bags or pay for one at the market. Tesco allows its customers to select the produce themselves, unlike the old-style Hungarian greengrocers. Because they are huge, they are typically located on the outskirts of Budapest.

9. In the United States, friends might visit a person’s home and help themselves to a cold drink from the refrigerator. It is a sign of familiarity. In Hungary, particularly among the elderly, to have a visitor open their refrigerator to help themselves would be rude. There is a strong code of hospitality in which a guest is served typically by the woman of the house. In addition, it takes years to build relationships and friendships that would allow one the more informal access to family (see West 2002: 36–41 and 109–110). I felt particularly privileged that Ica neni was willing to show and explain the contents of her refrigerator.

10. Senior Hungarians have actually chastised me for buying an expensive item out of season. This is seen as wasteful. I got into the practice of taking the price labels off of everything I bought to avoid the scrutiny of visitors who would disapprove.

11. Nothing is wasted; in fact, I bought some pickles and jam at the store and was criticized when I tried to throw out the empty jars as these could be used over with homemade preserves and sauces. Having assisted various women in the production of tomato sauce and jam, and one man’s brewing of palinka, I did not anticipate that I would take the time to make my own. Hence I either donated my jars to my neighbors, or took them outside the building to dispose of in the neighborhood recycling bin (see West 2002).

12. When I first started shopping in Hungary, I found that I often received money that was no longer circulated. They heard my American accent and slipped me old single forint coins that were no longer of any value.

13. “Férfi világ” translates as “men’s world” and “női világ” translates as women’s world.

14. There is a general and implicit understanding that these vegetables include carrots, parsnips, kohlrabi, celery root, potatoes, onions, and parsley.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX 1: SUMMARY PROFILES OF RESPONDENTS

Names are listed in alphabetical order, with the female respondents before the male respondents. I asked my respondents to pick the names I should use in this article; even so, some let me choose the pseudonyms. I briefly describe their age, class, and background, including religious affiliation and marital status. Class is a difficult category to define for Hungarians, especially as the Communist ideal was to eliminate class altogether. Furthermore, some people may be living on a modest income but have family links to the old aristocracy. Their family may still have appropriated aristocratic ideals and culture, yet live like paupers. Gáriel, for example, wears tattered old clothing, yet still hangs oil paintings by his famous great-uncle and visits the run-down family villa near Lake Balaton. I met most of these individuals through their children who lived in the United States. Though she does not socialize with the other people mentioned in this study, Ica néni is the only other person who knows everyone mentioned in this article. Typically, I would ask people to define their class status themselves. Hence, class was determined by income level, style of living, and self-definition. In most cases, I met with the individual before the actual taped interview to talk about the project and answer any questions they might have. At the first taped interview, I simply asked them to describe their lives from wherever they wanted to start. After several interviews, I would fill in basic background information with direct questions. I prepared an interview outline for these later interviews. I wanted to be prepared with a few questions of interest in case the topic of conversation would lead in that direction. In several cases, I also
used participant observation with unstructured interviews. The following is a description of the people mentioned in this article.

Female Respondents Mentioned in Article

“Albertina” was born in 1939. Though technically I should refer to her as Albertina néni, she prefers simply “Albertina.” (Néni literally means “Aunt,” but it is a form of respect and familiarity to refer to one’s elders with “néni” (aunt) for women, or “bácsi” (uncle) for men.) She is a widow. She is currently retired but worked for a newspaper. When asked what her belief system was, she replied “őkunemikus” (ecumenical). She identifies as Catholic. Her two children both emigrated from Hungary in the 1980s. Her son emigrated to Germany, and her daughter “Lea” emigrated to the United States. Lea was part of my original migration research. In 1986–1987 Albertina began treatment for breast cancer. One positive outcome from this illness was that she has come back to life. She no longer drinks heavily, and she has rekindled her relationship with her daughter. She has visited her daughter in Los Angeles three times (in 1997, 2006, and 2009).

Anna néni was born in 1935. She was a common-law wife to Gyuszi Bácsi (1931). I interviewed Gyuszi Bácsi’s son, also named Gyuszi, as part of my research with transmigrants in 1996. Though Gyuszi Bácsi died in 2004, his one wish was that Anna not be forgotten. I try to send her occasional holiday cards and visit when I am in the country. She lives alone in a poor neighborhood. She has two adult daughters and a grandson. Her ex-husband lives in the countryside. She is not very religious.

Eliza néni was born in 1928. She has one son, “Ádám (1956), whom I gradually got to know through an informal free jazz group that, much to Eliza néni’s dismay, meets at her house every Friday evening. Her husband died in the late 1960s. She remarried in the mid-1980s, but this husband also passed away. She lives in a small house that has been part of her husband’s family for many generations. She grows fruit and vegetables in her yard. Her grandson visits her often as he uses a computer to play International internet games. She lives on a modest income and regularly attends a Catholic church.

Erzsika néni was born in 1930. She is my neighbor in Budapest. In 1993, I was at first irritated by her nosy personality. She chastised me one morning for leaving a kitchen light on all night. She knows who comes and goes. Gradually, I have grown fond of her and feel comforted that she keeps a watchful eye. She is a chain smoker with serious health problems that prevent her from leaving her apartment. Her daughter will shop for her and occasionally takes her away on weekends. She divorced her husband, but
they continued to live together until his death in 2000. She lives alone with her cat. She still makes jam and pickles.

“Ica néní” was born in 1931. Not long after their son “Gyuszi” emigrated to the United States, she and her husband “Gyuszi bácsi” separated. (It is common for Hungarians to name their first son after the father.) Though he lived with another woman (Anna néní), they remained supportive of one another. She is a devout Catholic though she was raised Lutheran. She grew up in the countryside and was one of six children. She and her sister are the last surviving members of the family. One sister committed suicide, two siblings died of cancer, and another died in an automobile accident. She believes herself to be a part of the middle class, but truly struggles with the paltry pension she receives each month (the equivalent of $100 U.S.). Her small apartment is stuffed with jars of homemade preserves, tomato sauce, and pickles. She stocks up on flour, sugar, onions, and potatoes before the prices go up. Her son would send her American money; however, she simply stuffed the bills in a drawer. Now he sends money to his friend Gábrél, who then buys the necessities that Ica néní requires. When she was younger, she liked to travel to Turkey. As the amount of money one could take out of the country during the socialist period was restricted, she would stuff cash in her shoes. She liked to buy gold (which she smuggled back into Hungary) and leather coats. Ica néní has visited her son in the United States on three occasions, once in New York in 1985, and twice in Los Angeles in 1999 and 2006. Around 1956, she and her husband considered emigrating to Germany; however, Gyuszi bácsi decided against it because he feared it would be difficult to travel with his son Gyuszi, who was but an infant at the time. Other than that time, Ica néní has not considered emigrating from Hungary.

Male Respondents Mentioned in Article

“Ádám” was born in 1956 in a suburb of Budapest. He is married to “Arany” and has a young son, “Gonzar.” He was raised a Catholic but has a special interest in Native American and Egyptian cultures and beliefs. He refers to himself as “Sváb,” which he describes as a particular type of German immigrant to Hungary. He explains that groups of Germans, including his grandparents, were forced to migrate to parts of Hungary. To some extent, he believes this German identity was subject to racist restrictions under state socialism. The Russian Socialists were the ones who removed the Nazi Germans from Hungary. Anti-German sentiment then prevailed. He knew he would not be able to attend University, let alone the much-coveted music institute. Instead, he went to a trade school to learn the skills of house painting. He identifies himself as a musician but makes his living as a painter.
He organizes weekly jam sessions for a free jazz group. I was encouraged to attend and participate in these music sessions. I was designated to play the flute though I really have not played since my fourth grade music lessons. When I asked him what social class he belonged to he replied “kisvíz,” which translates as “shallow water.” Ádám has a tendency to talk in a poetic manner; he likes to use metaphors and twist words around. Though he lives on a modest budget, the equivalent of approximately $500 U.S., he supports his mother, wife, and son. “Ádám” introduced me to several of the people I interviewed.

“Gyuszi” was born in 1956. He is married. He describes himself as middle working class. He was raised a Catholic and was an altar boy as a child. His mother still actively attends church, but he and his father rarely go. He and his friends first emigrated to France in 1981. He was offered the possibility to immigrate to France, Australia, Canada, and United States. He chose the United States because he wanted to see something other than the European continent, he felt he would be able to travel more readily, and he became entranced with a picture of the San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge. He lived in New York for 8 years before moving to California. He received his U.S. citizenship three years after arriving to the States as he was able to claim refugee status. He reapplied for his Hungarian citizenship in 2007. He started going back to Hungary on a semiregular basis since 1989. He has been concerned about the health of his elderly parents. As an only child he feels responsible to go back to help them on occasion. At one point, his father was having surgery to input a pacemaker, and another time his mother was hospitalized for headaches and depression. I first met Gyuszi in Los Angeles in 1992. He introduced me to several of the people in this study.