

**Review Article: "Documenting Immigrants, Boarding Houses and Ethnographers" *Burdosház Amerikából – Balogh Balázs néprajzkutató nyomában* ('A Boarding House from America - in the Footsteps of Ethnographer Balázs Balogh'). Directed by Dezső Zsigmond, produced by Dunatáj Alapítvány, Camera: Arthur Bálint, 2015, 50:39 minutes.**

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**Abstract:** This review article offers a critique of *Boarding House*, a Hungarian ethnographically-based documentary film about a formerly Hungarian mining-settlement in Vintondale, Pennsylvania. In the film two researchers from Hungary introduce this settlement via interviews, old photographs and stories about a general store that in addition functioned as a boarding house for miners. Also featured in the film is the acquisition process of some thousand items of this store by the Open Air Museum of Szentendre, Hungary, in order to replicate the boarding house in the museum and thus illustrate some aspects of Hungarian-American immigrant life in this United States coal-region during the 1920s and 1930s.

This is correction to the original article. For information about changes made see the erratum <http://dx.doi.org/10.5195/ahea.2017.270>

**Keywords:** *documentary filmmaking, ethnographic research, Vintondale, Pennsylvania, boarding house, museum acquisition*

**Biography:** László Kürti is a cultural anthropologist (Ph.D. University of Massachusetts, 1989) with extensive fieldwork experience in Hungary, Romania, and the United States. He has taught at The American University in Washington D.C. and the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest, and is presently a professor at The Institute of Political Science, University of Miskolc, Hungary. From 2001 to 2006 he acted as Secretary of the European Association of Social Anthropologists; currently he serves on the international editorial board of *Visual Studies*, *Urbanities*, *AnthroVision* and *Region: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia*. His English-language authored books include: *The Remote Borderland* (2001), *Youth and the State in Hungary* (2002); his co-edited books are: *Beyond Borders* (1996), *Working Images* (2004), *Post-Socialist Europe* (2009), and *Every Day's a Festival: Diversity on Show* (2011).

As a number of film scholars have pointed out, Hungarian documentaries are nowadays among the gems of European cinema (Nichols and Renov, 2011; Petrie, 1982; Portuges, 1995; Szekfű, 2009; Varga, 2004). With such pioneers as István Szóts (1912-1998), Pál Schiffer (1939-2001), and their followers like Lívia Gyarmathy, Gyula Gazdag, the Gulyás brothers, Tamás Almási, Ádám Csillag, Péter Forgács, András Salamon, Ágota Varga, to name only a few, Hungarian documentary films have been making the rounds of national and international festivals to awards and high accolades (for example, since 2010 the Hungarian documentary film festival in Los Angeles attests to such events and appreciation). Therefore, when I was asked to review *Boarding House* (2015), a documentary film featuring Hungarian-American old-timers and their material culture in Vintondale, Pennsylvania, I had high expectations, especially since as early as the 1970s, while still a student at the City College in New York, I myself conducted research in Vintondale (Kürti, 1980, 1983). As I began watching the film I discovered that it has already been shown at numerous Hungarian-culture events in the United States and Budapest, as well as on Hungarian Television.

The ethnographer whose footsteps the camera follows is Balázs Balogh, the current director of the Hungarian Ethnographic Institute, who since 2006 has been conducting research on rural Hungarian life as well as on Hungarian-Americans. With his wife, Ágnes Fülemlé, herself an ethnographer, and with director Dezső Zsigmond, Balogh embarked upon rediscovering what he sees as remnants of Hungarian immigrant "life-world" (*életvilág*; unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author). The film depicts a general store cum boarding house located in a small Pennsylvanian town, whose current population barely numbers some four-hundred individuals, and which was once owned by the Bagu-Antal local family. This store serves as a springboard for introducing issues of Hungarian emigration to the area, the experiences of past or elderly local coal-miners of Hungarian origin, including recollections of their offspring about the former lives of their ancestors. Surprisingly, Balogh refers to the area in question as "Mid-West," whereas Pennsylvania actually belongs to the Mid-Atlantic region; similarly, mistakenly, the name of the town is misspelled throughout as Wintondale.

Tracing emigration from the North-Eastern region of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (although this periodic term is never mentioned in the film) to a coal-mining settlement in rural Western Pennsylvania is an excellent idea as this experience has not yet been much explored in research or in documentary film. One such work, though, is Péter Forgács's 2009 poetic documentary, *Hunky Blues*, a two-and-a-half hour unique handling of hard-to-find archival material and home movies featured together with numerous detailed individual personal narratives about the experiences of hundreds of thousand Hungarian immigrants who arrived in the U.S. between 1890 and 1921, after which new immigration policies sharply limited further immigration.

Balogh's film opens with his ethnographer's narration or narrative telling the history of Hungarian immigration to America, all in an authoritative voice and presence that rather overburden the film as it progresses. The camera then switches for a moment to a black-and-white scene, thus giving us an impression of a bygone era, but the scene is marred by present-day skyscrapers visible in the background. We then follow Balogh entering the William Penn Association offices, or the Verhovay Fraternal Insurance Association, or *Verhovay Betegsegélyző Egyesület* by its original name, an institution founded back in 1886 in Hazleton, Pennsylvania by Hungarian immigrants. There he meets with Endre Csomán, an employee of the Association,

who offers Balogh basic background details about the lives of coal-miner Hungarian immigrants of nearby towns in the early twentieth century. Csomán's narrative is illustrated by some random archival photographs of miners and coal-patch towns, without any identification as to where and when these photos were taken, by whom, and whether they actually refer to Hungarians at all; such information is absolutely necessary for photographs of immigrant communities to be reliable and useful for comparative anthropological and other visual studies (Kürti, 2012). This lack of identification is repeated again when the conversation switches to mine accidents (in particular the tragic 1907 Darr Mine disaster), at which point the camera pans a cemetery landscape with Hungarian gravestones, again, without stating the connection between these graves of Hungarian-Americans and the Darr disaster.

Following the interview at the William Penn Association, there comes a radical jump in the narrative and we find ourselves in Bányu, a settlement in what the narrator and a subtitle call *Kárpátalja*, a place that should have been identified in more detail since to this day it is referred to by many names and languages, e.g., Carpatho-Rus', Subcarpathian Ruthenia, or Transcarpathian Ukraine (Pod-Karpatskai Rus, Zakarpatia, Rusinsko, etc.). It now turns out that the settlement in question, Bányu (Batyuvo), is a place from where many Hungarian emigrants left for the U.S. A local priest now narrates how the Bányu Protestant Church was built in 1910 with the support of locals who then lived and worked in America either temporarily or permanently. Thus, the connection between the Carpathian Bányu and the Pennsylvania Vintondale was established as early as the 1910s, albeit at that time most of the Hungarian immigrant miners at the film's center still lived and worked in neighboring Wehrum, PA. The narrative of the film then jumps once more, showing the ethnographer holding the hand of an old lady referred to as *Tuba Giza néni* ('Aunt Giza Tuba'), who tells Balogh all about the precious U.S. dollars that the emigrants sent back to their Carpathin-Hungarian relatives.

At this point the film returns to Pennsylvania, to a café in Nanty Glo, where Balogh and Ágnes Fülemile -- who now appears in the film for the first time -- discuss mine accidents; and as it turns out, the café's proprietor is a descendant of miners, which explains why this café is a reservoir of memorabilia of days long gone. In yet another brief scene Balogh and second-generation John Dusza are conversing and looking at an old footage of mines and miners; this scene is in turn followed by an archival soundtrack of a former miner by the name of János Csapó reminiscing about his hospitalization, and of another individual (whose name is never revealed) talking about his youth while growing up in Vintondale. What is most striking in all these scenes is the use of unattributed archival footage so that viewers get no information about what they are seeing, who made these films and when; furthermore, even the final credits do not reveal the film's sources (actually the clips are taken from *Vintondale in 1938*, a silent documentary with valuable voice-over providing important background, even naming some of the miners emerging from their shift, that can be viewed on YouTube). In subsequent scenes we find ourselves inside the Protestant Church of Vintondale, now abandoned, where Balogh briefly introduces the building's history. These scenes are then followed by a few other small vignettes, in particular of two lonely and decrepit stores, where Balogh discusses shelves, hangers and furniture and how they supposedly looked and functioned in the past.

Later in the film viewers are invited by Balogh and Fülemile to enter another former store, where the ethnographer couple eagerly photograph the interior while exchanging offhand comments not characteristic of documentary style, such as: "Look, there is a musical score here,

actually a polka, could somebody play music in that family?"; "Now, that's a real East-European delicacy;" "Hungarians liked to smoke pipes, this is an original pipe stand." More troubling is when actual erroneous information is provided in the perhaps unscripted dialogue, for example, when Balogh tells us that "Hungarian miners emigrated to America at the end of the nineteenth-, beginning of the twentieth-century" (*A magyar bányászok a tizenkilencedik század végén, a huszadik század elején vándoroltak Amerikába*), which overlooks the fact that the overwhelming majority of Hungarian immigrants to the U.S. were agricultural laborers, not miners.

At one point in the visit to the former Bagu-Antal family store Balogh partially misquotes a line from the National-Hungarian poet Attila József's poem "My Home" (*Hazám*): '*Amerikába tántorgott másfél millió emberünk*,' instead of the correct '*kitántorgott Amerikába másfél millió emberünk*' (roughly translated as: "One and a half million of our people staggered to America"). The film then shows bills and purchase books kept in the store but Balogh does not mention that the miners themselves were paid mostly by scrip, a salary system that greatly contributed to their financial exploitation by unscrupulous employers (Bartoletti, 1996, 74-75; Caudill, 1963, 190). At another point he talks about the tide of emigration from Hungary in the years 1904 and 1907, stating that "more than 300,000 people left in a single year," but U.S. immigration and Hungarian emigration data show that the peak year of this wave was 1907, when around 200,000 people left Hungary for America (Kürti, 2008, 522-523; Puskás, 1982, 441-452).

There are many other minor and less minor factual inaccuracies throughout the Balogh film, some examples of which include the mistranslation of Blacklick Creek, a small river that runs through the town, as '*Fekete nyalás*,' when "-lick" really means "brook" or "rivulet" and not '*nyalás*,' meaning licking with the tongue. Another inaccuracy concerning language occurs when Balogh, quite assuredly, claims that nowadays there are no or hardly any Hungarian-speakers in Vintondale, a claim that is disproven by his own encounters and conversations with Hungarian speakers of the town. Also misleading is the statement that the town was once inhabited by mostly Hungarian immigrants, who composed "eighty to ninety percents of the population" of the town's 2,500 inhabitants; when in fact, in 1977, when I conducted research there, I found that strictly enforced company rules and open "hunky-hatred" (meaning hostility towards East-European immigrants) in the 1920s -- especially the actions of mine superintendent Otto Pappy Hoffman and his private police -- resulted in a controlled number of 2,053 people in 1920, the year signaling the end of the coal boom in Pennsylvania, at which time the overall Magyar presence in Vintondale mounted to twenty-five to thirty percents.

Regarding places of origin of the Vintondale Hungarians, Balogh recounts that they were mostly from the villages of Botrágy and Bályu in the historic Bereg County; but in fact, while many emigrants did leave from this area, other northeastern counties (e.g., Abaúj, Borsod, Gömör, Ung, Szatmár, Zemplén) were also represented in Vintondale. Moreover, the creation of the Hungarian colony of miners at Vintondale is later compared to the foundation of other industrial settlements in Pennsylvania such as Braddock, Duquesne or McKeesport. What is really missing in the film is a more complete history of Vintondale's early days, which would lead to the conclusion that this coal-patch town was a truly American creation and thus similar to many others like it in Pennsylvania and Ohio, where the multi-ethnic and multi-religious population was almost equally divided into Anglo-Irish, Italian, Slavic and Hungarian immigrants. I personally heard legends telling that in the 1920s more than twenty languages were spoken in town (cf. Dusza Weber, 1991, 2008).

As for religious faith and places of worship in Vintondale, long before the previously mentioned Hungarian Protestant Church was built in 1921 the Roman and the Orthodox Catholics (meaning Byzantines) had erected their own Baptist Church, which had served the town's English inhabitants since 1897. What further complicates early twentieth-century interethnic identities in this town (and film) specifically is that many Hungarians adhered to the Roman Catholic and to the Orthodox faith and therefore could not belong to the Protestant Church discussed in the film. (A note: When I [Kürti, 1980] wrote my first student paper from my Vintondale trip, I eagerly integrated information that locals told me, which included homes, bake-houses and stables, and the lay-out of the entire plot with gardens that seemed to replicate old-world patterns. Only much later did I realize that these patterns were ingrained only in their mentality for in reality house structure and floor plan of rooms followed mostly the general pattern of the company houses in Vintondale. From this experience I learned a hard lesson that all fieldworkers must learn: closeness to villagers does not mean that data obtained from them can be published before checking things as to their validity and accuracy.)

It is only well into the thirtieth minute of the film that we learn that this filmic venture is actually all about Balogh's successful negotiation with the store owners about the filmmaker's purchasing of the store's furnishing and household objects of about one thousand items. In this endeavor Balogh found a willing partner in the Open Air Museum of Szentendre, which is illustrated by a few stills of individuals taking measurements of the store and workers loading objects into containers. Thus, the main *raison d'être* of this documentary is to provide a visual testimony of how the items of this establishment are relocated to Hungary. Once in Hungary the objects are placed in a replica house, offering tourists a glimpse of how these objects might have looked in their heyday. With the help of a restored record and a Brunswick phonograph we then hear a Hungarian popular song the miners probably listened to in the interwar period. Still, even after all the efforts invested in first filming, then relocating and finally re-presenting these everyday objects, the question remains as to how much we learn from these objects about the lives and hardships of Hungarian miners; that is, to what degree can such a display solve or rather fill in the lack of scholarly research on the Hungarian Diaspora in North America (Kürti, 1999).

Close to the end of the documentary the last owner of the general store, the exotically named Zolinda -- whose father wished for a boy he would have named Zoltán -- the same Zolinda who had also been my original contact in Vintondale back in 1977, reminiscences with tears in her eyes about lost relatives and no less about the pain of having to sell her precious family inheritance to Hungarian ethnographers. With Vintondale and its vicinity undergoing a rejuvenation these days -- namely, restoration of the Eliza Furnice and of a mine-entrance monument as well as of the picturesque Ghost Town Trail passing by the town -- I wonder if the Hungarian institutions involved in making this film ever thought of the possibility of financing a local museum in Vintondale, meaning in the original location where there would have been no need to replicate anything! Somewhat ironically, in the last frames, we see Balogh standing by the gravesite of Mr. Bagu and his wife Ida Antal, the original owners of the general store, and commenting that these old-timers never returned to their native land.

When the credit rolls we see the names of Béla Várady and Ágnes Huszár Várady -- respected scholars of Hungarian immigrant culture in the U.S. -- pop up, but I wonder if these illustrious scholars really had any input in the finalizing of this film. This doubt is raised

following all the inaccuracies and small or no small flaws surveyed throughout this review article, all of which make the Balogh/Fülemile/Zsigmond film deserve Jay Ruby's verdict of many a joint project of filmmakers and anthropologists: "positively embarrassing to the anthropologist" (Ruby, 1995: 30). What should have been a unique or so-called "hunky story" about coal-mining Magyar-America and the generations whose lives were fundamentally intertwined with consumerism of the day is derailed by a museum acquisition project, a business deal that may unquestionably upset some viewers justly thinking about the specter of colonialism or nationalism haunting Hungarian ethnography. (Did Lord Elgin purchase, or simply force the sale of, the marbles of the Parthenon? Were the Greeks asked about that? Would the Hungarian ethnographers dare embark on such a salvage operation with American Indian tribes?). I do not intend to push these parallels too far but several ethical questions probably remain unanswered about this film.

It would be a mistake to dismiss everything in this documentary as inaccurate, faulty or commercialized, because it does have some redeeming features. For instance, brief photo-elicitation exercises assist descendants of miners to remember and share some heartrending family stories. Similarly, interview segments with old-timers make great shots (albeit not necessarily great movies). Yet, the unique Bátyu-Vintondale transatlantic connection, had it been backed-up with more detailed narratives of the changing lives of those who left to America and those who stayed behind, would have made *Boarding House* a memorable and previously unknown filmic project. As it is, however, this film is evidently made by Hungarians for Hungarians with a narrow lens to satisfy solely the filmmakers' business interest. *Boarding House* cannot be considered an example of anthropological filmmaking (since it offers no such theoretical or comparative framework). Neither does it live up to the expected level of a sound ethnographic film (it is too superficial for that); as a documentary it lacks a critical view of the social context and an investigative essence, both of which are considered hallmarks of engaging and thought-provoking documentaries.

Since it is impossible to define and compare *Boarding House* to other unique examples of ethnographically-based documentaries -- for example the award-winning American *Sweetgrass* (2009) by Lucian Castaing-Taylor, the raw *Oxyana* (2013), or the gloomy Chilean *The Last Station* (*La última estación*, 2012), or some of the novel films of the Hungarian ethnographic documentarist János Tari -- one wonders about its utility for scholars, Hungarians both within and without Hungary, as well as for general audiences. Just who is the intended audience and what is the purpose of the film are two things that it never makes clear. All these questions are much better answered in the Forgács film discussed earlier that therefore makes a far more accomplished work than *Boarding House*, which seems like an unfinished project that should have been edited with more care. *Boarding House* does not leave visually lasting images in viewers, which is one of the main reasons for my disappointment with it. This matters because Zsigmond is not a newcomer to filmmaking, especially documentaries, with excellent films to his credit for which he deservedly received the prestigious Béla Balázs prize. I guess that he either was restricted in his art, or failed to spend enough time with those he filmed in order to make them come alive on camera.

It seems at times as if the ethnographers and Zsigmond could not find a common ground as to what actually should be included so they tried a little bit of everything. Contrary to my comment about discovering the "life-way" of immigrants at the opening of this review article,

after watching these fifty minutes of cutting back and forth between locations and subjects I find it hard to elucidate what exactly this film contributes in this context. I hesitate to declare that the overwhelming material at the disposal of the filmmakers, together with the lack of common understanding about a sense of direction, worked against their joint venture. *Boarding House* is thus a classic example of a work for which less would have been more. At best, this documentary is a composite of raw dailies, or in the language of German-Hungarian cinematography, a choppy *werkfilm*.

The image of the white male anthropologist (Hungarian ethnographer) treading the rainforest (a sleepy former coal-patch) to discover a stone-age tribe (descendants of miners) unfortunately lingers on (remember Adrian Cowell's 1970 *The Tribe That Hides From Man* or Napoleon Chagnon's 1974 *A Man Called Bee?*). Surely, it may be difficult to some ethnographers to shed legacies of this mentality but visual anthropologists and documentary filmmakers have made great strides in the past decades to avoid such stereotypes and pitfalls, and instead reveal or raise new concerns of important diasporic and postcolonial experiences (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009; Pinazza, 2001; Pink, Kürti and Afonso, 2004). As a visual anthropologist who has conducted fieldwork among Hungarians in North America, including Vintondale, I am sorry to sum up by saying that despite some promising potential *Boarding House* fails on multiple levels. A coherent, well-written and well-researched film about the lives and tribulations of Hungarian old-timers and their descendants in rural industrial North America is still waiting to be made.

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