

Pointy Bras and Loose House Dresses:
Female Dress in Hungary and the United States in the 1950s

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Abstract

This paper is a comparative study of the social, ideological and economic differences between the United States and Hungary during the 1950s through the examination of the expressive features of female dress. It argues that dress served as a significant means of conveying the major divisions between the two countries and demonstrates that the female body became one of the crucial sites for waging the everyday battles of the Cold War opponents. Because less information is available about the construction of gender and the sartorial practices of women in Hungary in the 1950s this paper primarily focuses on Hungary. Data for this paper was collected through oral histories, archival sources and through the examination of contemporary photographic images.

Because of the distorted and simplistic propaganda that prevailed during the Cold War, both in the United States and in Hungary, most people knew very little about those on the other side. Consequently, most Americans imagined Hungarians in a uniform light and vice versa. As Karal Marling noted, Soviet bloc women were mostly portrayed in the US media as “unfashionable,” wearing either “sack dresses” or working in drab overalls as beasts of burden (Marling 42). At the same time, people in the Soviet Union and in the Soviet bloc thought that American women were “overdressed, neurotic and kept women” furiously engaged in conspicuous consumption (Meyerowitz 241). What appeared to matter most to both sides during the Cold War was making a dramatic distinction between the two competing worlds. Therefore, individuals of the “free world” had to be very different from the “suppressed masses” under communism in every respect, even in appearance.

Hungarian women’s sartorial history is checkered. Even though Hungary gradually evolved from a feudal society into a modern one, it had caught up with the West in the first decades of the 20th century. The capital, Budapest, became a fashion center and the wealthy from all over Eastern Europe and the Balkans flocked to the city to go on buying sprees because the dress styles and quality were as good as those in Paris, while the prices were relatively moderate (Dózsa 138). In most modern societies, where the class system undergoes a rapid change, status and wealth are expressed through dress, and this was the case in Hungary, too. Until the outbreak of World War II, female dress was an important marker of not only a woman’s but her family’s social status as well, therefore, many women, especially the members of the middle and upper classes, were reluctant to give up trying to look stylish and feminine.

Among the devastations of World War II was the loss of clothing, which was destroyed in the bombings and lootings, and the subsequent deprivation with the drop in production. After the war, not only were Hungarians stuck with a limited wardrobe, they also were thrown into a fashion time warp. For example, the ’50s saw much wider shoulders, shorter dresses, and boxier styles than what was standard at the time in America where, conforming to Christian Dior’s “New Look,” women strived for an hour glass silhouette and an ultra-feminine image. As more Hungarian women entered the work force, the demand for shoes rose because they were the first

to wear out. In 1955, for example, in Hungary one-fifth of the women had only one pair of shoes and most of the rest had two pairs (Valuch 55). Shoe production was minimal and limited only to a few sizes for both genders, and the service in shoe stores was inferior. The situation regarding the availability of shoes was so bad that in 1951 even the Hungarian Communist newspaper, *Szabad Nép*, carried reports about the state of affairs based on readers' irate complaints. In the Number Three Shoe Store, for example, a salesman sought to force a pair of boy's shoes on a woman instead of a size thirty-four adult female pair. One displeased parent wrote in to complain that the industry was making children's footwear from materials that were at best fit for lining the inside of shoes. Another reader commented that summer sandals were made of leather whose toughness may have been more suitable for winter shoes. All this suggests that in the early '50s in Hungary there was no communication between producers, retailers, and consumers and that in terms of sartorial necessities, Hungarian women were primarily left to their own devices (Medvedev b. 126).

The strengthening of the Cold War brought about a radical decrease in foreign trade, battering the economy further and prompting an unwitting recycling trend. The scarcity of clothing forced Hungarians to use their ingenuity to re-create their attire, so old dresses were altered, hemlines lowered, collars turned, sweaters unraveled and re-knit, and coats re-cut (RFE, Clothing and Laundry). People were not squeamish about accepting or using hand-me-downs, and looked forward especially to the packages of garments and accessories sent by relatives or friends who had emigrated to the West, mostly after the 1956 uprising. The items in those packages were stylish and durable and often inspired the receiver to re-fashion them with the help of clever tailoring. Ultimately, 1956 represented not only a turning point in Hungarian history, but Hungarian sartorial history as well. It not only marked the depolitization of everyday life but was the starting point of Hungary's gradual commodification as well which, by the early 1960s, somewhat eased women's sartorial misery.

Prior to 1956, during the "long 50s," official communist femininity was expressed through a "*kultúrált megjelenés* "cultured appearance," which meant simple, clean, starched, and well-ironed clothes. The hygienic standards of the general population in Hungary, unlike that of their US counterparts, remained below par. The difficulty of maintaining one's appearance was enormous because water shortages were frequent, hot water boilers did not work or were unavailable, and washing machines were mostly nonexistent even in middle class households (RFE, The Experiences of a Former Household-Help and Washer Woman in Baja). Still, some people managed to maintain a presentable appearance because the majority of women at least had basic sewing abilities and could create outfits for themselves and also because skilled tailors continued to make custom-fit clothes in their homes for those who could afford their services.

Most communist citizens were completely deprived of fine goods, whose supply came almost exclusively through illegal channels, mainly from athletes who traveled to the West. Because during the Cold War political confrontations were often acted out in international sports competitions, outstanding communist athletes enjoyed numerous privileges, one of which was unrestricted travel to the West. At the same time, they were still paid a communist salary, which led them to seek ways to enhance their income through smuggling foreign goods. Although customs officers were well aware of the wide scale of the illegal activities, they turned a blind eye as they often got a cut from the proceeds (Medvedev a. 137).

Given that dress is a form of cultural representation, one can easily establish that in the '50s, American women's cocktail dresses and gloves were meant to symbolize their genteel lifestyle and homemaker role. While women in the American media were generally portrayed

wearing high heels, clingy dresses, and jewelry even in their kitchens while cooking dinner, in Hungary, in the official media, women were rarely dressed up. Only party cadres were sometimes depicted somewhat glamorously, usually when entertaining international guests at official functions. In daily life women attempted to dress up as best they could only to go to the theater, for New Year's Eve, or for private events such as baptisms or weddings, Factory workers mostly wore work overalls or dark lab coats over their clothes, while professional women usually dressed in a simple dark skirt and light colored blouse. Party cadres differentiated themselves from the general population by donning a somber, somewhat mannish, dark-colored suit and carrying a briefcase.

It was the *otthonka*, (literally, “the little at home garment”) a cheap, cotton smock-like housedress, that ultimately best expressed both urban and rural Hungarian women's place in society. Many photographs of the '50s at *Fotótár* of the *Nemzeti Múzeum* in Budapest show bare-faced and bare-legged women in their urban homes wearing simple dresses, overlaid with an *otthonka*. The *otthonka* underlined the fact that when women arrived home from work, they immediately needed to start a second shift that invariably involved dirt or water, such as cleaning, washing and cooking.

Most rural women, on any given day, worked on the farm as well as in the home without a change of dress, for which they either tended to wear an *otthonka* or a *mackó nadrág* (literally, “bear pants,” a pair of loose pull-on pants), another item that symbolizes the disparity with American women, who even in their shapeless blue jeans and oversized man's shirts that they tended to wear for housework in the '50s seemed glamorous compared to Hungarian women in their *mackó nadrág* worn with a shabby sweater and covering their head with a dark-colored cotton scarf, all of which made them look not only dowdy but also inevitably older than their age. Some people believe the *mackó nadrág* is so called because the inside of the pants was woolly and because the garment made one look lumbering and shapeless. The first *mackó nadrág* produced was also brown, which makes the association with bears also possible.

The communist state afforded no consideration to people's intimate selves; good quality underwear, brassieres, hose, etc., were available only through illegal or alternative channels. Sewing underclothes requires special skills, thus it was much more difficult to produce intimate apparel at home, especially when suitable stretchy materials were nonexistent. In this situation Hungarian women would alter used bras or bras in wrong sizes or patch existing ones until they completely disintegrated, making undressing in front of others an embarrassing and often humiliating event.

The changes regarding women's appearance affected them from head to toe. During the '50s communist female cadres in Hungary wore their hair mostly short because long hair historically was regarded as a sign of conservative and traditional values. Short hair was embraced because it expressed faith in modern values and because it also matched women's lifestyles. Cropped hair in the largely industrial workplaces was safe — it could not easily get caught in a machine — and at home it was convenient for performing chores and was low maintenance. Hats were replaced by headscarves because hats were seen as luxury items as well as an obvious sign of bourgeois mentality. For example, in the '50s, *Nők Lapja* shows only actresses, models and foreign dignitaries wearing hats.

While American women wore colorful nylon scarves as a fashion accessory to keep their hair in place, Hungarian women's practice of wearing scarves was an entirely different matter. After World War II, higher living standards drew peasant women to the cities in unprecedented numbers, and they brought their sartorial styles with them. Monochrome, polka-dot and

patterned, usually faded cotton headscarves became Communist sartorial staples because of their association with hard work and a working-class mentality. Even urban women would wrap their head with a scarf to perform household chores.

Hungarian women's hair was perhaps the only aspect of their appearance that was somewhat comparable to that of women in the United States. Although American women were already using commercial hair care products in the '50s, because hair could also be cared for with inexpensive natural products, such as eggs, vinegar or herbs, and shaped into modern cuts with the help of skilled hairdressers, Hungarian women were often successful in approximating the latest western styles. Because the sluggish communist economy could not cater even for people's most basic needs, hairstylists, tailors, and shoe-repair shops were some of the few enterprises that were kept off the nationalization radar and were affordable. Women frequented hairdressers on a regular basis not only because they wanted at least their hair to look fashionable, but also because in the salons they were able to gossip, get fashion and cooking tips, and network. Salons often served as consignment stores as well, where women could buy foreign cosmetics and clothes clandestinely. To this day, two decades after the fall of communism, there is still a strong vestige of this phenomenon, as on virtually every block in Budapest one can find an old-fashioned hair salon and even low-income women regularly frequent them.

Because communist ideology demanded modesty and simplicity, public display of jewelry became to be regarded as inappropriate, and especially gold or precious gems disappeared, except as wedding rings. Officially, women in communist Hungary were judged primarily by their supposed ideological maturity and productivity. Hard work meant strong arms and fingers with short nails — nail polish was especially despised under communism — and the hands of a “good woman” were never idle. However, those who opposed such a narrow definition of women, or who wanted to hide the visible effect of hard work, would spend a lot of time on manicures because manicures were less visible than jewelry. Such subtle defiance of the norm was meaningful for a Hungarian woman and her immediate environment while at the same time did not push the envelope enough to be deemed a dangerous practice.

The production of cosmetics was limited because the regime discouraged the use of makeup. Therefore, what was soon left on store shelves was of substandard quality. The neglect of cosmetics was not only because a “natural,” unadorned look was promoted or because women did not desire them, but because putting food on the table was a higher priority. Therefore, if women wanted to enhance their looks they would use everyday household items — burnt matchsticks as eyeliner or beetroot juice for rouge, for example. There are many “horror” stories about lipstick use in Hungary in the '50s. Allegedly, lipstick bought from the stores would routinely harden soon after application and fall off causing deep embarrassment. Women who were determined to defy the state and had the means to do so would attempt to acquire expensive contraband goods. Foreign makeup products, therefore, for decades remained one of the most important gift items for women (RFE, Private Cosmeticians' Situation in Budapest and Fashion Problem). Even in the '70s bathroom shelves were regularly adorned with empty Western soap boxes and cosmetics containers as part of the usual décor.

As soon as light industrial production began again in earnest in the late '50s, most people started to dress in low-quality, readymade, mass-produced clothes. This was a sartorial turning point because before the war such apparel was lacking, with most dress production having taken place in the home or by small manufacturers. Although the poorly constructed readymade outfits undoubtedly eased Hungarians' sartorial misery, most Hungarians continued to have a limited wardrobe. For example, in 1956, the Hungarian Statistical Agency, KSH, reported that

Hungarian women on average could afford to buy a winter coat once in a decade, a simple dress every three years, and an inexpensive cotton dress once a year. Their budget allowed for one pair of stockings and one piece of underwear every six months (Valuch 55). Because working class women had not had many changes of dress before the war either, they did not protest this state of affairs. Middle class women, however, who had had high sartorial standards before the Communist takeover, clearly felt uncomfortable in their new attire and continued to crave feminine, well-tailored clothes, which remained out of their reach for decades.

Very few women, mostly members of the nomenclature and the foreign diplomatic corps, were able to dress elegantly, usually by patronizing downtown Budapest salons, such as the Clara Salon, the most elegant facility in the city at that time that, surprisingly, was allowed to stay in private hands. Besides the salons, the downtown stores represented the luxury level of the Hungarian contemporary fashion scene. Although only the affluent or the darlings of the regime, such as actresses, were able to make regular purchases in these stores, ordinary women would also wander in to get tips. Because being fashionable was one of the few means of distinguishing oneself in the '50s, the importance of dress for Hungarian women was blown out of proportion. By the end of the decade, urban women in Hungary especially would spare no effort or money to look fashionable.

In the '50s Hungary had no real fashion industry to speak of. Still, fashion shows were occasionally held even in factories. But unlike fashion shows in the United States, where designers and manufacturers in the 50s had broken free from French couture influence and turned American fashion into front page news, shows in Hungary were primarily intended to showcase the viability of the socialist economy and were used as tools of instilling the principles of socialist femininity and appropriateness. The practical role of the shows was to broaden the acceptance of communist working class or professional dress. Professional fashion shows showcasing real models and garments produced for export were closed to the general public. As a result, access to them was one of the most envied perks of Communist Party membership. They were mostly attended by male cadres because before mass production could begin, the clothing industry needed a go-ahead from the party in which the decision-makers were invariably men (Medvedev b. 261)

Visuals about fashion were limited, and oddly enough, *Nők Lapja*, which was primarily a Communist Party propaganda organ, was hugely popular because it sometimes contained some coverage on fashion. At first the magazine carried basic sartorial tips and fashion advice, but as the totalitarian leadership of the early '50s intensified, fashion disappeared from its pages. Earlier though, the few images of fashion products or foreign actresses that slipped through were thoroughly scrutinized and the styles instantaneously copied by eager and resourceful women. However, because something was always missing — the right buttons, matching accessories or shoes — most of the time, the women could only reproduce an unrefined version of the Western look. This evoked a sense of incompleteness and created a sartorial inferiority complex among many Hungarian women. After 1956, fashion was somewhat rehabilitated, but the mostly Western images that were reproduced in *Nők Lapja* remained inaccessible to most Hungarian women, unless their relatives or friends sent them apparel packages from the West.

During the Cold War, with the atom bomb under their belts, the Soviet and American superpowers were wary of direct military confrontation, so it became easier to channel their differences to other seemingly less risky battlegrounds, such as the visual, representational, and gender fronts — more specifically women's bodies — underscoring how clothes produce a language that is often exploited in ideological confrontations. Although the cultural production

of femininity took place in very dissimilar contexts, fashion and dress styles in both the United States and Hungary in the '50s expressed the social repression of women. While mainstream American representational female dress, with its emphasis on soft, feminine silhouettes, color and allure, signified the sexualization and containment of women and bolstered a traditional ideal of femininity, Hungarian women's functional, asexualized, and lackluster clothing determined not only their traditional maternal role but also that of a uniform worker indebted to the state. In other words, in America, social and political forces as well as economic development helped turn women into clotheshorses, while in Hungary the same forces turned women into workhorses.

But American and Hungarian women learned to navigate through such a minefield of possessing their bodies and their selves by attempting to define their own femininity and defy the prescriptions of sartorial norms. While women in the United States became eager consumers of fashion, Hungarian women resorted to resourcefulness and creativity to achieve an appearance that would please them, but at the same time also conform to communist ideology. Furthermore, revisionist portrayals of the '50s in the United States show that a large segment of women, especially women of color, women from low income families and farm women, did not languish at home, but were employed full time. For such occasions they wore simple and utilitarian clothes, just like their Hungarian counterparts.

Because their societies remained closed to each other in the '50s, American and Hungarian women relied on propaganda to inform them, and thus propaganda permeated their lives for a long time, often entrenching misconceptions. Hungarian women persisted in perceiving all women in the United States as stylishly dressed despite the post-war poverty faced by many American women, who were forced to juggle several responsibilities to make ends meet, limiting their sartorial choices greatly. And despite American women's belief that Hungarian women — like their communist counterparts — were repressed, shabbily dressed, androgynous subjects of the state, many women in Hungary, even party cadres, challenged the Communists' homogenization efforts by going to great lengths to dress stylishly, often in ultra feminine attire. Their clothing expressed discontent with the inefficiency of the state and a desire for a life where self-expression was not curtailed by scarcities and ideological considerations. In sum, the mainstream representations of women in both contexts do not reflect reality and served mostly propaganda purposes.

Dress continued to play a significant role in female gender construction in later eras both in the United States and Hungary. Many American women joined the ranks of the fledging women's liberation movement, began wearing functional, casual and unisex clothes, and demanded equal rights. They took charge of their own sartorial representation, which led to a diversification of styles in the 1960s. From the early 1960s, the Hungarian communist state also started to ease its grip on people's ideological representation, leading to the growth of foreign trade and the formation of a genuine fashion industry, which was highly regarded within the socialist bloc. The official Hungarian fashion industry and the newly emerging private boutiques provided women with more sartorial choices to express their identity and personal aesthetics. The great sartorial divide between East and West began to slowly close up.

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