

Borgos, Anna, ed. *Eltitkolt évek: Tizenhat lesbikus életút* [Secret Years: Sixteen Lesbian Life Journeys]. Budapest: Labrisz Lesbikus Egyesület, 2011.

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“I thought: wow, what a girl Tereskhova is. And I said, I wanted to be a female astronaut, but they said: come off it, you can’t become a woman astronaut. Then I replied: okay, can I be a Gagarin then? No, you can’t be Gagarin either, they replied. But I loved Tereskhova for a while, until I learned that I couldn’t be her.”

The above is a story told by one of the women interviewed in *Eltitkolt évek*, a publication based on oral history life course interviews given by sixteen Hungarian women, ranging in age from 47 to 70, whose central identity is lesbian. The book is an outgrowth of a film by the same title directed by Mária Takács, which was first shown in 2009. The title of the book and film refers to the women now “confessing” their lives, loves, happiness and pain, and struggles during those “secret years” from the sixties through the Kádár regime of the eighties, when they were living in a barely tolerated subculture. The analysis of the narrative interviews focuses on the construction of a lesbian identity while these women lived lives of invisibility during the socialist period. They all vividly remember the repression of the 1960s and 70s, when they were forced to hide their true identities and could only “be themselves” at secret clubs and picnics.

Identity questions connected to the socialist period are one of the most interesting areas of research in post-socialist Hungary. The quote above illustrates one interesting aspect of such research on that period, where the official discourses emphasised that women could do the same work as men, and, symbolically, that they could be men and become taxi drivers, tractor drivers (the famous *traktoros lányok*), and even astronauts.

In today’s research paradigm personal identity is interpreted as a social construct that changes over the course of one’s life. Therefore, attention is paid to how when relating a life-history a subject constructs her identity with reference to different groups at different times, with her life narrative emphasizing the groups that possessed considerable symbolic importance at different stages during her life-cycle. With both the subject’s personal and group identities shifting over time, life-cycle interviews can be difficult to balance. However, interestingly, in the set of life-course interviews in this volume one constant and stable category found was the respondent’s conception of gender.

This interesting book is a unique experiment, the first sustained research in Hungary whose goal is to provide “herstories” of Hungarian lesbians. The reader is introduced to the mental maps (i.e., the perception of their own world) and symbolic places invested with meaning and communality for lesbians in the 1980s, such as, for example, the Ipoly cinema. They also learn about the start of the Hungarian lesbian movement, including the important role that the organization Labrisz, with its parties, meetings, book publications, etc. has played in the construction of lesbian identity in Hungary. Part of Labrisz’s mission has been to organize a constructive discourse with the broader society and with this aim they have organized an educational program about lesbian identity. (For an overview of the lesbian movement in Hungary, see Anikó Imre, “Lesbian Nationalism.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 33.1 [2008]: 255-82, which interestingly won that journal’s prize for the best article of the year; for an overview of some of the earlier publications of Labrisz see Zita Farkas, “The Articulation of Lesbian Identities through the Paradigm of Visibility and Invisibility in the Hungarian Context” <<http://www.gender-studies.leeds.ac.uk/assets/files/epapers/epaper32-zita-farkas.pdf>>.)

One of the most interesting women featured in *Eltiltott évek* is Agáta Gordon, the first Hungarian author with a self-identified public lesbian identity, who is author of *Kecskerúzs* 'Goat Rouge,' a lesbian-themed novel, about which at the time of its publication in 1997 it was rumored that the name of the then unknown author concealed a male. Gordon is also one of the founders of an online literary publication and organizer of feminist literary evenings called *Irodalmi Centrifuga* (Centrifuge of Literature). Another interesting personality featured in the volume is Gerda Schmied, who came to Hungary from the former GDR, where she had worked as a cook in the Berlin. In Budapest, too, she ended up as a chef at the Hotel Gellért, but today she has chosen to reside in the countryside as part of a return to rural life movement, in which Gordon and others also took part. Others in the group include Iona Gál, who has worked in both stereotypically female and male occupations, as a stenographer-typist and as a taxi driver, Mária Bán, a former drummer in Hungarian bands and feminist activist, and Anna Lovas Nagy, a writer and one of the founders of Hungarian lesbian movement.

Some of the interviewees in the volume discuss the groundbreaking Hungarian film *Egyémsra nézve* (Another Way), a lesbian love story directed by Károly Makk, interestingly playing as early as 1982, although set in the immediate aftermath of the 1956 revolution. The film was based on a novel by Erzsébet Galgóczi, the first Hungarian to have written about a lesbian relationship, with her work describing the often intertwined political and sexual repression of that era, including the role of secret agents and informants in trying to uncover illegal homosexual activity. The main roles in the film had to be played by actresses from Poland, and it is also interesting how journalists writing at the time about the film had to scramble for terms to describe the relationship between two women (one of them married to an army officer), with most avoiding the term 'lesbian'. The context of the film at that time was very interesting, because the journalists tried to find the correct name for love of women.

An important topic that emerges in a number of the interviews in the volume is the relationship of the seeming stable lesbian identity of the subjects in relation to maternity, as several of those women had previously lived in traditional marriages and are mothers. Unfortunately, the problems relating to lesbian motherhood that the women describe are still relevant today in Hungary, where same sex partners still cannot legally adopt children.

The book under review is methodologically excellent but might have been further improved by a more detailed theoretical and historical introduction analyzing the many sensitive topics discussed by the interviewees. It is notwithstanding a pioneer step in analyzing and understanding the everyday life of lesbians during the socialist period.