

# Hungarians in the New World: A Grandchild's Perspective

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## Abstract

*During graduate school, I spent a semester studying Hungarian literature; I realized then that a European literature was not my own literary heritage. My literature was that of the American experience. Thus, I began to research Hungarian immigrants in central New Jersey. This research resulted in *The Other Sister*, published in November 2008. This paper details the research process, and more importantly, the process of discovery that led me to better understand the stories of Hungarian immigrants, and how the forces that shaped the lives of these travelers in their new country shaped my own heritage—culinary and literary.*

## The Story

My mother and I were having lunch together one day when I asked her how her parents met. She told me that at a village dance in Hungary, my future grandfather was dancing with a young woman, when he noticed another young woman standing on the edge of the dance floor. He asked his dance partner “Who is that girl with the pretty blue eyes?” She answered that the girl was her own sister. My future grandfather danced the next dance with the girl with the pretty blue eyes, and that was that.

My grandmother's rejected sister lived not far from us in New Jersey when I was a small child. We called her *Kettimama*, which I think is a term of endearment and respect. She was very old (to my toddler's eyes, anyway), and spoke no English; I was a little afraid of her. After my mother told me her story, I tried to picture *Kettimama* as a pretty young woman dancing with Grandpa. I wondered what she must have felt like when he fell in love with her sister; *Kettimama* never married. And because she never married, I began to wonder what her life must have been like if she had fallen in love with my grandfather, even though he married someone else...which is how Margit's story begins:

*“You should have been there,” said Mrs. Szabo as she walked into the front room.  
“Family is family, and you should have been there out of respect for your sister and your niece.”*

*Margit removed her new handkerchief from the embroidery hoop and smoothed the linen flat in her lap before looking up to reply. Mrs. Szabo shivered involuntarily as Margit's eyes—cold and expressionless as a cat's—looked into hers.*

*“I'll not attend the blessing of any bastard brat,” she said in a quiet voice so her father, in the next room, would not hear her.*

*“Ah, Margit, if the Good Lord can forgive, why can't you?”*

*“The Good Lord is not an older sister who was jilted, a spinster instead of a wife, a maiden aunt instead of a mother.”*

*Mrs. Szabo shook her head, walked over to Margit, and kissed her on the forehead. She smoothed back the dark brown hair, piled in a wavy mass atop Margit's head, the one still beautiful thing left about her. Never quite as pretty as her younger sister, Margit was still handsome, but now her gray-blue eyes were like steel, and her thin mouth was pressed into an unremitting line.*

*Mrs. Szabo picked up the embroidered handkerchief. "This is lovely work, Margitka, the best you've ever done."*

*"It's all that's left to me now, Mama," Margit said bitterly. "Why shouldn't I be good at it?"*  
*(The Other Sister, Chapter 1)*

## **Visiting**

Growing up in a mixed neighborhood filled with three generations of Hungarian, Polish and Italian families, my cultural givens included paprika as the only necessary adjunct to salt and pepper on the spice shelf; waking up to the smell of sautéed garlic on Saturday mornings; and dumplings in all shapes, sizes and fillings as both comfort food and ethnic haute cuisine. Other aspects of normal life in my neighborhood were that Italian grandmothers always wore black; Polish and Hungarian grandmothers always wore flowered-print dresses; all grandmothers crocheted doilies or embroidered pillowcases or sewed aprons; all cooked superbly; not one could read an English-language newspaper.

When we visited my own grandparents every week after church, my cigar-smoking grandfather would pull out a stick of Doublemint and ask "You vant choone gum?" My grandmother, after depositing kisses all over my face and head, would then exclaim "You too tin," while shoving food in front of me, a bowl of orange jello when she was too busy with spring cleaning to cook, or more happily, a plate of palacsinta or rétes.

My grandfather was missing the tip of one finger, lost to an industrial accident many years before I was born. He and my grandmother listened to the local radio station play Hungarian violin music and they subscribed to Magyar-language newspapers, which is why I know how important those papers were to them and to the other people in the neighborhood:

*Emil, once he got over the shock of Margit's request to live farther away from home than Eger, or even Budapest, was excited to think of moving. He loved his home, but since his mother's death there was little to tie him to the village. His only real friend there was her father, and the loss of their weekly talks was his one regret. Otherwise, America for him was the land of opportunity everyone said it would be, the chance to establish a Hungarian-language newspaper in a small city with a rapidly growing Hungarian population. Since 1900 the Van Dyke Company, a cosmetics firm, had actively recruited Hungarian men, so pleased were they with the first hard-working Hungarian immigrants they hired to do manual labor. Emil had spoken with one or two men who had returned from America despite the wages offered by Van Dyke. Their stories of homesickness, of feeling alienated among the American workers, made Emil realize that he had a skill that could bring a bit of Hungary to the immigrants. Like most Hungarians they were avid readers, who would no doubt welcome a newspaper in their own language. And, while providing a service to his countrymen, Emil would advance himself by becoming both editor and publisher of the Hardenbergh Hirlap.*

*(The Other Sister, Chapter 1)*

Sadly, my grandfather died when I was a little girl, so I have only the gum, the cigars and the missing fingertip to remember him by. My grandmother lived until I was in college. At first she lived downstairs from my aunt and uncle; their two-family house was a half-mile walk from mine and just a block from the Rutgers campus. When I was 13, my grandmother moved into a smaller apartment around the corner, my aging aunt and uncle moved downstairs, and my family moved upstairs. With my cousin away at college and my sister already working, I was in effect an only child living with an extended family.

My grandmother and I were as close as we could be considering her broken English and my inability to speak more than a word or two of Magyar—and I mean that literally: *igen, nem*. Even her brilliant parakeet, Skippy, spoke with a Hungarian accent. My mother and my aunt were bilingual, which came in handy any time there was family gossip. As a budding writer eager for material, I found this exceptionally frustrating. Now that I am an adult, I am truly sad that I lack such a basic tie to my mother's family's culture.

## Studying

It wasn't until graduate school that I really understood how much I had missed. A guest lecturer, Joseph Bruchac, talked about searching for his own heritage, a mix of his mother's Abenaki and his father's Czech. Excitedly, I mapped out a semester's worth of study of Hungarian literature. I started by reading about the literature in Lóránt Czigány's *History of Hungarian Literature*, now available on the Internet. In particular, I was taken with Czigány's description of the novel *Matthias the Icebreaker* by Áron Tamási:

...the narrative concerns a lost spirit arriving from the stars whose transmigration through flea, spider, bee, stork, owl, eagle, fox and dog eventually ends when he moves into a human being whose birth is the conclusion of the story.... ordinary reality is effortlessly supplemented by speaking storks or wise male fleas, in which a sorcerer attends regular mass in the church, or a goblin drinks brandy by flickering candle-light....

(<http://mek.niif.hu/02000/02042/html/63.html>)

Sadly, that novel was not available in English translation, nor were many, many others. I therefore narrowed my selections to six 19th and 20th century fiction writers: Milán Füst, Jolán Földes, Mór Jókai, Gyula Krúdy, Kálmán Mikszáth, Lajos Zilahy. A critical paper I wrote about Mikszáth became part of my master's thesis.

Not surprisingly, as much as I enjoyed reading the work of these authors, I discovered that the connection I had been hoping for was simply not there. I was reading stories of people who lived in a country I had never been to, whose lives reflected a political and social culture that was not my own. They were writing about a time before mine, a place whose landmarks I didn't know, and people who were strangers to me. As an undergraduate, I had studied French and Russian literature; now I realized that studying Hungarian literature was no different for me than reading *Eugene Onegin* or *The Red and the Black*. Whatever link I had hoped for to the culture of these writers had been broken long before.

The break occurred for me as it did for so many other second-generation Americans in the 1950s, when my parents made the decision not to raise us in a bilingual household. Although my mother spoke fluently the Hungarian of her parents' generation, post-War society was all about patriotism. I was not allowed to get my ears pierced lest I look like a refugee. I was not sent to St. Ladislaus Grammar School, where Hungarian was taught as a foreign language, but to St. Peter's, where a predominately Irish-American student body made St. Patrick's Day a highlight of the school year. Without fail, we celebrated the 4th of July with a backyard picnic, although in addition to hot dogs and hamburgers, we also never failed to make szalonna bread. On Thanksgiving we had the quintessentially American turkey dinner—with fresh and smoked kolbász on the side.

Except for a few cherished foods, the melting pot had absorbed us.

## Research

When I started writing *The Other Sister*, I had two pieces of information: the story of how my grandparents met, and the variety of cherries they grew in their yard in Highland Park, New Jersey, when my mother was a little girl. In 1992, when I started the project, I was living in Maryland, so I began my research by coming back to New Jersey to visit the library at the American Hungarian Foundation and Rutgers University. Later, when I was teaching at the University of Delaware, I was able to continue my research there. This was just before the Internet became a household word, and several years before the World Wide Web put so much information on our computer screens. I have pages of smeary printouts from microfilm records, because I needed to learn about life in the first half of the 20th century. How much did a living room sofa cost in 1911? What did women's hats look like in 1920? Which baseball teams were playing? Which movies? All the details of everyday life, I had to look up.

One of my favorite references was *Children of Ellis Island*, written by Yolán Varga in collaboration with her brother Emil. This book helped me in two ways: it described in beautiful detail how different life was in America for the immigrants, showing me that things I took for granted in my childhood—like a sheet of linoleum on the kitchen floor—were minor miracles to factory workers like my grandfather. It also reminded me of a shopping trip I once took with my grandmother, which I was able to recreate in a scene in the book:

She turned the corner at Hardenbergh Avenue and stopped at the butcher for a chunk of *szalonna* bacon, then continued on to the produce market where she chose fresh bunches of curly spinach and tender new peas. The milkman had left fresh sour cream that morning, so her only other stop was to get the chicken itself. Margit paused before the door of the poultry shop and took one last deep breath of fresh air before stepping inside. A small bell rang over her head as she opened the door, where she stood for a moment to let her eyes adjust to the dimness. Before her, on either side of a central aisle and as high as the top of her hat, were stacked rows of wooden cages. Each cage held three or four fowl: white spring chickens and brown ones, fat capons, a few ducks, and in one corner a solitary tom turkey who by himself filled one large cage. Feathers swirled around her feet as Margit walked slowly past the cages, peering in to find the

birds with the brightest eyes and the cleanest feathers. Chickens clucked and squawked as she passed, holding her skirt so it wouldn't brush against the grubby cages.

At the end of the aisle was the store's counter, and beyond that the back room where the birds were decapitated, dipped in boiling water, and plucked.

*(The Other Sister, Chapter 2)*

When I read that scene during the book's launch, last December at the American Hungarian Foundation, more than half the audience had experienced the same thing. My sister later told me, "Grandma took me to the chicken store, too!"

Without resources like *Children of Ellis Island*, and the newspaper ads and articles that helped me understand life in New Brunswick before 1950, I would have had a hard time creating the sense of culture and community the book depicts. My grandmother was dead long before I started the project; my aunt and mother passed away before I had finished. Neither one ever saw a copy of the manuscript. My first reader was my best friend Catharine Cookson, whose mother's maiden name was Juhasz, and who did go to St. Ladislaus Grammar School. It was Cathie who named one of my characters, the day she was telling a family story and exclaimed, "Everyone has an Aunt Zsuzs." It breaks my heart that Cathie, too, never saw the finished book. She died of breast cancer in 2004.

My sister Brenda, three cousins, and I are the only ones left from that side of our family. These losses have further eroded the links to our Hungarian-American culture. For example, my sister and I have been puzzling over my mother's recipe for kalács, which calls for "a handful of sugar" and "as much flour as it takes." If I hadn't watched my grandmother and then my mother make kalács every Christmas and Easter, I would have no idea how to proceed with the recipe:

From a towel-covered bowl near a sunny windowsill she pulled a lump of sweet, yeasty dough, kneading it on the floured board she laid across the sink. She divided the dough and rolled each piece flat, then spread over it a thick layer of poppy seeds cooked in milk and sugar. She rolled the filled dough like a jellyroll and placed it on a tin sheet while she prepared the next one. Each roll of *kalács* was placed on the tin like a pale, plump sausage, the first already rising again by the time the last was made.

*(The Other Sister, Chapter 2)*

## **Cooking**

Like Margit, I know how to make and roll kalács, but I have no recipe for either the walnut or poppyseed filling. The walnut I can fake by using our recipe for kifli filling, but I have four Hungarian cookbooks, and the recipe for poppyseed filling is different in each one. I have tried two of them so far without much success.

Fortunately, I have excellent directions for both my mother's kifli recipe, which is a variation that uses a cream cheese dough, and my grandmother's traditional yeast recipe, which descended through my aunt to me. I also have the benefit of many years as grandma's taster, to make sure the nuts weren't too sweet, and as her helper, filling and rolling the kifli. They look right and taste right when I make them, 15 to 20 dozen at a time by myself in my own kitchen, but I miss the pleasant social activity it used to be.

There were nights when we'd spread the yellow kitchen table with newspapers so we could crack a couple of pounds of walnuts and pick out the nutmeats to be ground up. At first we had three generations around that table; then there were only two. Now there's only me. I don't have any children, and my nieces and nephew have not only never made kifli, they have never even watched them being made. And there's a little technique that goes into knowing how thin to roll the dough, how wide to cut each piece, what the correct proportion is of apricot butter to walnut filling, and how much of the filling you can place in each kifli without having it burst open in the oven's heat.

It's the same with needlework. My grandmother never sat down to watch Lawrence Welk without having a crochet hook in her hand. She made doilies and potholders using thin cotton thread and a tiny crochet hook, working so quickly she completed a circle of square before the show's end. She embroidered all her bed linens, many handkerchiefs (which also had tatting on the edges), tablecloths; she darned socks; she sewed aprons from scraps of material left over when she made those flower print dresses, just like Margit:

Although Margit had finished spring cleaning only the week before, she opened the windows to air out the apartment. She put fresh crocheted doilies on the arms and back of their best chair and a fresh tablecloth on the kitchen table.... All of Margit's artistry was with the needle. Plain sewing bored her, although she darned, hemmed, and mended without complaint because it had to get done. Her real satisfaction came from embellishment, like the pattern of roses and ivy embroidered on the tablecloth, and the green tatting on its hem that matched the tatting at the edge of each napkin. The doilies Margit had crocheted herself, in stars and flowers and spiraling geometric patterns. A line of embroidery edged Emil's vest and his initials were stitched onto his watch pocket. Margit's own petticoats and camisoles were bordered in cream, pink, or blue lace tatting, and all the house linens—pillow cases, sheets, table runners—were embroidered with silk thread.

*(The Other Sister, Chapter 2)*

Like the other women of her day, my grandmother kept her hands in motion. If she wasn't sewing, she was cooking: making homemade egg noodles, paring apples, stretching rétes dough with her knuckles until it was so thin you could see the pattern of the tablecloth beneath it. And if she wasn't cooking, she would run the beads of her rosary through her fingertips, especially during the sad years after Skippy the parakeet died. I still remember how she wept and kissed his blue feathers, holding him gently in those skillful old hands.

I must have been only six or seven when she taught me to crochet. I use to make doll clothes, and as a young woman I made a few blankets and a scarf or two. Doilies are completely out of fashion, but I wish I could have made a tablecloth for my niece when she got married. I don't have anywhere near the skill that my grandmother had, or my aunt, who made my tablecloth, and I sure don't have the time.

The fast pace of contemporary life is not conducive to the culture I grew up in. It takes hours to make cabbage strudel, and kalács, and homemade egg noodles, or that Easter cheese that hangs from the kitchen faucet all night, dripping whey from its cheesecloth wrapping. It takes time to sew a pretty border on an apron, to embroider a pillowcase, to

crochet a queen-sized blanket. It takes time to make a family memory, time to fill a scrapbook, time to sort through your dead mother's pots and pans, her clothes, her doilies.

It takes time to write a novel, too, but writing it brought me closer to my grandparents' generation. I knew them as old widowed ladies who scrubbed the sidewalk in front of their house and called out "Jó, regell" when they came to visit. But years before I was born, they were very young and very courageous, leaving all that was familiar to travel to a strange new country. Their church, their language and their newspapers helped bind them into a community. Their hard-working hands created a home in which they raised their family, who in turn raised families of their own.

My grandmother would be so proud if she were here. No one makes palacsinta as good as hers.

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