



Kádár Era: Dysfunctional Complacency and Nostalgia

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City Tech 19th Annual Poster Session

Abstract

This poster presents the fourth chapter in my new book *Chorus of Experiences Capturing Moments in Time: From the Siege of Budapest to Goulash Populism* that uses oral histories of senior Hungarian women to explore the past and the present. This chapter looks at the Kádár era through the eyes of Irén who outlines some of the serious problems of the period but also shows some nostalgia for the economic stability and sense of community. Though not necessarily a “fair” society, people learned how to work the system, find ways to get short supplied goods, or bribe their way to gain advantage. Part of the prolonged stability of the era may be the perception of economic stability. Festering discontent lays the groundwork for the eventual fall of Communism and the incentive to change. Ironically, from the perspective of today’s society, some look back to this period with fondness, what has been referred to as communist nostalgia.

Methodology

I use a person-centered approach to collect life histories to allow the respondent to lead the direction of the interview asking follow up questions to build on their responses (Hollan 2001). For six consecutive summers (2011-2016) I selected women over the age of 65 to tell their life stories in order to understand living in the socialist period compared to the post socialist period. Most of the older women of my study do not speak English, and all interviews were conducted in Hungarian. I decided to not only make audio recordings of my interviews, but also video recordings. This enabled me to refer back to the interviews multiple times as often in any interview some information might be overlooked the first time. Most of the women I met due to my connections to Hungarian immigrants in the United States as they would ask me to carry gifts back to their mother’s back home. Others I met through the snow-ball approach relying on a few reliable Hungarian friends to introduce me to people they knew. Along with the standards of informed consent, I use pseudonyms in this book to protect their identity. As with any group one studies, some women I formed continuing close bonds with, while others I met with more briefly. My approach to presenting the stories relies on my wish to highlight specific stories to create a framework, and then add a chorus, the multiple layers and perspectives of others, to show complexity.

Introduction

“The 1970s were the best. Maybe it was because we were able to build. Really, we were ordinary people, with average salaries, or even just a little, little, minimum salary. But we were able to get an OTP loan. There was only one bank. Only one bank! OTP. I could not go elsewhere. But then they did a deal that gave so much and so much money, you pay for what do I know, for twenty years, so much so many forints. But it was not that after a year they asked for double.”

As Irén talks about the ability to get a loan from OTP, she also takes a stab at the more contemporary problems with the swiss loan crisis hence comparing the past as better than the present. The Országos Takarékpénztár (National Savings Bank), originally established in 1949 as a state-run bank, represents the ability of the then Communist government to provide for its citizens, unlike today’s free market economy with the Swiss Bank loan crisis. The Swiss National bank offered unfixed low interest rate mortgages, but after 2008, some found themselves faced with having to pay 20% more, sometimes making the final loan payment way more than the value of the home. Irén sees this period during the Kádár era as one of economic stability, with closer bonds to family and community.

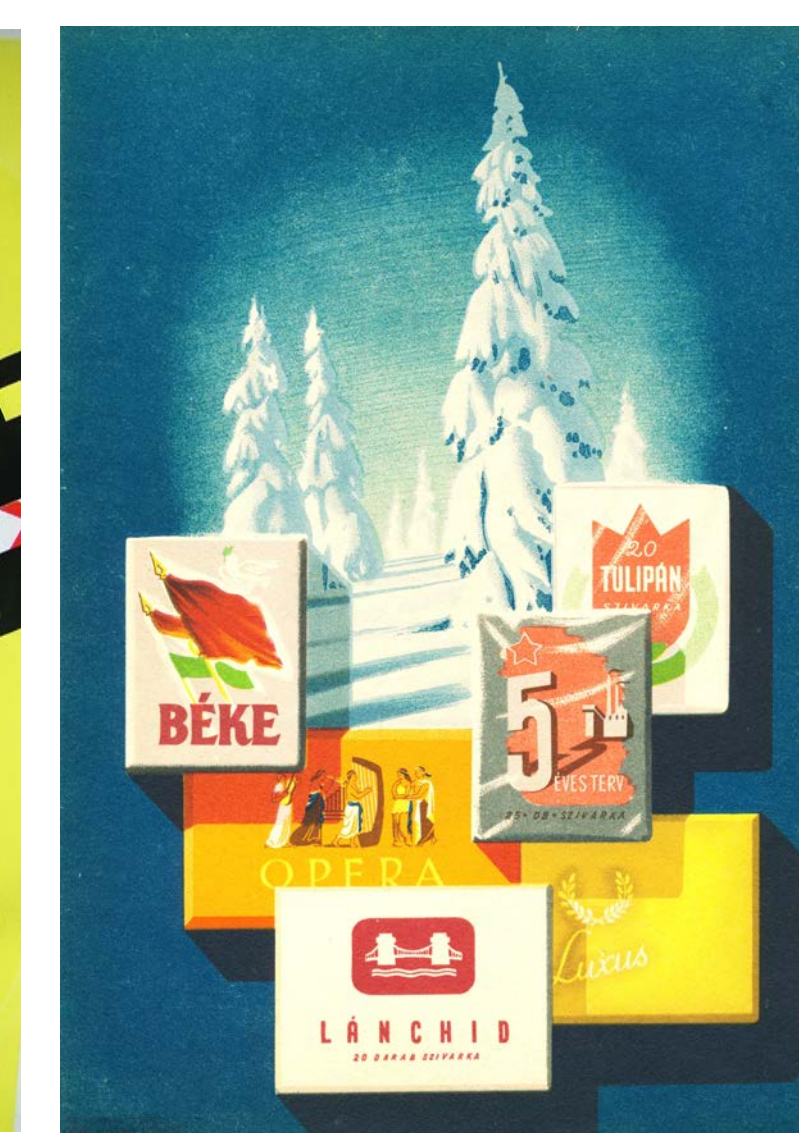
The cold war era lasted from 1947-1991, and whereas the United States had six different US Presidents during this time, Kádár dominates this period lasting as Hungarian Prime Minister since the Soviet squashing of the 1956 Revolution until his retirement in 1988. The Kádár era (October 25, 1956-May 22, 1988) marked the introduction of new economic reforms and more lenient travel restrictions. Under Kádár’s reign, and in part due to the fear of further uprisings like in 1956, the softened form of Communism in Hungary became known as “Goulash Communism.” The Kádár regime had its own special issues and problems, yet also offered enough security, so people to a certain extent became complicit, and or developed a way of life to deal with these issues.



Irén’s Story

I knew Irén’s younger brother Dezső who I met in San Francisco California and later interviewed as a return migrant to Hungary (Pope, 2001). Irén stands tall, has dark auburn hair. She likes to wear simple but colorful clothes, like a bright orange short sleeved shirt and white culottes. Her home also has a bright sunny feel. After our first formal interview in 2011, she exhausted me. Irén exerts a bubbly demeanor and eagerly chats. She liked the Kádár era best in her lifetime, despite the struggles she faced. Topics included discussion of the Cold War and Space Program, travel restrictions and defection, material shortages that could lead to bribing. She also fondly recalls special programs for women, economic opportunities, and a feeling of economic stability as jobs were mandatory, and there was a booming second economy. Irén lives alone now having lost her husband and daughter both to cancer one year apart. When I left our first interview, she told me she had not talked to anyone in over a week, this made me feel very sad.

In contrast to Irén’s story other women also mentioned Soviet forms of oppression albeit a softened form of Goulash Communism, causing some restrictions to education, travel, and religious expression. There was also a shift to heavy industry, and a loss of private property. Some programs such as the youth clubs such as the young pioneers (úttörő) were remembered fondly. Some appreciated the government social support systems that improved housing, healthcare, and subsidized vacations for workers.



Conclusion

The Kádár era can be seen as a response to the 1956 revolution as there were dramatic societal changes to ease tensions, but I also believe looking at the Kádár period sets up an understanding of the building dissatisfaction in the post socialist era after 1989. Although there were problems, shortages of material goods, restrictions on travel, pressures of compliance, people learned how to maneuver within the system, and to a certain extent there seemed to be a collective sense of “we are all in this together,” giving way to a general feeling of complicity. After 1989 during the initial phase of the post socialist period people were very hopeful that things would be better, however new problems arose making people look back at the Kádár era as not being so bad after all. This feeling of dissatisfaction for the present coincides with a longing for a past way of life, and feeds into the push towards Goulash populism.