

Trabant and the Kennedy Ring. Consumer Identity of Women Workers during the Socialist Period in Hungary

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This paper sets out to describe the cultural identity forms adopted by a semi-skilled woman worker. A lot of work has been done on the problem of worker identity. However, most of them are centered on one or two aspects of people's identities – their race, gender, sexuality, class and so on. The concept of socially constructed identities enables us to better understand the life histories of ordinary people who lived under socialism in Hungary.

Personal identity during the life-cycle is a social construction that shifts depending on the stage of the life-cycle¹. Different identities appear with differing importance in the descriptions of the different periods in the interview-partners' lives, just as they do in the descriptions of the brigade members. They not only identify with their workshop 'collective', but with their home, or the Trabant car they bought.

My paper will discuss questions regarding women worker's consumer identity forms. In constructing my argument, my most important sources were archive materials from BFL and MOL (Archive of Budapest, Hungarian National Archive) and my qualitative oral history interviews, which were carried out with skilled workers and semi-skilled woman workers. My aim is to recall and recount the life-story narratives of retired workers. My aim is to show the variety of consumer identities adopted by these people in telling their life stories.

Although this group of women is very similar sociologically, they draw on different identities in the telling of their life-stories. Each woman refracted her life from a different angle of vision. They originated from peasant families, and they were migrants to the city. They received a collective award from state in 1970, because they took part in the labour competition as a socialist brigade.

After migration these women lived in the city. At first they worked as maidservants, and from the early fifties to the middle of the seventies as industrial semi-skilled workers in the same textile factory; the Hungarian Stocking Factory. Some of them left the factory in the middle of seventies and they have worked subsequently as laundresses. A couple of them continued working there till the middle of 1990s. Consumption had meaningful use in the official discourse in

¹ Györgyi Bindorffer, *Kettős identitás. Etnikai és nemzeti azonosságtudat Dunabogdányban*, Budapest, 2001, p. 18-34; Ferenc Pataki, *Élettörténet és identitás*, Budapest, 2001.

socialist Hungary after the revolution of 1956. Consumer goods played a role in the construction of identities during the socialist era². They appeared in the official discourse of both party and state as the guarantor of a higher standard of living. In contemporary propaganda this representation is linked to the year of 1959, when the seventh congress of the ruling Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party launched a new living standards policy³. Equally the apparent opposition of the "socialist man" and "petty-bourgeois mentalities" was an important theme in official discourse, which was underlined by considerable debate in the press, like that surrounding "ways of life", in which commentators used normative categories to ask how "socialist men and women" should regard certain symbolic possessions, like the car, the weekend house, the plot of land, the sewing machine or the fridge⁴.

In my paper I will analyse two stories. One of them is: how could buy a woman worker Trabant? What are the symbolic meanings of this car in the life story narratives? Another story is: It was officially forbidden in the socialist period for anyone to bypass the official sales channels of a centrally planned economy. Act V/1961, under the 'Profiteering' section of the Penal Code, prescribed a maximum sentence of three years' imprisonment for those 'engaging in commercial activity or maintaining a business without the requisite permit, or b) conducting economically unjustified intermediary trade in goods, or speculating in other ways conducive to profiteering.' Respondents told of proceedings being taken against a colleague at the Budapest Hosiery Factory who sold clothing items (pullovers and cardigans) in the factory. The incident can be found in the archives as well, grouped with the cases of pilfering from the factory. Connected to this story my interview partner told me, how could they buy Kennedy signet gold ring, which was very popular in the factory in the end of 1960s.

*"When I was awarded, ... my good, I said, son, come on, let's count it quickly, one, two, three, four ... how many zeros are there, how much money is it? Oh, my good, how happy I was, I couldn't believe it: 20000 Ft we received, when I was awarded with State Prize."*⁵

Teréz was a 40 years old semi-skilled woman worker, when she and her brigade mates were awarded with the State Prize in 1970. She told me this story, when I asked her, what was the most important thing connected to the awarding process. This sum was extremely big money for a woman worker, therefore she bought a car: a Trabant. She was the first woman, who owned a car in the Budapest Hosiery Factory. Most of the brigade member bought durable consumer goods. Some women still use nowadays the sewing machine they bought, the grandson of Teréz

² Ina Merkel, *Utopie und Bedürfnis: die Geschichte der Konsumkultur in der DDR*, Weimar, 1999.

³ Tibor Valuch, *A 'gulyáskommunizmus'*, in *Mitoszok, legendák és tévhitek a XX. századi magyar történelemről* (ed. by Ignác Romsics), Budapest, 2002, p. 361-390.

⁴ Árpád Tyekvicska, *Frizsiderszocializmus, in Beszélő évek. 1957-1968. A Kádár-korszak története I. rész*, Budapest, 2000, p. 260-263.

⁵ Interview with T. Károlyné, November 9, 1999.

still drive the third Trabant. The award gave a chance for these women to emerge, even if for a moment, out of their environment.

In 1971 there was a report, illustrated with a photograph, about Teréz and her new car in the factory newspaper⁶. The basic aim of the article was to present to its readers a successful working-class woman, who was the first worker in the factory who could buy a car. The journalist who wrote the article represented her as “a friendly smiling lady” who was “a member of a notable collective” which had “transformed her into an outstanding woman worker”. According to the article she was not only successful because of her membership of a decorated socialist brigade, but also because over many years she had worked as a member of the leadership of the workshop party cell and as union shop-steward. The article drew particular attention to the fact that it was subject of everyday conversation in the factory that ‘we have one working woman, who comes to work in her Trabant every day’. The article concluded by asking Teréz what the most important three things in her life were. She replied with ‘my work, my family and my car’. The article, by implication, represented Teréz as a woman who by the standards of the period could be considered emancipated. Of the workers in the factory she was almost the first one to own a car, and she was proud that of her family she was the only one who drove, for she would not allow her grown sons behind the steering wheel. In the article she probably deliberately argued that her work was more important to her, than her family in opposition to notions then dominant notions of gender relations. This was perhaps only because she was a widow and she only supported to some extent her grown sons, but it was also because, as she frequently stressed in her life-history interviews, that for her the factory was a space in which she could define her life, and formed a stage on which she could be successful. Her ownership of a Trabant made it possible for her to represent herself as a strong, self-confident working woman, who was able to come to work by car every day, despite the fact that in the community in which she lived there were men who overwhelmingly bought cars, and then drove them. The newspaper ‘Brigade Life’, when it published the article announcing that the Liberation Brigade had won the State Prize, carried an article in the same issue that pointed to the curiosity of a female student, who alongside her studies earned money as a driving instructor⁷.

In her interview with the journalist in 1970 Teréz stressed two elements of her life. Firstly, she represented herself as a successful working-class woman when she stressed that as a decorated working woman she had been able to buy a car in a shorter time than others. Secondly, she argued that she needed the car, as the daughter of a sick, elderly father, so that she could go often to her home town of Túrkeve to visit her parents. “I didn’t even dream of winning a State Prize. I was

⁶ *Munkás kocsitulajdonosok. I.*, “Harisnyagyári Dolgozó”, December 23, 1971.

⁷ The article pointed to legal equality between men and women: *Ide is betörtünk*, Brigádelet, April 1970.

delighted with the large amount of money, because I knew I could buy a car with it⁸. I wrote a letter to the Light Industry Minister⁹ to ask her to help me get the car early, and I had the permit within three weeks. The whole thing only took two months, I passed my driving test, and now I often visit my sick father.”¹⁰

In her interview with me Teréz stressed her initiative and determination: it was her idea to write a letter so that she could get the car more quickly. Furthermore she revealed what had been left out of the newspaper article at the time. The car arrived more quickly than she expected so that she could not pay for it all instantly. She did not ask her colleagues for a loan, but went to one of her relatives. An upcoming family wedding provided the solution: “The Trabant arrived so quickly that I didn’t have the last 10,000 Forints for it. At that time the father of my son’s fiancée lent me the money. I paid him back, I worked day and night, I worked as a cleaner.”¹¹

Getting the Trabant required exceptional effort therefore on her part, as the need to pay back her loan forced her to take on work that was regarded, and this became clear from another story, as beneath an ‘hourly-paid worker’. In a difficult situation she used the connections provided by her extended family, so that she could be among the first manual workers in the factory, who was able to park her own car in the yard of the factory.

Among the stories told in connection with Teréz’s Trabant are those which show how useful the ownership of a car was in daily life. With it she took her son to his allotment, she was able to make excursions at the weekend, she could visit her relatives in the country, she gave lifts to fellow brigade members so they could visit relatives, and every year she gave lifts to Soviet soldiers from their Óbuda barracks to the factory’s celebrations of the anniversary of the October Revolution. She also drew attention to the fact that this allowed her to buy petrol at the rate of 2 Forints a litre from the Soviet troops, a rate which was ‘very cheap’. After she recounted the story of how she got the petrol on several occasions I asked her how she was able to come to this arrangement. I asked her whether she bought the petrol from the same soldiers who she took to the factory celebrations or from others. She told me that she bought it both from those she had given lifts to and others, who she had got to know, while studying Russian. She always agreed that the soldiers should bring the petrol to the caretaker of the apartment block where she lived, and from the money that Teréz left him, he then paid the soldiers. This arrangement worked so well, that when the caretaker decided to buy his own car, he bought his petrol in exactly the same way¹². Local Soviet troops appeared during my interviews with other brigade members, largely as a possibility for buying items like bedclothes and colour televisions at preferential prices.

⁸ In 1970 as a result of winning the State Prize every member of the brigade won 20,000 Forints. At that time Teréz’s monthly salary was 1800 Forints. The down-payment on the Trabant was 9,900 Forints.

⁹ This was Mrs. József Nagy.

¹⁰ *Munkás kocsitulajdonosok. I.*, “Harisnyagyári Dolgozó”, December 23, 1971.

¹¹ Interview with T. Károlyné, October 3, 2001. Interviews by the author.

¹² Interview with T. Károlyné, January 29, 2003.

Teréz remained very attached to her first Trabant. She drove 150,000 kilometres with it and even when she sold it, she regarded it as important that she should watch to see what happened to the car. For this reason she chose a buyer who also worked in the factory. Even today she regards it as sad that its new owner did not care for the car as much as she did. After buying it he took the car to Italy, where it was involved in a traffic accident and completely written off.

The Trabant, as a consumer good acquired a symbolic meaning in her life-cycle, for she bought three Trabants over the following years. She was always able to gain enough money from selling her old car to be able to afford a new one. At the time she sold the last of her cars, just as with the first of them, she did not trust its future to chance: she sold it to her grandson, so it remained within the family. She believed that the new owner's care was demonstrated by the fact that at the time the interview was conducted, in 1999, the third Trabant was still in good working order.

The lack of goods – the methods to buy desired clothes

Respondents told of proceedings being taken against a colleague at the Budapest Hosiery Factory who sold clothing items (pullovers and cardigans) in the factory. The incident can be found in the archives as well, grouped with the cases of pilfering from the factory. The woman was reported on suspicion of 'profiteering'. "The profiteering that occurred in the boarding shop of the Folyamőr utca [factory] in March this year [1968] was carried out by Mrs György H and the requisite official measures are in progress."¹³ The same report included cases on the scale of three cardigans worth 520 forints being stolen in 1967. The sale of goods within the factory was criminalized and those writing the report treated it as if it were a case of stealing 'public property' such as the tights produced at the factory or 'private property' such as clothes or valuables belonging to other workers. Nonetheless, there was a big demand for cheap products which were in short supply in the shops. Sellers were prepared to run the risk of police proceedings. It gave them extra income for work conducted at least partly outside working hours.

Teréz, the owner of Trabant car told me a story about Kennedy rings. "There was an old lady in the boarding shop and she had some American relative who sent her rings. And this old lady asked me to help her sell these rings. I said why not. A bit of money. And X. Y. bought from me as well and wore the ring for two months... It was Kennedy's signet ring, a gold ring, I think, selling for 200 forints. It wasn't expensive. And she wore the ring for two months and then she told them in the party committee that I was selling rings with Kennedy on them."¹⁴

¹³ BFL BB Fond 8 XXXV (8) C, Budapesti Harisnyagyár iratai. Report on situation with social [i. e. public] property in the two Óbuda hosiery factories, April 11, 1968. The case was also on the April 16 agenda of the factory's party executive committee: "16. In the boarding shop, police proceedings for profiteering are underway against Mrs H. She made sizeable transactions, selling in instalments to a value of 4,000-5,000 forints a month. It is necessary to mobilise several people for the social court proceedings; the trade union requests assistance."

¹⁴ Interview with T. Károlyné, October 3, 2001.

Teréz was explaining the fact that she had to resign from a responsible position in the factory trade union by relating that she sold rings bearing the portrait of the murdered American president. She was reported for this, because the authorities thought it was unbecoming for a party member to sell Kennedy rings, and not Khrushchev rings, for instance. (The Soviet leader had been ousted by then, and in any case, she would hardly have been able to sell such rings for 200 forints a piece.)¹⁵ She explained at the beginning of the story how she had obtained the goods, which earned her a little extra income. The same storytelling approach occurs in other narratives, when the women explain why they took jobs as domestic servants when they were girls. 'Lending a hand', as the main motive for a women to take a job outside the home, is a recurring narrative element, as if the respondents were ashamed in the interview situation to bring up need as a motive.

Mária the leader of brigade sold pullovers in the workshop and came into conflict for that reason with the party committee and with the factory security officer. She related that the security officer borrowed an argument from official parlance when trying to shame her out of selling. He said that selling was petty bourgeois and incompatible with public office or party committee membership, and unworthy of 'socialist man'. This was related when the respondent was asked about the police matter mentioned earlier.

"I did selling as well, you know. And I was reported. Where we were living... next door, you know, there was a lady with relatives in Czechoslovakia, and she... brought knickers and bras and things over from there and asked me if I wanted to try and sell them. Well, of course, I took them into the factory and sold them, but the security officers noticed... I was reported... The security officer told me he knew I was selling something. I said prove it then. Then he said I was a district party committee member, and this and that, and how come I did that?... But he couldn't prove it." (She laughed.) 'Nothing ever happened over it.'"¹⁶

Those travelling to work from villages around Budapest included a contingent from Csév (Piliscsév, Esztergom County), who would regularly bring home-grown, home-made produce not available in the city markets. They would put offerings in the fridge for supervisors and workshop managers in the hope of advancement – some accepted the gifts and some did not – but ordinary work mates had to pay for their sausage or black pudding.

¹⁵ The author of a manual for leaders of socialist brigades did not advise naming brigades after Kennedy either, although he had been murdered. Tibor Fábri, *A szocialista brigádvezetők feladatai és munkamódszerei*, Budapest, 1972. On the removal of T. Károlyné, see BFL BB Fond 8 XXXV (8) C, Budapesti Harisnyagyár iratai. Meeting of Branch I, October 4, 1970.

¹⁶ Interview with S. Vilmosné, January 14, 2003.

“The Csév people brought in *disznótoros* [pig-slaughter products] to sell. They’d ask every year if I wanted some. I’d say yes. They made black pudding differently from us at home, with a lot of white breadcrumbs, but it was delicious.”¹⁷

According to the stories, the furnace workers would also buy liquor in working hours from country *pálinka* sellers. The porters were involved in the selling and would tell the furnace workers when a new consignment arrived¹⁸.

Conclusion – the role of an official discourse emphasised women worker identity

The notions of female equality and unequivocal political support for women going to work formed central pillars of official discourse during the socialist era. Although the propaganda of the regime maintained that there was no unemployment, fluctuations of supply and demand in fact determined how many unskilled women were able to work in industry and what work they were able to get. In 1965 an article in *Nők Lapja*, the most popular womens’ weekly, wrote about how unskilled women workers were laid-off in one factory. The article did not dispute the ‘economic justification’ for the lay-offs, and while it expressed sympathy for women affected, it nevertheless supported the official point-of-view. The author argued that those who were laid off were those who had to go because they were not good workers: they had taken too much time off and were consequently seen as untrustworthy. The director of the factory was quoted by the journalist, and made no concessions to notion of gender equality, but instead expressed the importance of the primacy of men in the world of work. The director stated that in deciding who should be laid off he took into account the family status of the worker and, where a married couple worked in the factory, he sacked the woman rather than the man, because her wage was almost always the lowest. He not only regarded it as acceptable that a woman should earn less for the same work than a man, but that when a woman lost her job, she did not lose everything. She could go back to the family, which was how she defined her life. Most of the laid-off women, however, did not stay at home: according to the article most went to work in the market-gardening unit of the local state farm¹⁹. In the official discourse of the socialist period the rhetorical promotion of gender equality and the integration of women into socialist labor, appeared together with notions that stressed how female wage labor came second to the role of women within the family. The need to guarantee the economy a sufficient supply of female labor was regarded as an important function of the state according to official discourse in the socialist era. There had to be an adequate supply of female labor. State control over labor was not only symbolized by the institution of work books, but also by the fact that official discourse represented working in the same factory and workshop over many years as a virtue in its self. The “core” of the long-term

¹⁷ Interview with F. Józsefné and S. Józsefné, November 19, 2002.

¹⁸ Interview with T. Károlyné, October 6, 2003.

¹⁹ *Kétoldalú felelősséggel*, “Nők Lapja”, 30. January 1965, and *Nők a munkaközvetítőnél*, “Nők Lapja”, November 11, 1962.

workforce received material rewards, labor mobility was condemned²⁰. The state attempted to strengthen the ties of the worker to the factory, through, among other methods, the publication of articles in both enterprise and national newspapers that dealt directly with factories and their histories. This was a consequence of an attempt to build collective identities around the factories through official propaganda²¹.

It should be pointed out, that these men and women speak a lot about consumption. These women rarely depict themselves as 'working women'. These women's narratives offered a sense of having belonged to more than one group in their life (consumers, workers, neighbourhood communities). Major differences in the narration of these women have appeared in many ways. Understanding how working people came to be storytellers in the interview situations is only the first step toward a better understanding how and why they structured their life accounts the way they did, and how they understood, and ultimately structured their lives.

²⁰ *A törzsgárda létkérdés*, "Nők Lapja", July 17, 1969.

²¹ For example, *Emlékezik a gyár*, "Nők Lapja", May 2, 1981; "Harisnyagyári Dolgozó", December 19, 1974.