

Preface and Acknowledgements

The origins of this work lie far back in 1982 when I read a book by two excellent Hungarian sociologists György Konrád and Iván Szelényi called *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power*. This work was a Marxist critique of 'actually existing socialism' with the authors building from their research into urban inequality a thesis about the new class oppression in 'Eastern Europe'. In my desire to pursue these lines of thought I began a dissertation which eventually metamorphosed into a critical study of the situation of women in Hungarian society. Doubts concerning 'studying women' were then being voiced in women's groups in terms of objectification and careerism. I eventually made my peace with these arguments as the aim of my research was to privilege women's experience of change, in close contact with many women in Hungary over the past seven years. I am glad to have written this work in order to 'feed it back' into the women's groups which are now developing in Hungary and elsewhere in central and eastern Europe.

My way of working was ethnographic in that I spent as much time as I could with women discussing everyday concerns, particularly aspects of their lives in terms of work, child care, money, personal identity and sexuality, and political change and sometimes taping more formal 'interviews'. The taped interviews formed the basis for much of my reasoning in the original work, yet I was warned by 'Oxford academia' not to include too many 'unsupported quotes' from women. It is precisely these discussions which are the most valuable insight into how women in Hungary have experienced the changes since 1948. It was from 1948 that conscious decisions were being made to alter Hungarian economic and social decision-making radically within a new form of political organisation.

For this book I transcribed documentary and other materials written by Hungarian sociologists on various aspects of women's situation and theories of 'socialist families'. I also interviewed

various people in Hungary who had worked on areas associated with the 'woman question'. It was relatively easy to spend time with women from various backgrounds and age groups in Budapest, but it became more complicated when I wanted to visit women in other towns. This was in part because my Hungarian was never good enough to have long interviews without interpretation and partly because the time and energy needed to organise such visits meant that I usually had to set up taped interviews rather than being able to get to know the women over time and 'just talk'. The title of this work 'Magyar Women' signifies my work with Hungarian women. I had neither enough opportunities nor the detailed linguistic and cultural knowledge required to work with many Roma women in Hungary. To do justice to the different lives of Roma women in Hungary would require at least as much research and another book. I hope it will not be too long before such research is in progress.

The nature of the taped interviews usually followed a pattern. I explained what the research was about and why it was being carried out, and asked certain open-ended questions about women's experiences of change, their expectations and things they might like to see developed for women. What was most surprising to me was that almost without exception I was not only welcomed warmly into people's homes and lives, but also that women were so willing and sometimes very enthusiastic to be able to talk about themselves and their own lives. The comment from Eszter that 'It is good to talk, to be able to think it out loud and to put my thoughts into a kind of whole somehow' was not uncommon. All the names of women have been changed but I am sure some will recognise themselves and each other. When I was only to meet a woman once we always ended our session with a general question-and-answer part for me to answer questions about women in the 'West' – about child-care, contraception, feminism, sexuality, work or lesbians. I can certainly say that to be given the opportunity to spend 7–8 months travelling in Hungary talking with women about their lives was an honour. I thank the Isle of Man Board of Education and the British Council for their financial support in 1986 which enabled me to do this.

Since 1986 I have visited Hungary many times but always for much shorter periods of 2 months or less. During these visits I have been able to notice and discuss the tremendous social and

political upheavals which have taken place in Hungary and the impact such changes have had on women's situations and possibilities. In writing up this work for publication I hope it will make a small contribution towards enabling Hungarian women to draw together the threads of their shared experience and to build on some of the analyses to be able to support each other in their various activities.

I would very much like to thank everyone who helped me to carry out this work in Hungary – those who gave of their time and energy to share their days and nights with me, sociologists with whom I could discuss my ideas and thoughts, women who introduced me to their sisters, daughters, grandmothers, aunts and mothers and especially to those women who snatched a few hours from incredibly busy schedules, often whilst their children slept, to discuss their lives with me.

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