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**From National Inclusion to European Exclusion: State,  
Nation and Europe in Ethnic Hungarian Migration to  
Hungary**

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**FROM NATIONAL INCLUSION TO EUROPEAN EXCLUSION: STATE, NATION, AND EUROPE  
IN ETHNIC HUNGARIAN MIGRATION TO HUNGARY\***

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**Introduction**

Large numbers of ethnic Hungarians from Romania have been working illegally on and off in Hungary since the regime changes in 1989-1990. In 2001, Hungary passed legislation, the so-called "Status Law," that granted the transborder Hungarians the right to work in Hungary three months out of each calendar year. But in preparation for joining the European Union in May 2004, the law has been gradually dismantled in accordance with the EU's strictures against ethnic-based entitlements. Over the last decade and a half, ethnic Hungarian migrants have received mixed signals from Hungary. On the one hand, initiatives such as the Status Law have sought to symbolically incorporate transborder Hungarians into the fold of a greater Hungarian cultural nation. On the other hand, the erection of a new European boundary between Hungary and its neighbors (preceded by tight immigration controls in place since the early 1990s) has made it increasingly difficult for the transborder Hungarians to enjoy the legal benefits of Hungarian citizenship. While macro-political developments in this domain have received increased scholarly attention in recent years (see, e.g., Fowler 2002; Kántor 2002; Lukács and Király 2001; Stewart 2003; Wallace and Stola 2001), the way in which these changes affect the lives of ordinary migrants has not been systematically studied. The aim of the

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present paper is to explain how these shifting and ambiguous political contexts impact the trajectories, experiences, and self-understandings of undocumented ethnic Hungarian migrants from Romania working in Hungary.

By definition, all international migration is interstate, with sending and receiving country contexts shaping the ways in which different types of migration unfold. The Hungarian case, however, is characterized by two additional political contexts. For one, ethnic Hungarian migration to Hungary, while interstate, is also *intra*-national: it occurs within a single cultural nation as conceived (and imperfectly institutionalized) by the Hungarian state. In this sense, Hungarian migration has much in common with what Rogers Brubaker terms “ethnic affinity migration” (1998). In these cases, states such as Germany, Israel, and Japan pursue migration policies which invoke, elaborate, and legitimate the notion of shared ethno-national belonging between host and migrant (Joppke and Rosenhek 2002; Levy and Weiss 2002; Münz and Ohliger 1997; Rock and Wolff 2002; Tsuda 2003). Ethnic Hungarian migration to Hungary thus takes place *across* state – but *within* national – boundaries.

At the same time, Hungarian migration is occurring in the evolving context of European Union enlargement. After Hungary’s planned accession in May 2004, the state boundary separating Hungary from Romania will double as a European boundary separating Europeans from non-Europeans (or not-yet-Europeans). Hungary’s earlier policies in support of its transborder co-ethnics sought to diminish the significance of state boundaries; its incorporation into the European Union, however, will reinforce them (as European boundaries). Ethnic Hungarians in the neighboring countries may continue to enjoy symbolic inclusion in the greater nation of Hungary, but they will be practically

excluded from Europe.<sup>1</sup> These three overlapping contexts – interstate, intra-national, and European – define the institutional and political parameters within which ethnic Hungarian migration to Hungary continues to evolve.

Hungarians from Romania represent the largest cohort of foreign workers in Hungary in the post-communist period (Wallace 2002: 611-12). There are approximately 1.5 million Hungarians in Romania versus 600,000 in Slovakia and 300,000 in Ukraine. Thus, while economic disparities between Hungary and Romania are not as pronounced as they are with Ukraine to the east, the larger absolute number of Hungarians in Romania accounts, in part, for their greater presence in Hungary.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Hungarians from Romania have an established history of migration to Hungary that predates the regime changes in 1989-1990 (see, e.g., Tóth 1997). In addition, these “Romanians” – as they are derogatorily labeled by Hungarians in Hungary (see below) – have become synonymous with *all* foreign workers in Hungary, irrespective of either citizenship or claimed ethno-national affiliation. Thus, both in scope and the popular imagination, migrants from Romania are at the center of the migration debate in Hungary.

My interest is in how these ethnically Hungarian migrants from Romania make sense of themselves and their predicaments in these shifting political contexts. The migrants are simultaneously citizens of the neighboring countries and ethno-nationally

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<sup>1</sup> According to the terms of integration, citizens of new member states such as Hungary will have to wait at least two years before they have unrestricted movement within the Union. The movement of foreign nationals residing in these new states will be even more restricted. Romania is slated for membership in the European Union beginning in 2007. In all likelihood, it too will be subjected to a probationary period before unrestricted movement of its citizens becomes a reality.

<sup>2</sup> The 600,000 or so Hungarians living in Slovakia are better off economically than their co-ethnics in Romania or Ukraine. They have been less likely to work in Hungary.

Hungarian, but *not* (yet) European.<sup>3</sup> Earlier contributions to the literature on identify formation through migration focused on patterns of assimilation – or dissimilation – that immigrants underwent in their countries of destination (see, e.g., Glazer and Moynihan 1969; Gordon 1965). More recent trends in the literature on transnationalism have documented the ways in which the policies pursued by sending countries have contributed to the emergence of new modes of migrant identification that challenge the traditional paradigm of the nation-state (Basch, Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994; Levitt 2001; Schiller 1999; Smith 1998). But neither assimilationist nor transnational paradigms adequately account for the ways in which these undocumented Hungarian migrants have come to understand and represent themselves. Shifting political contexts have indeed challenged the migrants to rethink their civic and ethnic understandings of themselves as Hungarian. These migrants have not become full-fledged members of the Hungarian nation, but neither have they formed uniquely new hybrid identities that supersede earlier forms of national identification. Rather, migration has provided the context for the revaluation and reformulation of specifically Hungarian forms of identification. In spite of their nominal national affinity with Hungarians in Hungary, the migrants have come to view themselves as nationally distinct from their hosts of the same name.

### **Methodology and acknowledgements**

This paper draws on research from a larger collaborative project with Rogers Brubaker, Margit Feischmidt, and Liana Grancea on nationalism and ethnicity in

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<sup>3</sup> At this stage, it remains to be seen what effect European integration will have on the trajectories and experiences of the migrants. For the time being, then, my analysis will limit itself to migration in its interstate and intra-national – but not European – contexts.

Transylvania. Several of the paragraphs presented below are adapted from drafts of a book manuscript growing out of that project. The data I present were collected by all of us at different times during the course of several extended trips ranging from two months to one year between 1994 and 2001 in Hungary and Romania. Interviews and focus groups were conducted to elicit discussion among ethnic Hungarians in Romania about their experiences and concerns regarding migration. In participant observation fieldwork, we spoke more informally with migrants in Hungary (and past and prospective migrants in Romania) about similar matters. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. All translations in the text to follow are our own. All names have been changed. I would like to thank my collaborators for permission to use this material in this paper.

### **Shifting contexts**

In 1990, Hungary's first post-communist prime minister announced that "in spirit" (though not in fact) he was prime minister of fifteen million Hungarians – five million more than those in Hungary. His statement was greeted with approval from the transborder Hungarians who looked to Hungary to defend their rights and champion their causes. In the years that followed, successive governments expressed their commitment to the fate of the Hungarians stranded in the neighboring countries by the peace treaties that ended World War I. While Hungary looked westward with one eye toward integration in Europe, it simultaneously kept its other eye focused on its disadvantaged ethnic brethren in the neighboring countries. In the early 1990s, Hungary established the Office for the Hungarians beyond Borders to promote the political, economic, and

cultural interests of the transborder Hungarians. Its policies were aimed at enhancing the Hungarians' quality of life *within* their respective countries rather than encouraging their migration to Hungary. Concerned with its own precarious economic footing, Hungary placed tight controls on foreign labor.

Nevertheless, large numbers of migrants, attracted by Hungary's relative economic prosperity, came to Hungary to work – mostly illegally – throughout the 1990s. These migrants had to endure the same sorts of difficulties and humiliations typically experienced by migrants in other contexts. They were greeted in their putative mother country not with benevolence but with suspicion and mistrust fueled by economic insecurities. Hungarians in Hungary did not see the migrants as their long-lost ethnic brethren but as poor Romanians threatening to take their jobs (Fox 2003). Despite Hungary's lofty rhetoric of symbolic inclusion, the migrants came to understand themselves as ethno-nationally distinct from their hosts of the same name. Return labor migration provided the context for the emergence and transformation of these new understandings of Hungarianness (see Bodnár 1998; Kovács and Melegh 2001; Sik 1999).

The legal status of labor migration changed, however, in 2002 when the Status Law invoked the principle of ethnic affinity to make it possible for transborder Hungarians to work in Hungary three months a year (Fowler 2002; Kántor 2002; Stewart 2003). But even before the law was implemented, Romania and Slovakia objected that it unfairly discriminated against non-Hungarians (an objection later echoed by the European Union). Anxious to appease the European Union as much as the neighboring countries, Hungary agreed to extend the law's reach to *all* citizens of those countries,

irrespective of ethno-national affiliation. Legislation that partially realized Hungary's self-proclaimed obligation to its co-ethnics was denuded of its *raison d'être*.

As originally conceived, the Status Law invited ethnic Hungarians to view their ethno-national affiliation as a resource for securing access to the Hungarian labor market. To date, the Status Law has had little impact on the actual practice of Hungarian labor migration to Hungary. Like migrants in other contexts, these workers continue to sidestep the law's provisions in favor of the less restrictive (and tax free) benefits of undocumented employment. In practice, there is a disjuncture between the vision of ethno-national inclusion promoted by the Status Law and the reality of social, economic, and ultimately ethno-national exclusion experienced by the migrants. The Status Law has not facilitated the entry of the migrants into either the Hungarian labor market or the Hungarian nation.

Now Hungary is poised to enter the European Union in May 2004. The greater cultural nation of Hungarians institutionally legitimated by the Status Law will effectively be cut in half by the eastward expansion of Europe's borders. Migration privileges and other benefits guaranteed by the Status Law will have to be rescinded in accordance with the European Union's prohibitions against ethnic discrimination (see Jileva 2002; Lukács and Király 2001; Mitsilegas 2002). Over the years, Hungary's support of the Hungarians in the neighboring countries has fostered a corresponding sense of entitlement among those Hungarians. Many, in fact, felt Hungary should offer them dual citizenship. For them, the more modest provisions of the Status Law were a reflection of Hungary's inability – or unwillingness – to help them. But now, as the more lucrative labor markets of Western Europe gradually open up to Hungarians in Hungary,



the economic stakes of migration will likely become higher. The Status Law privileges are being revoked at the very moment when they matter most economically. This is the context – at the threshold of these changes – that I will examine the migrants’ changing understandings of themselves and their experiences.

### **The migrants**

As a relatively prosperous, geographically proximate, and easily accessible country, Hungary has been a popular destination for travelers, cross-border traders, labor migrants, and resettlers from Transylvania since the regime changes in 1990. It has been most attractive, of course, to Transylvanian Hungarians, who, in addition to knowing the language, generally have better contacts in Hungary than Transylvanian Romanians (though significant numbers of Romanians, too, have worked and even resettled in Hungary). In as little as a half a day, migrants from Transylvania can be working in Budapest; more importantly, perhaps, they can return to their families in the same amount of time.

In strictly economic terms, however, Hungary is not the most favored destination. Wages, while significantly higher than in Romania, are far lower than in Western Europe. Given the choice, many Transylvanian Hungarians would prefer to work elsewhere. “Hungary’s a little bit better off than Romania,” a public administrator from Cluj explained. “But the farther you go from Hungary, the bigger the difference.... And so I’m going to go to Austria, you know, I’m not going to just go next door.” But since most do not have the contacts that would lead to job opportunities elsewhere, while many

do have the contacts to get work in Hungary, Hungary remains a popular destination for those seeking work abroad.

Transylvanian Hungarians visit or migrate to Hungary with certain expectations that they do not entertain when migrating elsewhere. These have been shaped by the long history linking Transylvania and Hungary and by forms of identification and talk on both sides of the border. Most Transylvanian Hungarians feel a strong affinity with Hungary, their *anyaország*, or mother country. This sense of affinity is part of their self-understanding as “Hungarian.” For Hungarian is not simply a local ethnicity; it is a state-transcending cultural “nationality.” The Hungarian national anthem – the national anthem of a sovereign state – is seen by most Transylvanian Hungarians as *their* anthem as well; it is sung on New Year’s Eve (at one a.m. local time, when it is midnight in Hungary) and also on certain occasions in church. The flag of Hungary, too, is seen as *their* flag by most Transylvanian Hungarians; the red, white, and green national colors are displayed in public on the major Hungarian national holiday, March 15<sup>th</sup> – a holiday celebrated with greater conviction in Transylvania than in Hungary (Brubaker and Feischmidt 2002) – and sometimes in private as well. Many Hungarians from Transylvania would like to have dual Hungarian and Romanian citizenship – a theme that continues to find expression in among migrants and non-migrants alike. They feel that their *anyaország* (mother country) has some kind of special responsibility for them. As some Transylvanian Hungarians are quick to point out, it’s not that they left Hungary, but that Hungary left them.

So when Transylvanian Hungarians travel or migrate to Hungary, they take with them a set of tacit expectations quite different from those they take when migrating to

any other country. Of course, Transylvania Hungarians are well aware that Hungary is a different and, in many respects, “foreign” country. As migrant laborers, they certainly don’t expect to feel entirely “at home”; they are aware of differences not only in wages, but in material civilization, life style, and mentality as well. But at the same time, in traveling to Hungary, they understand themselves as traveling to a country that, in some sense, belongs to them, and to which they, in turn, belong – not only in an informal cultural sense but also, since the passage of the Status Law, in an (admittedly thin and largely symbolic) formal political sense as well.

Thus, when Transylvanian Hungarians began after the regime changes to travel to Hungary in large numbers to work, they did so, in an important sense, *as* Hungarians – not simply as Romanian citizens, skilled or unskilled workers, or men or women. It was not that they expected to be welcomed with open arms as ethno-national kin; it was not that they expected anything in particular. One thing they did *not* expect, however, was to have their Hungarianness – a taken-for-granted identity – questioned or challenged. Yet this is precisely what happened. Rather than being at least tacitly recognized and accepted as Hungarian, many migrants found themselves identified and treated as Romanian.

In many ways, the experiences of Transylvanian Hungarian labor migrants differed little from those of migrants in other contexts. They faced the same sort of economic hardships, humiliations, and diminutions of status faced by migrants everywhere. Working illegally in a foreign country took its toll physically and psychologically. Melinda, a barmaid from Cluj (in the center of Transylvania), described the tension she felt when crossing the border: “You’re afraid, you feel nauseous.”

Without a work permit, she explained, “you have to come back, every month you have to come back and get your passport stamped.” But sometimes the border guards wised up to what the migrants were doing. “Then they don’t let you cross, the Hungarians stamp your passport, for 24 hours they don’t let you in.”

And like migrants in other contexts, it was uncommon for the Transylvanian Hungarians to ethnicize their asymmetrical and at times degrading relations with their hosts. Indeed, as has been observed in many different migration contexts, migrant-host ethnic (and/or citizenship) distinctions easily map onto employee-employer distinctions. Migrants understand and represent themselves, their predicaments, and their relations to their hosts in quasi-ethnic terms. Consider, for example, the following explanation of differences provided by Gyuri, a focus group participant:

[We] definitely work for less than the Hungarians [in Hungary], that’s the way I see it. I worked a... month [in Hungary],... I mixed the mortar, put up the frame, laid the bricks, whatever they needed, I was a worker. Fine, I worked ten hours, but the way they just screwed around all day, it’s not right.... My father-in-law worked sixteen hours a day, every day – the Hungarians, they go home at four o’clock.... Maybe they just don’t need the money as bad as the Transylvanians, and they don’t push themselves because they’re at home there, for them, the discipline, everything, family, my father-in-law’s a long way from his family.

Gyuri and his fellow migrants were “Transylvanians;” their employer hosts were “Hungarians.” The work ethic Gyuri ascribed to his fellow migrants in contrast to those imputed to workers in Hungary were ethnicized.

The Transylvanian Hungarian case is distinctive in that migrant and host nominally share the same ethno-national affiliation. But while the hardships of migration reinforced the Transylvanian migrants’ understandings of themselves in these ethno-national terms, their hosts of the same name tended to receive the migrants in terms of

their citizenship. To Hungarians in Hungary, the migrants were simply “Romanians.” The supposed Hungarian ethnicity of the migrants was irrelevant from the perspective of Hungarians in Hungary; for them, the fact that the migrants were from Romania, its poor and backward Balkan neighbor, mattered most when competing with them for jobs in the labor market.

Distinctions between citizenship and ethno-national belonging often get blurred or confused in the context of international migration. In Turkey, Kurds define themselves in oppositional ethnic terms to Turks; as migrants in Germany, however, they become, in the eyes of their German hosts, simply “Turks” (Leggewie 1996). Similarly, indigenous peoples in Mexico who see themselves, and are seen by others, as “distinct” nevertheless become “Mexican” in the U.S. context (Kearney 1995). In this respect, it is not wholly unsurprising that ethnic Hungarians who migrate to Hungary from Romania simply come to be seen by their hosts in Hungary as “Romanian.” But while these other cases of migration involve movement from one’s own country to a foreign land, Transylvanian Hungarian migrants are moving from a country that is only ambiguously “their own” to a country that is, in a certain sense, *also* their own. Thus, the experience of bearing a stigmatized Romanian citizenship can be particularly disquieting in light of their nominally shared ethno-national belonging.

This misrecognition or non-recognition prompted, in turn, a compensatory re-assertion of Hungarianness, rendering Hungarianness highly visible and salient rather than invisible and taken for granted. For the Transylvanian Hungarians, being called “Romanian” – for which a word, “*lerománózás*” (roughly “derogatorily labeling as ‘Romanian’”), has come into popular usage – was an insult and a symbolic denial of their

claim to Hungarian national belonging. To be denied recognition *as* a Hungarian *by* one's fellow Hungarians could be a profoundly unsettling, even humiliating experience. "That's the way it is in Hungary," one Transylvanian worker observed: "they look down on you." Another Hungarian working in a pharmaceutical factory in Cluj talked with her friend about the humiliations they experienced "as Romanians" in Hungary:

Kati: ...Everybody thinks you're Romanian—

Timi: —Romanian?, *Wallachian*, excuse me, *Wallachian*<sup>4</sup>...

Kati: ...and where did this "stinking Romanian"<sup>5</sup> come from,... that's the way they treat you a lot of the time, like you live on the street, and I don't know, you steal, and they come up with all this stuff about you... it was like you were Afghan or something,... it didn't matter that you were Hungarian, in terms of your nationality, I'm not talking about citizenship now... they don't understand what it means that you're Romanian, that you're a Romanian citizen, but your nationality is Hungarian, they just don't get it ...

To Kati and her friend, this was not a simply an issue of "mistaken identity;" rather, it was a deliberate and unjust denial of their "true" Hungarian belonging. As Laci, a stagehand working at the Hungarian opera in Cluj, justified it, Transylvanian Hungarians never chose *not* to be Hungarian:

When... they carved up Hungary,<sup>6</sup>... no one officially renounced their Hungarian citizenship,... the Hungarian state never took [it] away.... [But] now lots of people... are going to Hungary and they're being treated like they're Senegalese, Kirghiz, or whatever.... My grandpa and my parents were Hungarian citizens and they didn't choose to renounce their citizenship....

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<sup>4</sup> "Wallachian," or "*oláh*," in Hungarian, is a common slur used to refer to Romanians. While it technically refers to Romanians from Wallachia, or the Old Kingdom, south of Transylvania, in practice it has become a synonym for Gypsies.

<sup>5</sup> "Stinking Romanian," or "*büdös román*," in Hungarian, is another common slur directed at Romanians.

<sup>6</sup> Two-thirds of Hungary's pre World War I territories were awarded to the neighboring countries at the end of the war.

This denial of Hungarian belonging was further exacerbated by the Transylvanian Hungarians' minority experience in Transylvania. He continued: "They think I'm a Romanian, and then here [in Romania], it still sucks, because here I'm a Hungarian, so I don't have a homeland, I'm between the two.... Somehow I've got to decide where I belong."

Laci hoped that the recently passed Status Law would be a step toward righting these past wrongs. "Ultimately this whole thing, the Status Law, the way I see it, it's to fix what happened, I don't know, since Trianon<sup>7</sup>...., it's a moral question somehow." But for many others, the Status Law was viewed as being of little practical consequence, particularly for those who found it more advantageous to sidestep its constraints in favor of working unrestricted in the informal economy. Older Hungarians, like Laci's parents, welcomed the Status Law for its symbolic recognition of them as Hungarians. But most younger Hungarians – those who worked in Hungary and had already experienced being treated as Romanians – tended to be far more skeptical of its supposed benefits.

As the centerpiece of Hungarian policy toward the transborder Hungarians, the law sparked heated debate over how well Hungary was living up to its self-proclaimed commitments. The following exchange quoted at length between Pali and his mother, Erzsi, nicely maps out the conflicting practical and symbolic stakes of the issue. Pali, in his mid twenties, was a computer technician in Cluj; Erzsi, his mother, in her early sixties, was a retired X-ray technician. Neither had actually worked in Hungary, though both had visited on numerous occasions (Éva, Erzi's daughter had emigrated to Hungary in the early 1990s before controls were tightened). The conversation took place one

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<sup>7</sup> "Trianon" refers to the treaties signed at the conclusion of World War I.

evening after dinner.<sup>8</sup> Erzsi favored the law for symbolic reasons; Pali criticized it as frivolous:

Erzsi: ... We've never had any help [from Hungary] for as long as I can remember, Hungary was always like, if things were tough for us, "whatever, they're Romanians, we don't care"....

...

But now at least... they're doing something, I don't know what it's going to involve exactly, there're only two pages in the newspaper and I didn't have time to read it, it's just what I heard on the TV. Anything's welcome, anything but—

Pali: —It's *minimal* help.

Erzsi: It doesn't matter, however much it is.

Pali: But when it's so little that it doesn't even matter to you anymore...

Erzsi: But it *does* matter to me....

...

No matter how you look at it, it would be nice for us to get some help,... so many years have passed without Hungarians in Transylvania getting anything, and now, finally, it seems that there's enough good will,... why shouldn't we get something? Who's it going to bother?....

...

Pali: It's all just stupid, stupid, you understand? It's ridiculous.... You know what it's like?, they give you a little piece of crap and you complain so you get some more crap, "give me some crap!," but no one cares about that crap... No one's even talking about... whether it's crap or not, or what it even is that they're getting.

Erzsi: You haven't read it [the article in the paper], you should have read it—

Pali: —I *did* read it, Mom—

Erzsi: —to see what it is you'll get...

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<sup>8</sup> This discussion between Pali and Erzsi was recorded as part of an ongoing attempt to capture informal conversation in the family. This was not a structured interview. While I introduced the issue of the Status Law on this particular occasion, the issue had been an unprompted topic of conversation on other occasions earlier that summer.



...

Erzsi: This isn't about—

Pali: —Then why do you care??—

Erzsi: —about what we *get*, it's—

Pali: —[*laughing ironically*] Then what *is* it about??—

Erzsi: —it's about the *principle* of it, it's the *principle* that Hungary finally wants to help the Hungarians in the neighboring countries in some way.

Pali: But there isn't anything for them to do!

Erzsi: Of course there is.... Are things really so great around here?

Pali: Mom, you can't help someone if you don't do anything for them.

Erzsi: Well, they want to do something.

Pali: But *they're not*, they're not doing anything, they threw a piece of crap up into the air and everybody wants it [*laughing ironically*]

Erzsi: I already said it's not about that, about what you're getting, it's about the *principle*.

Pali: You're doing the exact same thing—

Erzsi: It's the *principle*.

Pali: Right, the principle – you're doing the exact same thing the Hungarian prime minister did with Năstase.<sup>9</sup> Năstase comes along and says “don't give anything to the Hungarians!” and then you come along and say [*mimicking her ironically*] “just give us a little something.” Well, you're not getting anything, it doesn't matter to me, it doesn't matter to you, if they *don't give you anything*, then *what am I fighting for*, you know?...

Erzsi: You should just accept it.

Pali: But I don't want to—there's nothing to accept as long as they're not giving us anything.

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<sup>9</sup> Adrian Năstase is the Romanian prime minister.

Erzsi: You should accept the principle... that it's a nice thing on their part that they want—

Pali: —Right, really nice of them and that's it, end of discussion—so why make such a big fuss about it?

Erzsi: I'm not making a fuss about it.

Pali.: Yeah, but, but *they* are.

...

All I'm saying is that I'm not going to get *anything* out of any of this, and *you're* not going to get anything either, just the *principle*, you're fighting for the *principle*, Mom.

Erzsi: And that's already something.

Pali: ...You worked 39 years straight, you should get *something*, it doesn't matter *what*, but *something* at least. The Hungarians don't give you a *thing*, the Romanians work hard to keep you from getting anything. So many principles. Every damn thing is a principle. I'm gonna fight for something when that something is tangible, when it'll be mine, and I'm going to know it's mine, then I'll fight, and as long as some *Hungarian* tells me "you just keep fighting, because eventually I'll get around to giving you something," then the Hungarian can go to hell, you understand?... To me what matters is that I *work* if I get *paid*, and I'll start *fighting* for something when I *get* that something.

...

Erzsi: There isn't even anything to fight for, but we might as well be glad—

Pali: —*Why?*—

Erzsi: —because... we're getting something.

Pali: But I'm telling you

Erzsi: It's a matter of good will, too—that's nice isn't it?

Pali: ...they're good-willed, very nice,... but none of that *means shit*.

This passage captures different ways Transylvanian Hungarians related to the Status Law. Erzsi focused on the principle: irrespective of any tangible benefits she

might reap, she appreciated the long-overdue gesture from Hungary, offering formal recognition to the transborder co-ethnics. Pali was indifferent to the principles, gestures, and symbolism. If there were no tangible benefits – and Pali did not see any – then the law had little merit. It was simply an empty gesture.

Even though many Hungarians like Pali felt the law had little to offer them *as* Hungarians, there was a common perception that *non*-Hungarians would be eager to cash in on its token material rewards. Since the law attached certain benefits to the official legal “status” of being a (transborder) Hungarian, it raised the question of who could, who would, and who should acquire this status. Any sort of symbolic recognition the law might have afforded to transborder Hungarians would be cheapened by potential abuses by a new category of would-be entitlement-seekers with questionable, at best, Hungarian credentials. “And so what will happen?,” asked Jancsi, one of Laci’s coworkers from the Hungarian opera. Jancsi saw the problem as stemming from what he claimed were exceptionally high rates of mixed marriage (he himself was married to Romanian):

Because in Romania out of 23 million Romanians, or rather 23 million *citizens*, it’s going to turn out that 20 million are Hungarian [*chuckling*] and 3 million Bulgarians or whatever [*chuckling again*], that’s where the problem is with this whole thing... I mean it’s human fallibility, right? If I have the teeniest possibility, an ounce of a chance to get something....

Romanians (and Gypsies) would claim to be Hungarian, and, in the end, Hungarians in Hungary would be proven right: those showing up in Hungary *would* all be Romanians.

Jancsi and the other stagehands made light of the pitfalls of the identification process:

Peti: On what basis are you going to get the [benefits]...?

Zoli: If you consider yourself Hungarian.

Peti: ...Okay, fine, but it's not like I can call myself Hungarian and then all of the sudden I want to call myself *Japanese*, I don't have slanted eyes, so it *shouldn't* work on the basis of what you call yourself [*laughs*]

Csaba: No,... you have to know the language on a certain level.

Peti: Fine, and so maybe I learn *Japanese* [*laughs*] but that won't make me Japanese....

...

Csaba: it's still going to be decided on the basis of how you identify yourself....

Peti: Fine, but I still can't call myself Cameroonian even if I want to.

Csaba: Whatever you call yourself, however you feel, if that's what you want be then that's what you are.

...

Peti: I can say I'm Kenyan.

Jancsi: And then that's what you are, that's what you are.

Csaba: If that's what you want to call yourself, my God...

Jancsi: Then that's what you are...

The law invited speculation not only on what it meant to be Hungarian (or Romanian, for that matter), but on how flexible such notions were. Most Hungarians and Romanians ordinarily understood ethnic and national identity as natural and enduring, not as negotiable, fluid, contested, or constructed. They were everyday primordialists, not postmodern constructivists. Yet the Status Law, by inviting them to reflect on what they ordinarily took for granted, brought out a more constructivist strand in the local folk sociology of ethnicity and nationality.

These challenges in identifying Hungarians, however, were rendered moot even before the law was implemented by extending its privileges to *all* citizens of the neighboring countries, irrespective of their ethno-national affiliation. In its new version,

the law offered little of symbolic value to Erzsi or others like her who had previously sought little more than recognition *as* Hungarians. In the end, many Hungarians remained skeptical about the law's ability to redress the humiliations they experienced as "Romanians" in Hungary. The law's rhetoric of symbolic inclusion clashed sharply with the reality of national exclusion they faced as they worked in Hungary.

## **Conclusion**

The macro political context for migration is not necessarily the best indicator of the ways in which the migrants themselves understand themselves and their predicaments. State sponsored initiatives aimed at including migrants into the fold of the Hungarian nation proved to be no match for the everyday reality of exclusion experienced by laborers enduring hardships and humiliations. In spite of the migrants' initial tacit expectations, Hungary was *not* experienced as the benevolent mother country depicted by the Status Law. But neither did the migrants accept the "Romanian" label ascribed to them by their less friendly hosts. Rather, the daily experiences of migration provided the space for the articulation of contested claims to Hungarianness. What form these self-understandings take as Hungary joins the European Union remain to be seen.

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