

Women on the move: Between Szék and Budapest

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Introduction

The goal of this paper is to analyze and understand the migration processes from Szék, Romania (Sic - in Romanian) to Budapest, Hungary. The case of Szék is a very interesting one, because while its inhabitants used to migrate to Hungary before 1989, today the process of migration and those who are migrating has changed. Earlier, it was men who migrated to work in construction companies, whilst nowadays women are the migrating actors who regularly work in 'domestic industry'. Moreover, we are speaking about a village where the most important and widespread occupation among women is domestic work in Budapest. As one interviewee has noted: 'it is sure that Budapest has put Szék on its feet. Since then [since the inhabitants of Szék have been working in Budapest] people have a totally different, a better life in Szék.' (K. K., 59 year old woman from Szék).

In my study I will approach this phenomenon within the paradigm of transnational migration, where migration is not a linear and a directional process from point A to B, but rather creates transnational social spaces where several locales and several actors are included. Many people are involved and not just those who travel regularly between different countries, or those who remain in their place of immigration and are just in permanent contact with their place of origin, but even those people who never move away from their place of origin¹. Scholars emphasize the fact that through the process of transnational migration, migrants create transnational social spaces, which have 'pluri local frames of reference', one frame being shaped by the norms of the host society, and the other one by the norms of the migrant's emissive societies².

The paper will also discuss the questions of gendered and ethnic migration. We know from Glick Schiller's article, 'Beyond Methodological Ethnicity' that ethnic groups as units of analysis are problematic because they do not deal with non-ethnic forms of societal

¹ Steve Vertovec, 'Super-diversity and its implications', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30 (6) (2007), 1024-1054

² Ibid.

organisations like familial, religious, economic and political networks of interaction. Equally important is that ethnic pathways co-exist with other forms of local and transnational incorporation³. In spite of this, or more correctly, next to this, ethnicity plays an important (but not exclusive) role in migration, in our case in choosing the country of destination. Those women who are migrating from Szék are Hungarian, so they speak Hungarian fluently. This is the first reason why their destination is Hungary, and more precisely Budapest. Of course physical proximity and direct bus connections (from Szék to Budapest) also play a crucial role in migration from Szék to Budapest.

In construing the phenomenon I will use seven interviews conducted in 2009 with women who are inhabitants of Szék and are returning migrants to Budapest, who are (or were at a certain point of their lives) ‘hired’ as domestic workers in Budapest. I do not consider this paper a complete analysis of the migration of women from Szék to Budapest, and I am aware of the fact that perhaps with more interviews the information collected could have been more sophisticated. Despite these limitations, I consider that even with this number of interviews we can deduce relevant information in relation to the studied phenomenon. The interviews were conducted by a colleague from Babes-Bolyai University, Ágota Zrinyi, and I.

It is known that Mary Douglas is the reason anthropologists study ‘in’ a certain village and never the village itself, I consider it necessary to introduce and describe the place of my study. I consider that ‘knowing’ the field always facilitates the deeper and easier understanding of the construed phenomena⁴. Szék is just one village in Transylvania that is inhabited by women who regularly travel to Budapest for work; however this is the village that has mostly ‘specialized’ on this type of migration of women to Budapest and this is why it would be pertinent to take a deeper look at the structure of the village.

³ Nina Glick Schiller ‘Beyond methodological Ethnicity and Towards the City Scale’, in *Rethinking Transnationalism: The Meso-link of Organizations*, ed. L. Pries (London: Routledge, 2008), 40-6

⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1992)

Szék/ Sic

Szék/Sic is a village/parish 45 km away from Cluj Napoca, in the center of Transylvania, Romania. According to the official data of the 2002 census, the village is inhabited by people of Romanian (4.8%), Hungarian (94.7%) and Roma (0.5%) origin.

1. *Table. Ethnic Composition of Szék*

| | | |
|-----------|------|--------|
| Romanian | 152 | 4,76% |
| Hungarian | 3021 | 94,73% |
| Roma | 16 | 0,51% |
| | 3189 | 100% |

(2002 Official Census)

Due to its vivid popular customs, dances and still worn costumes the village has been ‘discovered’ by Hungarian ethnographers and was ‘made’ a famous ethnographic and cultural center. A reader may question the relevance of this information in relation to transnational migration but several aspects of these statistics and features are relevant to this study. First, ties with individuals from the latter destinies of migration were established through ethnographic ‘connections’ because women from Szék started to work for families that were part of the ethnographers’ network. As one woman recounts:

‘Hoppál Mihály, the ethnographer was our first acquaintance. He was here to carry out research and produce a documentary about customs in Szék. Later on he invited us [a smaller group of people from Szék] to a trip to Hungary, when he screened the documentary for us too. Then we got in touch with a family with whom we stay in contact even now. Since that year either I or my daughter –in- law goes every year on 15 March [national holiday of Hungary] and cooks stuffed cabbage and other Transylvanian food for the festivities. The same ethnographer came 20 years later to the village and made another documentary, about baptism this time. Through this we made other acquaintances. [...] We have a large acquaintanceship there [in Hungary].’
(K. K., 59 year old woman from Szék)

I wanted to find out the year in which Hoppál Mihály first carried out research in Szék. Online documentation shows that it was in 1968, so as evidence suggests, migration from Szék to Budapest started after 1968⁵.

We are dealing thus with an ethnic Hungarian community with 94.7% of inhabitants being Hungarian. Does this allow us to speak about ethnic migration? As mentioned above whilst referring to ‘Beyond Methodological Ethnicity’, ethnical groups as units of analysis are problematic because they do not take into consideration ethnic organisations as familial, religious, economic and political networks. In our case it seems, that many of these other forms of societal organization are realized on an ethnic dimension as well. Mixed marriages are very rare in Szék (nobody from our interviewees was married to a person of another ethnicity than Hungarian), their religion is a reformed Protestantism to which only Hungarian people belong to in this region. Naturally economic networks are more diversified. So we can affirm that ethnicity plays a very important role in migration, not because of cultural abstractions but because of the knowledge of the Hungarian language. This facilitates the communication between migrant women, their employers and the whole host society – if these women didn’t speak Hungarian, they wouldn’t go to Hungary:

‘Hungary was near and we could go there. Because we used to go there to sell even before the revolution [before 1989] and because of the language... if we didn’t learn any language where could we have gone further?’ (B. Zs. 55 year old woman)

Equally important to ethnicity (and knowledge of the Hungarian language) is the class position of these women. They all had lower positions in society before starting to go to Budapest. They have worked in agriculture, collective farms, and shops and have worked as seamstresses or were housewives. Thus, migration for them was an opportunity for upward mobility. And when I use the term upward mobility- I am not referring to their work in the host society. I refer to their position and to the position of their families in their home society, which is renegotiated through the migration of these women as we shall discuss below. We have seen that these women have similar backgrounds, but still, when describing the

⁵ ‘Hungarian Ethnography’ VII. Folklore 3. Popular Custom, Popular Belief and Popular Religiosity. Accessed: 12 10 2010 <<http://mek.niif.hu/02100/02152/html/07/327.html#page7-471>>

‘migrating community’ we should not make the mistake of using ‘container theories’ because the group we are speaking about even though similar are not a homogenized entity⁶. Their ethnicity is just one of the ‘parameters’ (naturally, an important one) which are combined with different labour experiences, age profiles, and patterns of special distribution, but all of these women have the same labour rights and access to services⁷. From the interplay of these variables is born what Vertovec calls ‘super-diversity’. When mapping the reasons as to why these women choose this migrating lifestyle, we cannot leave aside the phenomenon of globalization (the special widening of social spaces), and global capitalism which has brought more insecurity into the lives of these families.

Although I operate with sensitive concepts (community, language, ethnicity) I wish to emphasize that I do not treat these terms as explanatory and homogeneous categories and I shall avoid overplaying their importance. Equally important, I handle the population I have studied as a community because it is a small group where people engage in face-to-face interactions with each other, and thus cannot be defined just as an ‘imagined community’⁸.

The migration process

It is very common for the inhabitants of Szék that the women from the village work in Hungary, typically in Budapest. They are usually ‘returning migrants’ who spend around one month in Budapest and one month at home. They never stay in Budapest for holidays and as one interviewee said ‘if something happens at home, they just call me and I take the bus and I am home in a night’ (A. S. 53 year old woman).

For villagers, working in Hungary has a long history, originating in the Ceausescu era (1965-1989). At that time, they were allowed to leave the country every second year and were only allowed to stay abroad for one week. After returning to the country they were obliged to

⁶ Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller ‘Transnational Perspectives on Migration: Conceptualizing Simultaneity,’ *International Migration Review*, 38.3 (2004), 1002-1039

⁷ Vertovec, ‘Super-diversity and its implications’

⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991)

give their passport to the authorities and got them back only after two years had elapsed since their last ‘trip’ – recalls a woman in Szék. When the borders were opened they originally went in groups, –some of them to families and some of them to sell their embroideries. They sold their pieces in underpasses and on the streets. This was later restricted and this is how many women started to work for families. Some women even found their first families whilst trying to sell their embroideries. There were people who stopped to chat with these ‘weird’ women wearing the typical black-and-red costumes marking them as street vendors.

The issue of popular costumes worn until recently (and even now by some women from Szék) is significant, because it was and still is a sign of their different identity. It highlights that these women do not want to assimilate to the mainstream society and maintain their way of being different through their clothes.

‘We have suffered so much for these clothes. Beginning with customs, where the custom officers have flung about our luggage after seeing our costumes.[...] Whoever wears this Széki dress has to know how to behave too. And where the costume goes, the behavior goes as well. It was law that those women who wore the Széki costumes were not allowed to drink alcohol, to smoke, to go to pubs and other debauched places.’ (B. Zs. 55 year old woman)

‘They have seen us on the tram, and they have seen our costumes too. So it happened that they started to yell at us that «you come here, you work cheap, you take our work and we don’t have anywhere to go to work». But in my opinion there are places everywhere to work; only one has to want to do that work. He/she could have done cleaning work, to do that work, what I have taken from him/her.’ (V. K. 55 year old woman)

Leela Gulati presents the dangers which usually can be and are faced by women working in ‘domestic industry’⁹. She highlights the fact that the situation of these women can be characterized by dependency and a high level of vulnerability; they are not protected by labour laws. Moreover their work is not considered physically demanding, so their personality

⁹ Leela Gulati, ‘Asian Women in International Migration: With Special Reference to Domestic Work and Entertainment’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32. 47 (Nov. 1997), 3029-3035

is seen to also be inferior¹⁰. Today those women who go from Szék to Budapest have a clear destiny already. They always have other ‘colleagues’ already in Budapest, who help the newcomer to find a family, more often several families, to work with. This shows how women are working already in a more secure environment and they are not exposed any more to the (potential) danger of unknown families. They go to an acquaintance of somebody they already know. Although they work illegally¹¹ without the protection of the law, compared to domestic workers in other situations they are relatively ‘safe’ because of the factors presented earlier. Compared for example with the conditions of women from Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and India as described by, but also in comparison with the migration of women in Southern Europe too¹². Thus, network and trust are very important concepts in the migration of women from Szék to Budapest.

Networking is important later on too, as Hondagneu-Sotelo states ‘domestic work is volatile’ so that one must be connected to a ‘living’ network from where one can obtain new information. She describes how Mexican undocumented immigrant women in the USA teach each other how to negotiate salaries and how to use different cleaners for example which women from Szék do too¹³. To address this we need to clarify at first the living ‘circumstances’ of migrant women from Szék in Budapest. It was observed from the interviews conducted that women from Szék usually live together in Budapest. They rent an apartment where in one room there are as many as six or seven women. Every woman has to pay her share of the rent even for those periods when she is not there. But nobody complains about that, it is worth it for them, even if they pay a little surplus money.

‘I can hardly wait to arrive «home» in the evening, after all I can talk «like that» [that familiar, using regionalisms] only to them; it feels like arriving home when I arrive among women from Szék. [...] I don’t care that we are sleeping in that room six or seven women, it doesn’t bother me, I love the company of all of them, I see all of them

¹⁰ Gulati, p. 3031

¹¹ We are speaking about that period as well when Romania was not an EU member state yet (before 2007) but even nowadays tax payment is required by the law in the country where one works.

¹² Floya, Anthias and Gabriella Lazaridis ed. *Gender and Migration in Southern Europe. Women on the Move*. (Oxford : Berg, 2000)

¹³ Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo ‘Regulating the Unregulated? Domestic Workers' Social Networks’, *Social Problems*, 41. 1, (1994), 50-64

alike. God didn't create that much difference between us that is exists now. This is what time brings... ' (K. K., 59 year old woman from Szék)

Exceptions from this flatmate-community are those women whose job in Budapest is not the cleaning of houses, but who take care of the elderly and who are usually 'live-in domestic residential workers'¹⁴. Taking care of older persons is considered among the villagers an easier task comparing with house cleaning (naturally, it depends on the mental and physical state of the person who requires the care). Those women who clean houses have loaded schedules. They work six days a week from morning until the evening for at different families, in different houses. They have free time only on Sunday. Then, most of them gather at the Pasaréti reformed church in Buda. This is the scene where they can interact with each other and repeatedly rebuild their unity even when they are 455 km away from their homes. Pasarét is the place where they can also discuss 'news' related to Szék. This is exactly another illustration of the ideas formulated by and of ideas which are organic parts of the transnational migration paradigm, highlighting the issue of living in one place (in the host society) but belonging to another one (to the home or sending society)¹⁵.

An important aspect of the migration of these woman, which ties their practice to the field of transnational migration is the fact, that it is 'migration from below', initialized by actors in civil society¹⁶. It is a self-initiated (facilitated by the community), self- financed project, performed by those actors who were relatively powerless in their own countries¹⁷. Through their migration women gained more autonomy and control over economic resources than in their country of origin. Furthermore, they become active participants in economic

¹⁴ Gulati, p. 3033

¹⁵ Alejandro Portes, 'Conclusion: Towards a New Model: the Origins and Effects of Transnational Activities', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22.4 (1999), 463-477

¹⁶ Alejandro Portes 'Introduction: The Debates and Significance of Immigrant Transnationalism', *Global Networks* 1.3, (2001), 181-194.

¹⁷ Eugenia Georges, 'Gender, Class and Migration in the Dominican Republic: Women's Experiences in a Transnational Community' in *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration*, ed. Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Blanc-Szanton. (New York: The New York Academy of Sciences, 1992), 81-99 (p. 83)

processes both in their country of origin and country of destination. Equally important is that this can happen only with strong familial support¹⁸.

‘My daughter- in- law cooks for my husband, for her husband and for her mother. So it is not a problem that I am not home and somebody is starving in the family. Until now we could divide things [tasks] at home very well. I don’t have to worry while I am out that I left home my family and somebody is starving, because they take care of everything very well.’ (V. K. 55 year old woman)

The impact of migration on Szék

Anthias argues that migration should be always seen in relation to three locales: the homeland, the country of destination and the local transnational migrant group¹⁹. I have already presented the country of destination, the life of the migrant community studied by us, their everyday difficulties and their will to remain non-integrated into the host society. What has remained is the analysis of the ‘home society’, the impact of permanent migration of these women on Szék.

I will repeat one idea formulated by one of our interviewees; which was presented at the beginning of my paper: ‘it is sure that Budapest has put Szék on its feet’ (K. K., 59 year old woman from Szék). What she has stated is visible in the whole village through its new and renewed big houses.

It is important to be aware that migration and emigration alone do not lead to economic development²⁰. The chain is needed: sending goods and money home. Remittance–use studies focus on how migrant remittances and savings are spent, and these studies show that most of the money goes for non-productive ends, for family maintenance, ‘increased consumption, education and better housing’²¹.

¹⁸ Anthias and Lazaridis, p. 25

¹⁹ Anthias and Lazaridis, p. 6

²⁰ Edward J. Taylor, Joaquín Arango, Hugo Graeme, Ali Kouaouci, Douglas Massey, Adela Pellegrino, ‘International Migration and Community Development’ *Population Index* 62. 3(1996), 397-418

²¹ Ibid.

‘I have a friend, she teaches Romanian, so I take my grand-daughter to her; Katica stays at her place two-three weeks and is taught to speak Romanian, but literary Romanian, not just Romanian from the street. So that, thank God, I am so glad. Because we are here after all, and the future is if we know all languages. It is good already if somebody speaks English too, not only Hungarian or Romanian.’ (K. K., 59 year old woman from Szék)

‘We are in the situation that everybody is buying unnecessary things. We already removed the glazed tiles from the walls because we need new ones. We change our carpets and curtains every two or three years, because my neighbours have bought new ones, so I need to change mine too. I won’t remain behind them, if it is possible I will reach before them – this is why we are going to work in Pest, it is not just for the basic livelihood anymore.’ (B. E. 48 year old woman from Szék)

Economic activities thus are not extended home, but people will get used to a lifestyle which cannot be sustained anymore without migration to Budapest.

Women not only ‘bring’ money home with them, but different tastes and different ways of arranging the house which they have seen in Budapest usually at wealthy families. They bring home new food recipes and new technical tools as well. In As social remittances women mention with concern ‘cold personal relations’ which they do not want to ‘learn’ in Budapest.

‘Budapest brought to Szék many crazes, and now the disaffection which was brought from there can be seen, one can feel it on somebody who returns after spending a long time there. It would be very good, if people were starting to work at Cluj Napoca, to not follow the custom which one sees in Budapest, that I do not know even my neighbor anymore.’ (B. Zs. 55 year old woman)

Transmission of this ‘migrating culture’ to children can be seen but only until the children who couldn’t have a good education are grown. Families already pay attention to the education of school age children and grandchildren, as we can see it from the interview about private lessons. Thus it is visible that the tendency for upward mobility in Szék will not be limited to migration into Budapest.

Final remarks

Domestic work in Budapest for women from Szék plays a very important role, and marks the whole image and lifestyle of the village. Women create transnational social spaces, where they are moving permanently, between Budapest and Szék.

Many people are involved and not just those who travel regularly between different countries, or those who remain in their place of immigration and are in permanent contact with their place of origin, but even those people who never move away from their place of origin²². Network and trust are very important concepts in the migration of women from Szék to Budapest. One has the chance to migrate because of her network, and is hired because of a trust which has become almost a 'categorical trust'. I dare to say that domestic workers from Szék, who clean houses or take care of the elderly have become almost a 'brand' in Budapest. Based on the interviews we can affirm that ethnicity is playing a very important role in migration, not because of cultural abstractions but because of the knowledge of the Hungarian language and the close proximity of Budapest to Szék. This facilitates the communication between migrant women, employers and the entire host society. We also can state that women 'bring' home with them not only money, but different tastes as well as different ways of arranging the house, which they have seen within the homes of wealthy Budapest families. They also bring home new food recipes and new technical tools. In social remittances women mention with concern 'cold personal relations' which they do not want to 'learn' in Budapest.

A further aspect to research in regards to the migration process presented in this study is how the positions of women are renegotiated and redefined within their families and toward their husbands. This aspect could not be elaborated because of lack of empirical material on this topic but it certainly would deserve further interviewing and field work.

²² Steve Vertovec, 'Trends and Impacts of Migrant Transnationalism Centre on Migration', *Policy and Society*, Working Paper No. 3, University of Oxford, WP-04-03 (2004)