

Digital Media and Hungarian American Women's Migration Narratives

Agnes Strickland-Pajtók

ABSTRACT: This article examines typical features of gendered memory through analyzing the narratives of those now elderly female refugees who left Hungary in 1956 or shortly after the Hungarian Revolution. The corpus for this analysis is provided by the short documentaries of the American-Hungarian online visual archive, *Memory Project*, produced by Réka Pigniczky and Andrea Lauer Rice. The in-depth interviews record and recount the experiences of those men and women who emigrated from Hungary to the United States in the late 1940s ('DP generation') or shortly after the Revolution of 1956 ('1956ers'). The novelty of this visual archive is that it uniquely offers new media as a tool for self-expression for a mature age-group for whom these facilities are often not as easily accessible. These interviews serve as evidence of digital storytelling that can facilitate elderly women in overcoming their customary muteness and finding a voice of their own.

KEYWORDS: oral history; digital storytelling; gender; women's studies; migration; Hungary; Hungarian Revolution of 1956; refugees

Introduction¹

The main aim of this article is to observe and scrutinize the typical features of gendered memory in the narratives of the generation born between the 1920s and 1940s. The corpus for this analysis consists of interviews from the *Hungarian American Visual History Archive, Memory Project*, produced and recorded by Réka Pigniczky and Andrea Lauer Rice. As the creators state, "*Memory Project* is their joint project to help document and record the personal stories of Hungarians who emigrated to the United States after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and as displaced persons after World War II."

The primary driving force behind investigating the digital archive is to draw attention to the narratives of those now elderly female refugees who left Hungary in or shortly after the Hungarian Revolution, analyze their stories and attempt to find answers to questions such as: what are the characteristics of feminine narratives? How do women overcome the shock of fleeing and establishing a new life in their host country? And: can digital media serve as a

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means to come to terms with past grievances for a more mature and emancipated generation of women? I will argue that these interviews serve as evidence that digital storytelling can enable elderly women in overcoming their customary muteness and finding a voice of their own.

The *Memory Project* archive currently displays one hundred and forty-one interviews on its website. As Lev Manovich indicates “[s]ince new media is created on computers, distributed via computers, stored and archived on computers, the logic of a computer can be expected to have significant influence on the traditional cultural logic of media” (63-64). In the case of the *Memory Project* the pervasive logic of the computer manifests itself in the mosaic-like structure of the site: the conversations are organized in three columns with only a portrait-like image, a name and ‘DP’ or ‘1956er’ inscription superimposed on them.²

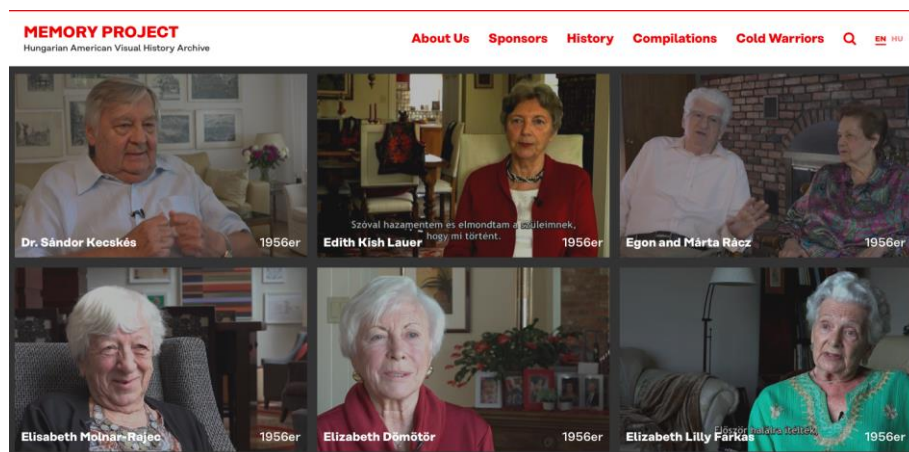


Fig. 1. Screenshot of web page of the *Memory Project*. 1 Dec. 2019. Copyright *Memory Project*.

The interviews are arranged in alphabetical order, hence, their juxtaposition is not thematic or chronological, but arbitrary and purely based on the interviewees' initials. The alphabetical order changes depending on language settings: in the English language version of the website the interviews are arranged by first names, while the Hungarian version

² The present article is confined to the 1956er narratives. This decision was motivated by the fact that those refugees who entered the United States as Displaced Persons in the 1940s and who were still able to participate in the Memory Project (from 2015 onwards) were children during the flight, or were born en route, hence, they do not possess memories about the military-political turmoil of their home country, the fleeing and the cultural shock of coming to terms with the constraints of the host country, which constitute the main focus of this article.

orders them by surnames. Hence, the stories of family members who share the same surname appear next to each other in the Hungarian version, and are placed separately in the English. Also, newly uploaded interviews often alter the order of the already published pieces. This fluid, malleable database-like structure shapes one's reading and interpretation: the appearance of new stories and new data prompts returning viewers to re-interpret the texts; they thus become active participants in the co-creation of the narrative. Viewers who embrace their role as co-creators are endowed with the joy of involvement and will gradually realize the correspondences between only seemingly unrelated stories: diligent viewers will detect that interviewees sometimes refer to each other's stories, and include shared experiences in their storylines. Avid viewers may gradually detect family ties between interviewees. Although the database is clearly structured and user-friendly, it only provides viewers with uninterpreted, raw material, whose meaning each viewer is left to decipher.

Background and Context

October 23, 1956 is an iconic date in Hungarian history, since it marks the day when the now legendary rise against the communist regime manifested itself in the form of actual fighting against the overpowering Soviet military force. Even though the Revolution was crushed twelve days later on November 4, it became an emblematic event in Hungarian and even world history. Since then, the Hungarian Revolution became a symbol of courage, civil comradeship, and uncorrupted resistance. The event had a lasting effect on the country's history, and its aftermath can be felt to this day. Historian Ignác Romsics believes that “[f]or all the predictability of its failure from the outset, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 proved to be a watershed in the country's post-World War II history. It forced Hungarians to take a more realistic stock of themselves and taught them that they would be unable to count on assistance from any quarter in their fight for independence” (311).

After the Revolution masses of people were forced into exile or decided to flee from the country where they felt their safety and future were not guaranteed. “In the wake of defeat, 200,000 Hungarians escaped to neighboring Austria and about 38,000 found haven in the United States” (Pastor 197), where the “absorption of the refugees through a well-organized

governmental program proved to be speedy and successful” (Pastor 197). The importance of refugees and hence their narratives are significant, since even “[t]oday, Hungarian politics continue to be influenced by the 200,000 Hungarians who left after 1956 and formed a huge global diaspora of political migrants” (Passerini et al.).

This article specifically focuses on the reminiscences of refugees who left Hungary in 1956, yet, its scope has deliberately been limited to expose the narratives of fleeing and the gendered experiences of transculturality. Therefore, it neither seeks to explore the significance of 1956 in Hungarian and world history, nor to search for historical aptness and reliability in the interviews. 1956 is rather regarded as a significant date which—for the interviewees of the *Memory Project*—signals the turning point for when they left their home-country, and also serves as a common reference point which plays an essential part in their self-definition.

Recollecting the events of 1956 also demonstrates the difficulties a nation can face in the process of reconciling with its history. As the political climate is changing we continuously reassess our relationship to the past, including our relationship to the legacy of 1956. As Raymond Williams noted in *The Analysis of Culture*: “the existing state of the selective tradition—establishing new lines with the past, breaking or re-drawing existing lines—is a radical kind of *contemporary* change” (56). It seems that it is inevitable that the evaluation of past events can only happen from the vantage point of the present, since “people may consciously or unconsciously mold the memory to today’s situation” (Conway). The burden of facing and re-evaluating the historical events of the second half of the twentieth century is still pressing, unfinished and contradictory in Hungary. After the political change in 1989 the participation in the anti-communist Hungarian Revolution of 1956, which was previously viewed as condemnable, became a revered effort. One of the side effects of this shift in historical perspective was that it opened the possibility for private stories to emerge and be collected, since 1956 is recent enough to rely on the narratives of the survivors, and controversial enough to utilize the polyphony of subjective individual testimonies. The *Memory Project* presents the stories of both men and women, who are sometimes interviewed in pairs. Since the aim is to shed light on feminine aspects of storytelling I have mostly concentrated on women’s narratives. Yet, to be able to highlight the features of

gendered memory, in those cases when couples were interviewed together, I also included the male voice.

Oral history narratives display a unique account of the past: they not only complement mainstream history but also re-create it. Yet, it is undeniable that the characteristics of oral history include the blending of present and past, and truth and facts with myths and unreliable memories. As Paul Ricoeur noted regarding the unreliability of individual memories: “[t]he constant danger of confusing, remembering and imagining, resulting from memories becoming images this way, affects the goal of faithfulness corresponding to the truth claim of memory” (7). This thought might make our scrutiny seem futile and vague: the task of reconciling and synthesizing endlessly polyphonic narratives and facets of memory might seem daunting. Yet, we can get encouragement from Ricoeur’s own reassuring answer to this dilemma: “we have nothing better than memory to guarantee that something has taken place before we call to mind a memory to it” (7).

Oral history has become an established part of historical research as well as media studies. In this article I apply Mike Conway’s definition of oral history as “an empowering research method in media studies. “This definition—importantly—highlights the key shift in the application of oral history: while historical research uses the method as an inclusive record of the past “in other academic fields the process of remembering, including what people forget or how they reconstruct the past, has become just as important as the historical information itself” (Conway).

The phenomenon, which fueled the adaptation of a historical method into the realm of media studies was its gradual but unstoppable reliance on digital technology, which “has become an integral part of oral history” (Sheftel and Zembrzycki 111). This turn affected the core of the interview-making process and “increasingly steered the field away from its archival roots [...] to a broader presentational purpose “(Sheftel and Zembrzycki 99). Peter Kaufman even goes as far as stating that “[o]ral history, in a word, should become, quite naturally, video history.” (2)

The general traits of the *Memory Project* also underscore this tendency: apart from being a historical archive the creators clearly had the needs and expectations of a twenty-first century audience in mind. In turn, they have created a space which is engaging enough to attract viewers accustomed to the user-friendliness of present day websites. The *Memory Project* website is meticulously designed, operating with the contrasting colors of red and white which are also reminiscent of the Hungarian national flag and emblem; written texts and captions are carefully translated into both English and Hungarian, spoken word is often subtitled. Each interview is preceded by a 16-second opening credit sequence, which leaves viewers with the impression that they are watching a documentary rather than random strands of raw material. This feeling is enhanced by the fact that the talks are edited, the background is carefully set, and the interviewees are well lit. It seems that the producers Réka Pigniczky and Andrea Lauer Rice realized the new task of the oral historian described by Sheftel and Zembrzycki that in addition to documenting lives it is also necessary to make them accessible and engaging for people (98).

Women's Narratives

The digitally preserved interviews of the *Memory Project* provide the viewer with a unique glimpse of a similar experience from multiple angles. The most often recurring topics are: life in the home country (including accounts of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956); the perilous act of escaping; and the challenge to come to terms with the cultural-political-economic constraints of a new country. These three major themes usually take up similar weight and time in the interviews. Furthermore, the act of storytelling highlights the peculiarity and subjectivity of memory: in one's mind an action which lasted only a couple of days or even hours may be preserved in detail and depth comparable to the decades following it.

One of the characteristics of the verbalization of important events in one's life is the keen attention to detail, preserved in what Brown and Kulik labelled 'flashbulb memories.' The choice of the term is explained by drawing attention to the key features of these short but vivid memories, which—similarly to their metaphorical definition—also suggest “surprise, an indiscriminate illumination, and brevity” (Brown and Kulik 74). Even though the Revolution

and the flight afterwards took place about sixty years before the interviews were conducted and recorded, the descriptions still display flares of flashbulb memories. These are customarily minute accounts of key episodes, characterized by seemingly unimportant details. One example might be the accurate description of outfits worn on the day of departure.

In numerous narratives women describe the clothes they had been wearing on the day they embarked on the perilous journey of leaving their homes for good. Since most people left during the months after the Revolution of 1956 was crushed in November, they had to face the cruel frost of continental winters. Hence, warm coats proved to be vital: they could save lives. Yet, apart from its protective function, outerwear also highlighted the gravity of fleeing: most people wore their best, most valuable coats, which were normally reserved only for special celebratory occasions. One of the iconic sartorial descriptions is given by a woman called Ibolya Daróczy. She recollects that on the day of her departure she had a “beautiful dark blue coat, with matching gloves and yellow cap and yellow scarf on” (*Memory Project* 19:50-19:57).³ Or another woman, Nóra Szabó remembers the long deliberation with her mother and sister regarding who shall wear whose fur coat. According to her, opting for fur coats had a practical reason: their inside pockets provided women with a tiny space of their own where they could keep their essentials hidden and safe (*Memory Project* 49:30-49:50).

In many of these narratives coats even acquire a symbolic meaning of sharing, compassion, and friendship. In her touching recollection Cecília Rékay—who at the age of seventeen eloped alone—remembers a truck-driver woman who, in addition to driving her to the border, donated her own coat to the young girl; hence the coat became a symbol for civil solidarity and female comradeship: “[w]hen finally we got to the shelter [...] she gave me her coat and she said, now I’ll be all right, and now good luck to you” (*Memory Project* 16:53). Or

³ The interviews are alternately in English and Hungarian. Unless otherwise stated the Hungarian texts are translated into English by the author of this article. The original reads: “Úgy mentem, halál elegánsan felöltözve, egy gyönyörű sötétkék télikabátom volt, egy sárga kis kalapom, sárga gyönyörű sálam, hozzávaló kesztyű.”

as Ibolya Daróczy remembers, after successfully crossing the border to Austria and finding shelter with a local family, in the morning she found all her clothes, coat and shoes cleaned:

I arrived at a little village, I saw some light in one of the houses, and I knocked on the door, the people there were really kind. They let me in, gave me a room, and covered me with an enormous warm blanket—it was fantastic. In the morning they woke me up, bought me a ticket to Vienna. My shoes—which were covered with mud the night before—were beautifully cleaned, and all my clothes beautifully brushed. They gave me delicious breakfast, and packed food for me (*Memory Project* 22:00-22:30).⁴

This episode reminds the viewer of the value of selfless help and a welcoming, compassionate attitude to refugees. The empathetic and benevolent attitude of Austrian border villagers towards Hungarian refugees captured in this episode is referenced in almost every narrative.

Corporeality and bodily integrity, especially if discussed from a female point of view, is and has been a difficult topic in a patriarchal and male-dominated Hungarian culture. This is especially true in the case of any form of physical abuse, when the “silence has also been reinforced by practically all those involved, whether they be the perpetrators, rape victims, or witnesses as they all share the interest to keep what has happened silenced” (132)—as Andrea Pető indicated in her analysis of the untold stories of wartime sexual violence. Yet, customarily even less traumatic aspects of corporeality are also omitted from the recollections.

Descriptions of the body or bodily functions are scarce in the recollections of the *Memory Project*. The fact that the interviewees are elderly and that the norms of the 1950s both in Europe and the United States were even stricter than today explain this tendency. The influential research of Geert Hofstede of the six dimensions of national culture indicates that on a scale from masculinity to femininity both Hungary and the United States can be categorized as masculine: “gender roles are clearly distinct: men are supposed to be

⁴ The original reads: “Láttam, hogy egy pici faluhoz [értem], és egy helyen még égett a villany, és oda bekopogtam, és azok olyan aranyosak voltak, beengedtek, egy külön szobát adtak, és akkor dunnával takartak be, hogy valami fantasztikus. Reggel költöttek, megvették nekem a vonatjegyet, hogy menjek Bécsbe. A cipőm—csupa sár volt este—gyönyörűen ki volt tisztítva, a ruhám minden kikefélve gyönyörűen. Finom reggelit adtak és összekészítettek ennivalót.”

assertive, tough and focus on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender and concerned with the quality of life" (Hofstede). Hofstede's definition can be fitted into the discourse of feminist theory: in his description of masculine countries he captures the essence of dominantly patriarchal societies, which generally privilege hegemonic masculinity (Duvall 267), where female sexuality is under patriarchal control. (Duvall 267)

The rare instances when female bodily functions are not omitted in the reminiscences can be put into two categories: these are either traumatic experiences of sexual harassment, or they are related to the experience of being pregnant and giving birth during the flight. Since the interviews of the *Memory Project* were not recorded until the 2010s, many of the episodes had been told to others "a hundred times." (Attila Kaloz 38:05) This fact, had an impact on the narratives, since "[w]e tend to have stronger memories of events if we have told the story to others over the years or even just gone over it on our mind" (Conway). In this sense, the stories of the *Memory Project* have gone through processes of stylization, editorialization, and sometimes condensation before they were finally recorded on video. In an effort of making one's story cohere with one's re-fashioned identity, painful, embarrassing, and compromising memories are often deleted from the narrative. Traumatic experiences of sexual abuse are especially difficult to come to terms with. This might account for the fact that in the *Memory Project* there is only one specific instance, in which we hear about actual physical harassment. Erzsébet Dömötör eloped with her fiancé, but they arrived separately at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey (a refugee camp transformed from military barracks to house refugees from Hungary in 1956-57). The barracks housed men and women together, and Dömötör recalls with horror that in the dark of the night she could feel hands reaching towards her and touching her under the blanket: "When we got into Camp Kilmer, it was full of beds [...] I got a top bed, and at night one could feel strange hands touching you. Because you were a young girl. And there were older men, and here was a young woman, a young girl on her own" (*Memory Project* 15:41-16:00).⁵

⁵ The original reads: "Amikor Camp Kilmerbe értünk, hát az tele volt ágyakkal, [...] én kaptam a fölsőt egy helyen, és akkor néha éreztél idegen kezeket nyulkálni feléd. Mert fiatal lány voltál. És voltak idősebb,

It is striking that even though roughly 36,000 Hungarian refugees entered the United States through Camp Kilmer (Niessen 127), many of them solitary women, this is the only recollection of harassment. It can only be assumed that women chose to conceal such incidents. This reluctance is not exceptional but rather indicative of a universal tendency. Just as rape, any sort of sexual transgression was left hidden by muteness: “no one spoke publicly about the rapes committed against women—neither the victims themselves, the bureaucrats, the police, nor the perpetrators” (Pető 134).

The admission by a man that such transgressions took place would be incongruous with many women's—especially elderly—identities; yet, a fleeting glimpse of the male attitude towards the female body is provided by Erzsébet's husband, who comments on the fact that male refugees touched his fiancée at night. Instead of expressing dismay or condemning the other men's actions, he explains with a grin on his face that his wife was “teased” in Camp Kilmer. Retrospectively we cannot expect the interviewees to account for the norms of the twenty-first century, yet, through the perspective of Erzsébet's husband we can fathom the contemporary perception of the female body and the denial of female autonomy. In this world, the female body existed as a communal commodity where the boundaries were defined by men, and women's attitudes towards their bodies were defined by passivity. As Simone de Beauvoir noted in her seminal book, *The Second Sex*: “Woman is determined [...] by the manner in which her body and her relation to the world are modified through the action of others than herself” (734).

The multiple Beauvoir-references in this article are not accidental: apart from Beauvoir's obvious importance and relevance in feminist theory and philosophy, the age group we are examining also justifies it. *The Second Sex* was first published in 1949 and unveiled the morals, gender-norms of mid-century Europe. Beauvoir's definitions and everyday examples correspond to the concrete experiences of the female interviewees of the *Memory Project*. Even though Beauvoir's French perspective cannot be expected to show a one-to-one agreement with Hungarian gender divisions, it can still be regarded as a compass to show

meglett férfiak, és hát itt van egy fiatal nő, fiatal lány egyedül.”

the general attitude towards women in 1940s Europe, a decade when most interviewees as young girls were socialized and acquired the gender-related norms and attitudes of their society.

As suggested earlier, apart from harassment the other concrete discussion of the female body is related to pregnancy and maternity. The verbalization of bodily limits and functions is inevitable in this case, since “in maternity woman remained closely bound to her body” (Beauvoir 97). Pregnancy during fleeing paradoxically leads to two contradictory behavioral patterns: on the one hand, pregnant women seem to take risks more willingly, and on the other hand, they are often more passive and yield to the will of others who are in a more dominant position. In the examined narratives passivity and animation, instinctiveness and rationality, calmness and panic jointly and alternately define pregnant women’s behavior. These paradoxes are explained and synthesized by the mindset that during maternity the focus on one’s self often shifts to the yet unborn child, and physical safety is placed above anything else. If a woman feels that security is not guaranteed, she is willing to take risks. Yet, if—at least on a minimal level—security and stability are provided, pregnant women tend to be described by languor, focusing not on the synthesis of the big political-social events but rather on the closely-knit mosaic-like world of their nuclear family. Ibolya Daróczy’s aforementioned recollections prove this pattern. Being seven months pregnant she was not going to be allowed on the airplane from Munich to the United States. As she remembers: “A woman was running after me shouting that that woman with the big belly mustn’t go, she shouldn’t be allowed. I quickly sneaked into the airplane to be left alone. It can’t be that I’m returned from here”⁶ (*Memory Project* 39:20-39:32). On the other hand, later in the United States she handled the frustrations of the initial culture shock by focusing on the internal world of her home. For example, she confesses: “I was like a moron, only cared for the children” (*Memory Project* 44:54).⁷ This sentence reveals that for Ibolya caring

⁶ The original reads: “Rohant utánam egy nő, és ordított, hogy az a nő már ekkora pocival nem mehet, azt már nem lehet felengedni. S én meg gyorsan besurrantam a gépbe, hogy hallgasson már, hagyjon engem békén, még csak az kell, hogy innen szedjen engem vissza.”

⁷ The original reads: Annyira el voltam foglalva a gyerekekkel, [...] csak éltünk mint a hülyegyerek.”

for her children was as much of a burden as an escape: childcare placed an extra strain on her, yet those duties also changed her attitude. Through the semi-conscious decision to solely concentrate on the domestic sphere, she chose to only tackle micro-level problems and hence ignore the unresolvable existential hardships and the anxiety of the family's precarious future.

In terms of corporeal existence, there is another common point connecting the reminiscences: the prominence of the body, which paradoxically appears through its denial. For women who made the decision to flee on their own, their families often voiced their anxiety over the preservation of their decency. Many of these women tell that upon leaving, their mothers ardently tried to prevent their departure. If families reluctantly allowed their young women to leave, they had to promise to behave virtuously. Elizabeth Molnar-Rajec for instance shared the following memory: I "had to kneel down to kiss their hand and promise that I won't ruin the family" (*Memory Project* 36:50-37:10). This sentence aptly captures the gravity with which a girl's chastity was taken: it was considered a commodity of the whole family, and hence, the loss of it meant collective shame.

A unique depiction of the strict morality in Hungary in the 1950s also appears in Erzsébet Dömötör's accounts when she blurs the boundaries of the political and private spheres. When responding to a political-historical question 'what does 1956 mean to you?'⁸ she describes her life at home, hence, equating freedom from political dictatorship with liberation from her mother's regulations: "1956 meant liberation for me, at home I lived with my mother and sister who was a legal secretary, and I was only the younger sister. 'You're young, you don't know anything.' So, it was good to leave, I found myself, I got liberated, I am finally myself" (*Memory Project* 32:36-33:05).⁹

⁸ The original reads: "Neked személyesen mit jelent '56?"

⁹ The original reads: "Felszabadulás, megszabadulás, otthon anyámmal laktunk a nővéremmel, aki legal secretary volt, s én még csak a kis húgocska voltam állandóan, te csak a kis húgocska, te semmit sem tudsz. Így jó volt elmenni, hogy kijött a saját énem, úgy érzem, felszabadultam, (ön)magam vagyok."

Fleeing from a country, hence, can also mean freeing oneself from its social pressures, as Julia Kristeva notices: “the foreigner [...] remains that insolent person who, secretly or openly, first challenges the morality of his own country and then causes scandalous excesses in the host country” (30). Yet, in the narratives of Hungarian women the opposite is much more frequent. Even in the aforementioned interview, the fact that Erzsébet was relieved to leave her home, never translated into the loosening of morals or promiscuity. In these stories the emphasis is so strongly placed on the preservation of chastity and modesty that it conjures up the imminent and likely danger of moral falling.

Hungarian refugee women seem to be crucially aware of the dangers of being labelled as ‘foreign women’ by the host society; a stereotype, which often automatically comes with the misconception of sexual promiscuity. Instead of conforming to prejudices, the interviewed women tended to over-compensate this fear by giving the preservation of chastity utmost importance, not only while fleeing, but also when accommodating to the identity of the foreigner in the United States. During the phase of settling in and forming a new identity according to the rules of the new society, being modest and chaste (a good wife and a good mother) was a requirement in preserving a family’s reputation, but it also expanded to the idea that a woman’s good behavior is the token of the good reputation of her home country. When the refugee women conformed with the expectations of their old and new cultures in this way, this refuted the stereotypical image of the foreigner or Other, according to which “[t]earing oneself away from family, language, and country [...] is a daring action accompanied by sexual frenzy” (Kristeva 30). Women in the *Memory Project*, hence, were not freed from the moral constraints of their homeland, moreover, they felt they had to preserve and display impeccable conduct to be worthy ambassadors of Hungary.

Morality also seems to be ensured by choosing partners from the same culture: from the people interviewed the majority married a Hungarian. From the men, we often hear that even those who attended university or worked further away from a Hungarian community deliberately returned to towns with Hungarian networks with the purpose of marrying a woman from the diaspora. Formal and informal social institutions facilitated intramarriage by offering free-time activities (scout groups, balls, dances) for young Hungarians. The

motivation behind making marriage a conscious decision was the intent to preserve Hungarian culture (and as often referred to 'blood') and avoid mixing it with other cultural influences, which became a moral and also political mission of Hungarian American refugees.

Despite the intention to create an intact and alternative reality within American society defined by Hungarian norms and culture, the effects of daily exposure to an American context could not be avoided and often resulted in a bi-cultural existence. Since the interviewed women spent a considerable amount of their time in at least two cultures they experienced more sets of social norms and systems than American women. Even though—as stated above—both Hungary and the United States have been dominantly patriarchal countries, gender roles were defined differently.

Russian-rooted communism spread the utopia of equality both in terms of class and in terms of gender. In post-war Hungary this idea was realized in the slightly distorted form, that “the paternal state of the socialist era on the one hand looked after its daughters as a caring father and regarded women as equals in official discourse. On the other hand, the state often ignored women when making decisions”¹⁰ (Tóth 9). In communist Hungary—by law—every woman was forced to work, which typically did not liberate them, and rather put an extra burden on them in addition to looking after their children and household. A wide range of jobs were deemed suitable for women, including typically masculine work: in the 1950s—to prove the possibility of socialist emancipation—women were employed as tractorists or machinists, yet, more feminine physical work was more revered, and working in the textile industry became the typical and most often chosen career path (Tóth 62).

After having fled from Hungary and trying to adapt to the rules of American society, some women welcomed the fact that they were alleviated from the pressure of mandatory work, since in a more masculine American society it was only men, “who [were] expected to aspire to career advancement” (Hofstede). For instance, one woman (Judit Gajáry) celebrated the

¹⁰ The original reads: “[A] szocialista időszak paternalista állama egyrészt jó apaként gondoskodott leányairól, de a nőket látszólag egyenrangú felekként kezelték a hivatalos diskurzusban. Másrészt az állam valójában sokszor a nők feje fölött döntött.”

opportunity that she could stay at home and raise her children for 17 years, which in Hungary would have met social and even political disapproval at the time. Some others, on the other hand, feel that they had to make amends to provide healthy and proper living standards for their children: an interviewee (Erzsébet Dömötör) quit her job as a kindergarten teacher and became a maid for a more affluent family. Since she did not have a garden she thought it beneficial for her children to be able to spend the afternoon in the employers' courtyard. Or another woman (Judith Korbuly) explains that her career choice was affected by the constraints of her family: she became an estate agent to be able to work flexible hours and be able to look after her children. This occupation proved to be popular for refugee women, for whom the lack of a family networks and help made it necessary to balance and harmonize family life, career, and finances. The lack of help and raising children in a nuclear family is especially conspicuous in comparison to the traditional Hungarian family-model where (to this day) grandparents—especially grandmothers—play a significant part in raising grandchildren: “Data from the 1960s shows that grandmothers helped their working-mother daughters an average 4.5 hours a day” (Gyarmati 33).¹¹

Nevertheless, there are numerous accounts where women were able to realize their ambitions due to the American social-educational system. Some women received scholarships to universities, and that combined with diligence and perseverance bore success. For instance, Elizabeth Molnar-Rajec became the head librarian of City College of the City University of New York; Julianna Adler Csongor received a Presidential Award in 1991 for teaching mathematics; Nóra Szabó established herself as an abstract expressionist painter; and Erzsébet Lily Farkas became head librarian of physics at Harvard University.

The analyzed testimonies are also invaluable in capturing the essence of the women's hybrid identities: this does not mean that elements of certain cultures are juxtaposed, it is rather an inseparable mixture of various subcultures, which can bring forth the feeling of isolation and homelessness, but also—and mostly in the case of the women of the *Memory Project*—the

¹¹ The original reads: “A 60-as években a legnagyobb háztartási segítséget a családoknak a nagymamák nyújtották: ez a kereső nők esetén átlagosan napi 4,5 órát jelentett.”

richness of transcultural identity formation as an inspiring process with many opportunities. Since the analyzed texts are from first-generation immigrants, these interviewees mostly (though not unanimously) identify as Hungarian. Nevertheless, they name the United States as their home country. The question of whether one can be American and Hungarian at the same time was answered affirmatively without exception. Among others the following responses were given: "Effortlessly" (Márta Rácz); "Absolutely" (Györgyi Böjtös); "I can" (Cecília Rékay); "It was the easiest thing, because of my background" (Elizabeth Molnar-Rajec). The latter interviewee also reminds the viewer of the multi-ethnic past and heritage of the now homogenous Hungary: "Being born in Czechoslovakia, being Hungarian and being very much influenced by my mother who was German, we've always had different identities. I am a Hungarian, don't forget that, [...] but I'm very international from the first day I was born" (*Memory Project* 54:22-54:55). The testimonies thus re-affirm the Homi Bhabhaian idea that transcultural existence "may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity" (38).

Technology

The topic of women and technology is a rather precarious one and is often automatically connected to gender inequality. In fact, the technical industry is a "heavily male-dominated sector" (Sheftel and Zembrzycki 110), where women are consistently underrepresented. One major aim of this article, however, is to explore whether the usage of technology has an impact on women's oral history narratives: firstly, by concentrating on the importance of technology during the women's flights from Hungary, and secondly by analyzing the impact of the digital platform of the *Memory Project*.

Information and knowledge transfer attain an even bigger importance amidst political, social, and military turmoil. In Soviet-ruled Hungary a free media did not exist, the news was heavily censored and centralized and free speech curbed. The only alleviation to this dictatorial media-world was the seminal, and now iconic, broadcaster Radio Free Europe (RFE), which "was created as an efficient western response to the circumstances of the cold

war” (Simándi 9)¹² by the anti-communist organization Committee for a Free Europe in the summer of 1949, whose “main and most prevalent aim was informing and liberating nations behind the iron curtain” (Simándi 22-23).¹³

The Hungarian program started its broadcast in October 1951 from Munich, Germany, and was in operation until October 1993. The main goal of RFE was to share international news with people behind the iron curtain: it was one of the first stations which broadcast news every hour, hence providing an up-to-date news service. RFE was run by former Hungarian émigrés, who promoted western political and cultural aesthetics and beliefs. However, on top of these self-evident functions, RFE filled a need, which has by now—due to the dominance of digital communication—vanished from institutionalized media: it enabled communication between Hungary-based citizens and those who had already left the country. One of the most popular programs was the Messages (Üzenetek) section, which proved to be one of the few means to get personal messages to those left behind in the home country. Communication happened through codes, to avoid retribution for those still in Hungary. This program was edited by Katalin Hunyadi, the radio’s only female editor.

Hanna Arendt noted in her seminal *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that information which manages to leak through the iron curtain “is a greater menace to totalitarian domination than counterpropaganda has been to totalitarian movements” (392). This was the very feature that made RFE a threat to the communist regime. Even though listening to RFE was defined as an illegal act, it attracted a wide audience in Hungary for being the only reliable source of international news. This is underlined by the interviews under analysis: many subjects mention that they were “devouring” every word from the radio.

RFE also proved to be vital during their flights: it was the source through which refugees could send messages home, and also those who lost touch with each other could find each

¹² The original reads: “hidegháborús körülmények egyik hathatós nyugati vállalkozásaként jött létre a Szabad Európa Rádió (SZER)” (9).

¹³ The original reads: “Az alapvető cél—a vasfüggöny mögötti rab népek felszabadítása—azonban mindvégig megmaradt” (22-23).

other through the wavelength of RFE. These short messages often capture condensed tragedies. For instance:

“Red flower to Győr: I crossed that day. Kisses to my parents! My wife shall follow me, even though it will be more difficult. Bluebonnet.”¹⁴ ([Szabad Európa Rádió](#))

Or:

“Lali form Tatabánya to Vera, he is well. When circumstances allow, I'll write. Sorry for not being able to say goodbye! Be good and patient! Wait for me!”¹⁵ ([Szabad Európa Rádió](#))

When the topic of technical devices and advancements are discussed one expects that the realm of technology—along with the aforementioned corporeality—is typically reserved for men, as Beauvoir also noted: “we shall hold that the body, the sexual life, and the resources of technology exist concretely for man only in so far as he grasps them in the total perspective of his existence” (55).

Even though female interviewees were not expected to operate the digital technology needed for recording themselves, they often questioned their worthiness and their right of appearing via the platform of new media; hence, their interviews tend to be shorter than those of their male counterparts'. Women often expressed doubt regarding the importance of their stories and heeded male narratives, which they considered superior to their own experiences (often saying ‘you should rather listen to my husband’), and expressed reluctance to participate in the project. Yet, by recording and digitally sharing their memories a very important facet of history is preserved: a narrative which does not necessarily contradict mainstream, male storylines, but one which complements it and directs attention to the fact that history is a texture of interwoven threads, which looks different based on which side of it one observes.

¹⁴ The original reads: “Piros virág jelige üzen Győrbe: aznap átjöttem. Szüleimnek kézcsók! Feleségem jöjjön utánam, bár már nehezebb lesz. Búzavirág.” 1956. november 10.

¹⁵ The original reads: “A tatabányai Lali üzen [...] Verának, jól van. Ahogy a körülmények megengedik, írni fogok. Bocsásd meg, hogy nem tudtam tőled elbúcsúzni! Légy jó és türelmes! Várj!” 1956. november 11.

This polyphony is further facilitated by the endless capacities of digital media. As Lev Manovich states, “the key operations behind all computer programs [...] influence the cultural layer of new media: its organization, its emerging genres, its contents” (64). The *Memory Project* is also free of time and space restrictions many analogue forms of media still have. Even though there is a time limit of 60 minutes set for the interviewees, they often exceed these, which is usually due to the interviewers' leniency. For example, when the interviewees (women especially) apologize for being verbose and running out of the allocated time they get the interviewers reassuring approval:

EVA KISS (being indicated that 10 minutes are left from the interview.) 10 minutes, oh my God, then, then....

ANDREA LAUER RICE: It's OK, [...] you can talk about the escape. It's OK.

(*Memory Project* 49:30-49:40)

The *Memory Project* is not a finalized archive, but an ever expanding, developing endeavor: new interviews occur, descriptions are added, Hungarian-English and English-Hungarian subtitles and translations are made. Even though this non-interactive archive might appear basic, it still employs and harnesses the database as “a new symbolic form of a computer age” (Manovich 194), and creates a unique platform where “a database can support a narrative” (Manovich 201). Hence, via digital storytelling women, who tended to be voiceless through history eventually gain a voice and cease to be mute.

This finding is backed by the theory of Gayatri Spivak, who in her seminal book *Can the Subaltern Speak?* alerts us to the fact that western narratives tend to forget the particular, subjective constitution of their subject, and regard it as a universal being, whose “concealed Subject pretends it has ‘no geo-political determinations’” (66). Once the subject is indefinite her desires become vague and blend with the desires of the majority. When specific political actions are narrated, desires and aims are clearly stated. But, the subject of this desire is often vague. In patriarchal narratives goals are often described as unanimous desires of the entire community. However, “when the connection between desire and the subject is taken as irrelevant or merely reversed, the subject-effect that surreptitiously emerges is much like the generalized ideological subject of the theorist. [...] It is certainly not the desiring subject as Other” (Spivak 68). One might find it unusual that the *Memory Project* does not offer the

option to comment, and hence harness the interactive nature of digital media. Yet, paradoxically even though we regard “interactivity as one of the great benefits of Internet dissemination, but this very feature can threaten the integrity of our interviews” (Sheftel and Zembrzycki 106). Therefore, in its current form as a read-only web-archive whose content can be modified only by the producers, it has the capacity to preserve and guarantee the intactness of its subjects, who acquire an uninterrupted voice. Representation of women on the website happens via providing a platform to let women have their voices heard, and not as “representation as ‘re-presentation,’ as in art or philosophy” (Spivak 70).

Conclusion

It might be idealistic to assume that digital storytelling has the capacity to dissolve the traditional muteness of the subaltern; yet, we can still have faith in that the open platform of digital media—if used wisely—can facilitate them in their effort to obtain an independent and authentic voice, as it did in the case of the *Memory Project* visual archive. Andrea Petó describes three ways in which internet-based archives could be used against silencing. One of these is showcasing the experiences of contemporaries as witnesses, victims, and perpetrators (137). The *Memory Project* is an example of this objective: the database can contribute to breaking the silence and making untold stories heard. This is especially crucial from a gender point of view. As “[w]omen do not have a common history, religion, language, or culture apart from men” (Duvall 268), and their stories are often omitted from mainstream historical narratives, it is especially important to encourage these unheard, suppressed voices. Digitally broadcast oral history can contribute to establishing a female storyline, hence the creation of a female history, a tradition which we have been lacking, and which could question the existence of a single hegemonic truth.

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