

Home objects: Picture album of the material culture of immigrants in Hungary

Most of us can remember a situation where, getting ready for a major trip, we stood there in the middle of the room the day before departure, staring at our open suitcase or backpack, unpacking and repacking over and over again, all the while growing more and more agitated as we tried to decide what to take with us and what to leave behind. It is in moments like these that we sometimes take just a little more time than usual to consider what the objects around us really mean to us, why it would be important to take this or that with us, what would happen to us if we didn't, whether we could find something to take its place somewhere else. In such a situation, we might also consider whether we should behave rationally and practically, or rather prepare ourselves for the moment when we are suddenly overcome with homesickness for our friends and relatives, or for the tastes, smells, sounds, and atmosphere we have left behind – what would make us feel "at home" in a foreign environment.

Sometimes in life, however, people find themselves leaving home for extended periods, not knowing when – or if – they will be back. The reasons behind such situations vary greatly: marriage, school, a new job, the promise of better economic circumstances, forced flight, voluntary exile, adventure, or any of a number of other things. But whatever the reason, the necessity of packing – the reality of knowing that there are things that will be left behind – remains.

Between 2011 and 2014, the Museum of Ethnography conducted a research project entitled *The Material Culture of Immigrant Groups in Budapest* under the auspices of the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund

(Országos Tudományos Kutatási Alapprogramok, or OTKA). From the methodological standpoint, this fieldwork-based cultural anthropological study departed from the premise that new perspectives on the lives of immigrants could be obtained by uniting two approaches: one that focused on the individual, and one that examined his or her personal material culture. By analysing the relationships between immigrants and the things they held important, we hoped to obtain useful information on such aspects of their lives as integration strategies, the nature of relations with their distant homes, transnational ties and the need to recreate the home environment, the relationship between tangible things and memory, and even the discourse on sameness and otherness that objects embody. The findings of this study were published as part of the Tabula series in a volume entitled *Migrating Objects*, released at the same time as the present publication.

From the time our research plan was drafted, we were adamant that the MaDok series should include a publication that transcended the boundaries of the genre. Specifically, we wanted to present the unique relationships – the dialogue – between Budapest immigrants and their things through as many personal stories as possible. For this reason, the authors of the present volume asked each of their interviewees to select an object he or she thought was important, one brought to Hungary as a personal possession, and tell them its story. Interestingly, some people found that it was only possible to express themselves through several objects at once, while in other cases, a single object elicited a multitude of experiences, feelings, desires, and longings. The

stories of these objects became narratives of separation, of encountering foreign people and things, of recreating the home atmosphere, of remembering, or of the road travelled – some short, some long; some distancing, others heavily infused with emotion.

Most of the interviewees were people we had encountered in the course of our fieldwork whose trust we had already gained. These individuals were joined by friends and acquaintances from their immediate vicinity whose lives we thought were particularly interesting and who were willing to share their stories with us. In selecting individuals for the project, we defined "immigrant" broadly to apply to any individual born abroad who was not of Hungarian descent and who had been living in Hungary for more than a year. Similarly, we did not restrict participation based on the reasons for, time of, or manner of migration, or on the ethnicity, religion, or home nation of the immigrant. Thus, the range of interviewees included an Afghan boy who arrived here with the help of human smugglers, an Iraqi woman living as a political refugee, Russian and Bulgarian women who married Hungarian men and have lived here for decades, and individuals – Indian and Turkish restaurant owners, a Bolivian merchant – who moved to Hungary in pursuit of economic prosperity.

Interview sites varied depending on the relationship between researcher and interviewee or the decision of the latter. In some cases, the meeting took place in the subject's home, where the lengthy conversation gradually refashioned itself into a hospitable visit, permitting the host to offer a homier atmosphere and reveal more of his or her personal identity. Others were interviewed in their shops, at some chosen location in town, or in the museum itself. The conversations were held in Hungarian, the mother tongue of the immigrant, or some third, intermediate language. Some interviewees chose to write down their stories themselves, while others did so with the help of an acquaintance.

As a rule, the researchers respected the principle that people should only share as much as they wished, though no limits were imposed on what or how much they could say. In some cases, subjects did little more than recount a particular period in the life of their chosen object, while others placed their stories within a broader personal historical context. Thus, the stories and confessions contained in this volume are not of identical length or depth, though we believe each one conveys something unique regarding the peculiar relationship between object and person. This applies to the volume's photographic

material, as well. In some of the cases where discussions were held in people's homes, our photoanthropologist (also the photographic editor of this booklet) was able to capture the members of the household in their broader material environments, and sometimes even to witness additional events. In other cases, such opportunities were more limited. Some people illustrated their narratives with photographs from their own family collections, while others wished to remain out of the spotlight, recounting only the stories of the objects they had selected.

The stories of lives and things recorded by each researcher were arranged into successive chapters. No immutable rules were set for either how material should be reported, or regarding scope or specific content. Some researchers edited the stories of their subjects' lives based on information gleaned from interviews and conversations, while reporting the stories of the interviewee's possessions verbatim. Other researchers found the life stories they had heard so exciting and enjoyable, they chose to leave the teller's phrasing intact, while relating the stories of the individual's objects in their own words. As interviewees were also given the opportunity of expressing themselves in writing, throughout the volume, the texts of various individuals are distinguished from one another by typographical means. Finally, by common decision, in the last chapter, the researchers themselves speak up and tell their own stories of objects that are important to them.

Thus, this volume is a tapestry of stories of people and their things, told on a variety of scales. It is an experiment in understanding the relationship between people and objects in a typical life situation in such a way, that the information can later be interpreted, systematised, and presented in the museum setting.

If here and there a reader is also touched by these stories (as our researchers sometimes were), then we can learn from them in another way, as well – because at any time, it could be any one of us standing in the middle of that room with the suitcase or backpack, any one of us who becomes the "immigrant". At the same time, this volume might help us to know and understand better the immigrants who live among us, trying to create for themselves the appearance, or the comfort, of home. Either way, we can only be the richer for it.



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