

PhD Dissertation Theses

**HUNGARIANS IN CLEVELAND
1951-2011: THEN AND NOW**

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Subject and aims of dissertation

This dissertation attempts to break new ground and shed light on previously unexplored areas of research among Cleveland Hungarians. The state of Hungarians in Cleveland in 2011 is that of a shrinking yet still vibrant and patriotic community with extended roots, a community that continues to maintain its Hungarian language and traditions.

Indeed, some Cleveland Hungarian traditions date back over a hundred years, brought with immigrants from the Carpathian basin and maintained through several succeeding generations, passed on from grandparent and parent throughout the last and current century, whether in folkwear or in customs. The Hungarians living in Cleveland today are also a thriving community, much as Hungarian villages in Hungary and its surrounding countries. The purpose of my research is not only to document their current culture, values, and traditions, but also to analyze how and why these traditions perpetuate the community and slow their assimilation.

The dissertation achieves this goal by addressing the question of vibrancy in sketching contemporary Hungarian communities in Cleveland, but also conducts a literary explication of several local and visiting authors, as well as giving an overview of Hungarian newspaper, periodical, and book publishing in Cleveland. It delves into a language use case study to disclose the factors impacting language maintenance in the community. Finally, the dissertation details the level of patriotism among Cleveland's Hungarians by noting their public monuments and examining their service in the U.S. military using primary sources and oral histories.

Research methodology

Ethnographers and folk-musicologists have long studied Hungarian communities in and near the Carpathian basin. Recent scholars such as Gábor Tarján, Ágnes Fülemile, and Balázs Balogh have lived in Hungarian-American communities and documented their ethnographic and folk traditions. Hungarian immigrants to Cleveland are not homogenous, since they came from many different enclaves in Hungary and the Carpathian Basin. Furthermore, they revived certain Hungarian folk and cultural

traditions, often relearning them from books, and over time passed these traditions on to each successive generation. This dissertation uses a similar ethnographic methodology and tries to discern a similar pattern among Hungarian-Americans, specifically those living in Cleveland, as a distinct ethnographic group.

My methodology is qualitative, comparative, and interdisciplinary to provide the academic scholar familiarity with what it is like and what it means to be Hungarian in Cleveland. Research entailed mostly primary sources and personal interviews, with the use of some secondary sources. The research was carried out mostly from 2008 to 2012, but I have been drawing on insights and personal contacts gained from 42 years of living in Cleveland and taking an active part in its ethnic Hungarian community. My research attempts to show the state of Cleveland's Hungarian community in 2011, comparing it to what it was like in 1951. While the dissertation's purpose is to show the state of Hungarians in Cleveland in 2011, slightly disparate methods of research are used in each of the topics of interest. Thus each chapter has a somewhat different focus and uses varying methodologies.

The second chapter addresses the vibrancy of Cleveland's Hungarian community, beginning with a snapshot of life in 1951 to compare to today, showing neighborhoods, churches, organizations, businesses, and major community events. The community has been constantly shrinking due to assimilation and to Hungarians moving away from Cleveland. The second chapter briefly traces the demise of several organizations active in the Hungarian community, with a case study of the closing of St. Emeric church in 2010, which attracted international media attention. Most of the chapter, however, addresses the current state of Cleveland's Hungarian community, including its churches, secular organizations, and ongoing or galvanizing events. The chapter develops a new way of ascertaining the Hungarian population, going beyond traditional census figures and delving into funeral and mailing list statistics. My methodology was simple: I asked the presidents of the organizations for their membership or mailing lists, with addresses redacted, but with family names and cities/zip codes delineated so I could differentiate among the many Kovacs and Horvath and Takacs and other popular family names. I promised each organization confidentiality, and that I would destroy the lists after my research. Mostly primary and some secondary sources are used for the second chapter to demonstrate the vibrancy of Hungarian communities in Cleveland.

The third chapter addresses the literature produced by Cleveland's Hungarians, i.e., what they read and what they published. It begins with an

overview of the Hungarian newspapers published in Cleveland in 1951, then continues with primary research about book publishing in the Hungarian language in Cleveland. Most studies of Cleveland Hungarians have focused on churches and social organizations, but not much to date has been written of literary publishing; this dissertation attempts to fill that void. In methodology I have elected to follow a geographical rather than thematic organization, to allow future researchers to more easily find collections of Hungarian literature and periodicals published in Cleveland. The chapter also includes a case study and literary explication of the Cleveland Hungarian writers István Eszterhás, as well as literary summaries of local scholar Ferenc Somogyi and émigré author Áron Gábor, a recurring visitor who shared many of the values of Hungarians in Cleveland. Finally, the chapter provides an overview of the last two conferences of the Hungarian Association, proceedings of which were published in 2011, to give an insight as to the scholarly themes of contemporary Hungarians in Cleveland.

The fourth chapter introduces the various ways in which Cleveland's Hungarian community maintains its Hungarian language, specifically showing the factors that impact Hungarian language maintenance and use. Qualitative research is well accepted in the fields of sociolinguistics and ethnography to get at substantive reasons for cultural and language maintenance. Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, Andrea Fontana and James H. Frey, and James P. Spradley have all traced the importance, and accepted methodology, of interviewing and case studies to elicit insights not normally available using quantitative methods of research. Mónika Fodor has applied these methodologies specifically to Hungarian-Americans and the narratives they construct about their cultural identity, and I drew heavily on her work in constructing my research methodology. The chapter begins with an explanation of my specific approach and gives a brief overview of the study participants. Nine in-depth interviews were conducted with a variety of second and third generation members of Cleveland's Hungarian community to ascertain the factors impacting their language use in the family and in the community.

The fifth chapter addresses the patriotism of Cleveland's Hungarian community. First of all, it displays the values of Hungarians in Cleveland vis-à-vis their Hungarian ancestry and heritage as evidenced by the Hungarian statues, gardens, and memorials they have placed and dedicated through the years. Next, it traces their relationship to their adopted and/or native country from the perspective of their U.S. military service, looking at Cold War historical events through the personal life stories of hundreds of Cleveland

Hungarians. One section is devoted to the 1950's and the Korean war, and another to the Vietnam war. The patriotism of the community is also indicated by the volunteers who continued to serve through the end of the Cold War and into today's conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as by those Cleveland Hungarians who served in the U.S. military for over twenty years. Interspersed throughout the chapter is the motivation of the interviewees, i.e. how much influence Cleveland's Hungarian community had on their decision to join the U.S. military. The bulk of this chapter is my own primary historical research. Because it entails military history, I chose to use oral histories to collect data and shed light on world events from individual standpoints.

These methodologies, although differing in focus, all serve to show the state of Hungarians in Cleveland, while at the same time unearthing the extended roots of the community, especially the impact of the DP generation.

Results and conclusions

The state of Hungarians in Cleveland in 2011 is that of a shrinking yet still vibrant and patriotic community with extended roots significantly shaped by the DP generation, a community that continues to maintain its Hungarian language and traditions. The first chapter of this dissertation surveyed scholarship on Hungarian-Americans in general and on Cleveland Hungarians in particular. It gave a theoretical overview of Hungarian ethnography and Alba, Nee, Attila Z. Papp, Bressler, Urban, Orbe, Böjtös, and Fry's theories and outlined my research methodologies. Finally, it gave an overview of major waves of immigration to Cleveland, starting with those after 1848, then those of the Dualist period, the Displaced Persons (DP) wave, those fleeing the 1956 Revolution, the economic refugees of the 1960's, 70's, and lastly, the brain drain of the 1990's and early 21st century.

Each successive wave of immigration eventually assimilates into American life, earning their living and spending their working days among Americans. Three major trends exist for their rate of assimilation: complete assimilation, assimilation of succeeding generations, and involvement in the Hungarian community. Firstly, the members of each wave can completely assimilate and forego contact with Cleveland's Hungarian communities, blending into their neighborhood. Second, the emigrating generation can

establish contact with the existing community structure of Cleveland's Hungarians, but their children and grandchildren assimilate into American life and forego contact with the Hungarian community, usually due to language difficulties. The third trend, by far the smallest but significant nevertheless, is for succeeding generations to maintain contact with Cleveland's Hungarian community, with their identities being actively formed by the community, and then continuing their language maintenance and holding onto their Hungarian traditions.

The second chapter showed the vibrancy of Cleveland's current Hungarian community, and it also showed how the DP generation shaped its lasting institutions. Cleveland already boasted over 300 Hungarian-owned businesses and 81 Hungarian organizations in 1920, and most of these were still around in 1951. That number has shrunk since then, yet Cleveland still has ten Hungarian churches, more than 25 vibrant secular organizations, and numerous Hungarian-owned businesses. Traditional Hungarian customs are also propagated as social rituals in the greater Cleveland area, including the arrival of *Mikulás*, *betlehemezés*, four formal balls yearly, *locsolás*, *májusfa*, a scout picnic attracting over 2,000 people yearly, multiple harvest festivals, musical concerts and scholarly lectures. Occasional large-scale events such as visits by famous Hungarian personalities or anniversary performances serve to galvanize almost the entire Hungarian community of Cleveland. Approximately 105,000 people in the greater Cleveland area listed Hungarian ancestry in the 2010 American Community Survey, with about 6,000 of those speaking Hungarian in the household. Over 2,000 are active in one or more of Cleveland's secular Hungarian organizations as of 2011, and about 400-800 attend a Hungarian church weekly, with 50-75 Hungarian funerals yearly. Most of Cleveland's major Hungarian organizations have at least a third to half of their current executive boards being members or descendants of the DP generation. For the scouting movement, that ratio is even higher, with 34 of 52 scoutmasters, or 65% being members or descendants of the DP generation, and 6 of 8, or $\frac{3}{4}$ of its district commissioners. It is safe to say that the DP generation has shaped, formed, and left a noticeable and lasting impact on Cleveland's Hungarian community life.

The third chapter analyzed the literature produced by and read by Hungarians in Cleveland. Looking through the lens of the Hungarian Association's yearly conferences, I summarized every tenth *Krónika*, the published proceedings of the conference. I found over 12,000 Hungarian volumes in the Cleveland Public Library, as well as numerous Hungarian

books and periodicals published in Cleveland throughout the years. Unpublished family memoirs were also addressed, as were church and organization yearbooks. I highlighted local authors István Eszterhás and Ferenc Somogyi and visiting author Áron Gábor, giving a literary explication of their works. An additional feature of this chapter was touching on the Hungarian musical, art, and radio programming scene in Cleveland.

The fourth chapter showed the factors impacting Hungarian language use, thereby enabling the community to provide a social means of group identity and a vigorous ethnic pluralism, one that enables even second and third generations after original immigration to maintain their language, culture, and traditions. Very important in developing their Hungarian identities was the role of consistent parenting. Parents who spoke Hungarian in the household, who took their children to Hungarian community events such as the Hungarian school, scouting, and the folk dance group, made a significant cultural impact on their children, as evidenced by their children's recollections even twenty years later. The Hungarian scouting movement and folk dance group, by placing strict demands on its participants, effected a deep camaraderie and strong bonds of friendship among the children and especially the teenagers, who are prone to listen to their peers instead of their parents. When peer friendships in American high school are stronger than among Hungarian friends, language use suffers. When peer friendships among the Hungarian teens is strong, their Hungarian language use improves. Thus having a child actively involved in Cleveland's Hungarian community events leads to a higher fluency and a stronger sense of cultural identity, as does visiting Hungary. When only 6% to 9% of Hungarians in the Cleveland area report speaking Hungarian regularly in the household, odds are that 90% to 94% of those with Hungarian ancestry will eventually assimilate. These nine case studies, as examples of Cleveland Hungarians who maintain their language and culture, show how to beat those odds. Even late into the second and third generation, it is still very possible to maintain an ethnic language and culture and pass it on to the next generation. It all depends on strong parenting and peer friendships put into place and enabled by a tight-knit community.

Finally, the last chapter addressed the patriotism of Hungarians in Cleveland, both to their Hungarian identity and to their newfound country, through the perspective of landmarks and of their U.S. military service. I confirmed 328 Cleveland area Hungarians who served in the U.S. military, including 27 officers, and of those 2 generals and several colonels. Many sets of brothers served, there were several examples of multiple generations of the

same family, and at least 16 Cleveland area Hungarians still serve today. The people I interviewed exemplify patriotism, enduring hardships hardly known in the civilian sector; many were formed by and still partake in the activities of the Hungarian community of Cleveland, and the notion of patriotism goes both ways. A patriotic community begets patriotic individuals, and patriotic individuals beget patriotic communities. Cleveland Hungarians not only take and have taken an active role in participating in the Hungarian organizations and institutions, but many serve their American homeland as well. Ties to both facets of their identity are deep and can peacefully coexist in their psyches, as can be seen not only by their active participation in Hungarian organizations, for many an important part of their heritage, but also by the sense of duty and sacrifice they exhibit in their military service and in their daily civilian business lives. The many successful careers, details of which came out in the hundreds of interviews I conducted, were simply normal for these Hungarian-Americans. Quite simply, it was who they are. They are Americans, for many of them were born and raised in the United States, but they are also Hungarians, for their ancestry and for some, participation in Cleveland's Hungarian organizations is also an important part of who they are. Their relationship with America is well-balanced and healthy, unlike the propaganda characterizations of historians from Hungary during the Cold War. Monocultural people have a hard time imagining that a person can have allegiance to more than one country. Cleveland Hungarians, on the other hand, have done it for many decades. Living in and experiencing day-to-day American culture, they also share a transplanted or inherited Hungarian culture, and this biculturalism, when combined with a sense of duty and historical mission stemming from family pride and Cold War experiences, is able to engender a sense of dual patriotism. This dual patriotism is directed toward the Hungarian people, with whom they share a spiritual homeland, but also toward the American people, with whom they share a physical homeland.

And the future is also bright. Cleveland's Hungarian community continues to flourish, proudly maintaining its Hungarian language and traditions. New things are also happening, including the start of a parent and toddler monthly playgroup and a burgeoning online community, in addition to the existing churches, secular organizations, and strong scouting movement. This shrinking yet still vibrant and patriotic community, with extended roots significantly shaped by the DP generation, will continue to maintain its Hungarian language and traditions, now in 2013 just as then in 1951, as well as in the future.

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