



ARTICLES

“The Past Must Be Given a Place”: Migration, Intergenerational Transfer, and Cultural Memory Practices in Belgian Families of Hungarian Descent*

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This article investigates the intergenerational effects of migration on the memories of Belgian families of Hungarian origin, focusing specifically on how these effects can prompt the second and third generations of migrant families to bring their private memories and identity constructions into the public sphere. Their social participation becomes a crucial element in their quest to uncover their families’ histories. While the memory of the migration experience was initially contained in the “archive” (the private sphere), it eventually transitions into the “canon” (the public sphere), becoming accessible to those outside the family circle. Using published biographies of second-generation members about their immigrant parents, photographic images, texts of a theatre play, group conversations on social media (Facebook), and interviews with members of the second and third generations, this article offers a varied source material to explore these questions. By pushing the boundaries of historical research and memory studies, it demonstrates that the memories of migration can have long-lasting effects that connect people and families with larger communities and the social sphere.

Keywords: migration, identity, memory, memory work, family, intergenerational relations, cultural memory, archive and canon, Hungarian child relief project, Belgium

In the course of governmental negotiations in 2019, the Flemish government under the leadership of Prime Minister Jan Jambon reached an agreement to follow the Dutch example and develop a Flemish cultural canon. An independent committee of experts worked on the Canon of Flanders for almost three years before presenting it to the general public in May 2023. From more than five hundred possible subjects, they selected sixty Flemish “windows” focusing on politics, culture, archaeology, economy, science, ecology, and sports. The

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purpose of the governmental agreement on the Canon is to create anchor points in Flemish culture, history, and sciences which can be used for support and inspiration in three fields: education, integration processes, and the heritage and tourism sectors.¹ A wide and controversial social discussion surrounded the preparation of the Canon in the course of which historians and other experts got into heated public debates on the question of how to canonize national history and whether it is desirable or even possible to do so. The fragmented Belgian cultural and political landscape made these debates even more intriguing and created a challenging problem. As a result of the public discussions, it was also necessary to refrain from generalizing the concept of Flemish identity, and the commission responsible for the project decided to separate the Canon of Flanders from Flemish identity. Following the principles of tolerance and diversity, the heritage and memories of the different migrant communities in Belgium also got a place in the Canon. Among them there is a photo and a short note on the history of the Belgian-Hungarian child relief project, which is a very interesting fact from the perspective of this paper.² Its mention is surprising, as the migration of Hungarian children to Belgium in the mid-1920s was a largely forgotten episode of shared Belgian-Hungarian social history a few years ago. What happened in the meantime? How did a mostly privately shared history of a now small (a couple hundred families) group of people (Belgians and Hungarians) become part of the Canon of Flanders? How did this “forgotten” history of a once widely known event in the lives of the Catholic communities of Belgium again become a noted part of the public/national/regional canon? The aim of this paper is to venture answers to these questions by looking at the private and public activities of the second and third generations of descendants of the Belgian-Hungarian child relief project and the processes by which memories have been shared in this community across generations. I consider how these activities helped dislodge family memories from the private sphere and gave them a place in public knowledge. Three specific cases of transgenerational activities will be examined to uncover how

1 https://www.canonvanvlaanderen.be/content/uploads/2023/05/Canon_Rapport-aan-de-minister_7MEI.pdf. Last accessed on June 12, 2023. The content of the website was also published as a book: *Canon van Vlaanderen in 60 vensters* (Gent: Borgerhoff en Lambrigts, 2023).

2 <https://www.canonvanvlaanderen.be/events/de-wereld-in-vlaanderen>. Last accessed on June 12, 2023. There is a mistake in the text. The Hungarian children are referred to as refugees (*vluchtelingen*), but in the original sense of the word they did not belong to this category of migrants. They did not flee their home country.

memory of migration can define generational ties and how these memories in return become public heritage.

Short History of an Old Story and Its Consequences

The Belgian-Hungarian child relief project was a humanitarian transnational initiative between Hungary and Belgium. The idea of temporarily placing Hungarian children with foreign families where they could regain their strength after the devastation of World War I came from Dutch citizens who worked during the war as volunteers in Hungary, which was in a difficult situation economically and socially.³ The project started in 1920 in the Netherlands. Other European countries, such as Switzerland, England, and Denmark joined the Netherlands shortly thereafter, and in 1923, Belgium followed suit. The project was organized along denominational lines. Therefore, as Belgium was an overwhelmingly Catholic country, the organization of the project rested in the hands of the large Catholic community and its networks. The children were transported by trains from Hungary to Belgium, and they were distributed upon arrival among the volunteer host families. The original intention of the organizers was a so-called “holiday” of six months for children who were malnourished but not sick. They were supposed to be fed well, attend the local schools together with their Belgian peers, and follow the Catholic traditions of the local community. The Hungarian organizers took care that only Catholic Hungarian children were placed in Belgium. While the various aspects of the journey to a foreign country and the placement of the children with families once they had arrived were relatively well organized, the decision of which children would return and when remained flexible. This decision was left up to the Belgian and Hungarian

3 The Netherlands as a neutral party in World War I offered humanitarian help not only to Hungarians but also to Austrian children. These were the first large scale humanitarian child transports where unaccompanied young children crossed national borders to spend time with families in other countries. This initiative was unprecedented within Europe. In the subsequent decades of the twentieth century, many other humanitarian child relief projects were set up. However, the organizers of these later projects were trying to save children from imminent dangers of war or persecution, which was not true in the case of the Hungarian and Austrian children. The later projects included Spanish children fleeing from the Spanish civil war, Jewish children of the well-known *Kindertransport*, Finnish children escaping to Sweden, Greek children being rescued from civil war, and the children of the many Displaced Person camps in Germany and Austria. These projects differed based on their specific humanitarian goals and, most importantly, the political agendas behind them. However, the individual experiences of the participating children were often very similar. See Lagretta, *The Guernica Generation*; Zahra, *The Lost Children*; Danforth, “We Crossed a Lot of Borders.”

families. They were able to discuss and decide among themselves or sometimes even unilaterally when the child would return to Hungary or whether, in some cases, he or she would remain in Belgium. This had serious and often unforeseen consequences later, not only for the ways these children came to understand their identities but also for their children's and grandchildren's perceptions of themselves.

Many Hungarian children remained in the care of their Belgian families longer than six months. Some of them stayed years with their host families, and some remained in Belgium forever. Altogether approximately 21,000 Hungarian children came to stay in Belgium in the framework of this project. Due to the scarcity of contemporary administrative data, we can only make a rough estimate of 4 percent concerning the number of children who never returned to Hungary or, after having returned, decided (or had the decision made for them) to travel back to Belgium and settled there for good.⁴ The children who remained in Belgium for good became immigrants, whether of their own decision or not. Their migration experience was unusual, in that it was shaped in no small part by the constraints of childhood. Like adult migrants, they experienced the cultural rupture that is an inevitable part of migration. They were separated from their native culture and from the environment and people they knew and, most importantly and most formatively, from their parents and other family members. As children, they quickly learned the language and the local habits, attended school, joined youth organizations, and thus, unlike adult migrants, they were socialized in Belgium rather than in Hungary. They did not differ, from the perspectives of religion and skin color, from the local population, and this contributed to their successful structural integration.⁵ Although they remained Hungarian citizens until marrying a Belgian man or woman or completing the process of naturalization, because of their integration and socialization into Belgian society as children, the question of citizenship remained a minor administrative factor in their lives.⁶ While their structural integration seems to have been very successful, their identificational integration, how they perceived

4 For detailed information on the history of the Belgian-Hungarian child relief project see Hajt6, *Milk Sauce and Paprika*.

5 I am using the concepts of *structural integration*, which can be measured more or less objectively by mapping social mobility, school results, housing patterns, etc., and *identificational integration*, which is subjective and refers to the extent to which migrants and their offspring keep regarding themselves as primarily different. Lucassen, *The Immigrant Threat*, 19.

6 The children could not be adopted by their Belgian parents or be given Belgian nationality as children because the adoption of minors in Belgium was only legalized in 1940. Hajt6, *Milk Sauce and Paprika*, 24.

themselves vis-à-vis the rest of the society, was more complex and problematic. Very often feelings which bordered on melancholy seem to have lingered, as well as some attachment to their country and culture of origin, at least to the extent that they either knew or imagined it. If they preserved transnational connections with Hungary (for instance with their Hungarian families), the two identities, Hungarian and Belgian, intermingled. Moreover, for many of them, separation from the early childhood environment and especially from their birth parents proved a traumatic experience. They sometimes developed traumatic disorders or depression. They were often unable to form healthy relationships with their partners and incapable of performing healthy parental roles.⁷ In their late life-testimonies, these people often shared the difficulties they faced while growing up and establishing their own families in Belgium.⁸

Why Memory Matters and How It is Transferred

The secondary literature on cultural memory has persuasively shown that movement and memory are closely intertwined. Memories are on the move.⁹ They travel with migrants as intangible possessions that migrants cannot and will not get rid of because memories connect places and help preserve existing social ties and build new ones.¹⁰ As the process of migration involves dislocation not only from people and social connections but also from biographically important places, remembering these places and people is a way for migrants to bridge the gap between their past and future lives. These memories, however, are not stable entities. They are also on the move, not just in space but also in time. They change together with the migrants and their circumstances. In general, memories change over time. We remember different aspects of the same event

7 Most interestingly, recent discoveries in neuroscience and in the fairly new field of epigenetics show the possibility of transgenerational transmission of traumatic experiences within one's body. According to these studies, it might be possible to carry the traumas experienced by our parents through epigenetic changes, or changes in gene expression as a consequence of environment and behavior. Therefore, emotional deprivation as a consequence of neglectful or traumatized parenting can cause changes in gene expression.. See: Klosin, et. al., “Transgenerational Transmission of environmental information in *C. elegans*,” and Hens, “Dynamiek en ethiek van de epigenetica,” and Assche, “Strategies project: Genetic and epigenetic aspects. Depressive symptoms in adolescence: genes & environment.”

8 Hajtó, “The ‘wanted’ children,” and Hajtó, *Milk Sauce and Paprika*.

9 Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott. Memories on the Move*; Assmann and Conrad, *Memory in a Global Age*; Palmberger and Tošić, *Memories on the Move*.

10 Ibid., 12.

at different moments of our lives.¹¹ The concept of moving memories in time can also refer to a generational transfer, when memories in the form of family stories, tacit knowledge, mnemonic objects, and even bodily habits are passed down to the offspring of the person who migrated.

While in the past, memory was often the most important or even only possible way migrants could maintain some form of psychological and emotional connection to the social networks and family in the home country, in recent years, technology has changed communication without necessarily dislodging memory from its crucial position. One of the main reasons for this is that memory is closely connected to our identity construction. If we look at the process of migration, we can see that both memory and identity are in an endangered position. The experience of migration causes rupture and alteration in both processes. This is why migrants often struggle with the reconstruction of both. This process of recovery, however, often takes a long time and might not be completed before the migrant dies. If this is the case, another generation may inherit the incomplete reconstruction of their family history and a fragmented personal identity.¹² As Leo Lucassen very aptly put it, “integration, just like assimilation, is viewed as a non-linear, long-term, and thus intergenerational process.”¹³ The adults who had come from Hungary to Belgium as children and later took Belgian spouses established mixed families in which their children often shared the cultural heritages, identities, and personal memories of both parents. Moreover, the children and sometimes even the grandchildren of these families regularly struggled with the unfinished projects of their parents to resolve problematic integration from the perspective of personal identity. In other words, they had to figure out the most important questions faced by people who had undergone some cultural rupture in the past caused by movement. These questions included the issue of cultural belonging, how the cultural identities of members of the second and third generations in migrant families evolved, and most importantly, where the origins of their identities as people who had inherited more than one cultural tradition lay. They often faced the challenging necessity of reconstructing the stories of their parents. These reconstructions

11 Leydesdorff, *Oral History*, 25.

12 There has been substantial research on generational transmission of traumas in Holocaust studies. The body of research is so large that I only mention here the works of Marianne Hirsch, who combined postmemory theory with generational transmission of memories in the form of family photography. Hirsch, *Family Frames*; Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*.

13 Lucassen, *The Immigrant Threat*, 19.

sometimes became very painful processes. This was particularly true when the parents had shared traumas or painful memories of their migration experiences, intentionally or unintentionally. In certain cases, we can talk about the concept of postmemory, when “the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their birth but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.”¹⁴ However, within one family not every sibling necessarily experienced the need of reconstruction and the need to resolve traumatic legacies in the same way. Some felt compelled to research their parents’ past while others were content to know only what had been shared with them.

These descendants of the people who had come as children to Belgium through the Hungarian relief project mostly shared their memories within the limited circle of family and friends. In some cases, they maintained a connection with their Hungarian families and Hungary. In the 1960s, for example, when traveling between the two countries became easier, many families spent holidays in Hungary or in Belgium visiting relatives or old host families. As a natural consequence, after the death of the parents (the original participants in the migration experience), the children slowly started to lose their connections to the other country and to the memories of their parents. This was when they often realized that they needed to know, research, and talk more about these memories and this heritage. Until recently, with very few exceptions, these private memories remained within the family.¹⁵ They were talked about and showcased in the form of photographs, artifacts, and other mnemonic objects within the private family “archive.”¹⁶

The influential theories of Aleida Assmann on cultural memory draw a distinction between active and passive remembering. Assmann calls active remembering the *canon*, which is accessible to the wider audience in the form of books, articles, and other publications (published by mainstream publishing houses) or in exhibitions held by museums and other cultural institutes. Assmann refers to passive remembering as the *archive*, to which access is limited because

14 Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” 103.

15 One example is the literary work of the Belgian writer Rudi Hermans, discussed later in this essay.

16 The “From private to public: Memories of migration, family heritage, and continuity where Belgian-Hungarians and Dutch-Hungarians meet the public sphere” part of the online exhibition *Émigré Europe. Central and Eastern European émigrés in the Low Countries, 1933–1989*, which is hosted by the Belgian documentation and research institute KADOC (Katholieke Documentatie- en Onderzoekscentrum voor Religie, Cultuur en Samenleving), shows how these mnemonic objects are presented in the private sphere of the migrants. <https://kadocheritage.be/exhibits/show/emigreeurope>. Last accessed on June 12, 2023.

the objects in the archive remain within the private spheres of individuals and families. Most interestingly, the elements of the two forms of remembering can change places. Memories of events that remained in the archive thus can suddenly appear in the public canon and vice versa.¹⁷ The second and third generation of the original participants of the Belgian-Hungarian relief project are increasingly engaged in the process of bringing family memories from the archive into the public canon. They remember and reimagine their childhood memories, deconstructing and recontextualizing them in the transfer process from archive to canon. These descendants are actually engaging in “memory work.”¹⁸ In her fascinating book, Annette Kuhn actively stages, recontextualizes, and analyzes her memories of childhood. She also demonstrates how, while processing the raw material of personal memories through memory work, she produces new memories, and she shows how potentially therapeutic this process might prove. This therapeutic effect has been observed and experienced by the descendants during their memory work. It brings an additional sense of relief not only to confront painful personal family memories but also to share them with the larger public.

Over the course of the past ten or fifteen years, there has been an upsurge in public activities in the form of publications, theater performances, interviews, films, exhibitions, and online community building.¹⁹ These activities have played a major role in how the story of the relief project is becoming better known by the Belgian general public and how it found its way into the Flemish Canon. There are key participants, however, who regularly drive this process forward

17 Assmann, “Canon and Archive.”

18 “Memory work is a method and a practice of unearthing and making public untold stories.” Kuhn, *Family Secrets*, 9.

19 Examples of major public events and publications include the exhibition *De Hongaartjes*, from March 7 to June 5, 2016, KADOC, Leuven, Belgium and the publication by Vera Hajtő, *De Hongaartjes*. Opening of the MigratieMuseumMigration in Brussels, which dedicated one vitrine out of the 50 to the Belgian-Hungarian child relief project about the history of twentieth-century migration to Belgium, October 19, 2019, Exhibition *Úti cél: Remény. A nemzetközi gyermekvonat-akció a két világháború között*, from December 9 to March 27, Budapesti Történeti Múzeum, Budapest, with published catalogue, *Úti cél: Remény. A nemzetközi gyermekvonat-akció a két világháború között* (Budapest: BTM Vármúzeum, 2022). There was an exhibition in the Netherlands as well, *Bestemming: Hoop*, from June 18 to October 1, 2023, Van ’t Lindenhout Museum, Nijmegen. While the first exhibition in Leuven was exclusively about the Belgian-Hungarian project, the other two exhibitions were more comprehensive and showed the story and involvement of the other participating countries. The play *Een bijzondere vrouw* was staged for the first time on March 14, 2018 in Houthalen-Helchteren, Belgium and also on November 8, 2018 in Budapest, Hungary. There is also a documentary film about a Hungarian girl who participated in the Belgian project: *Emmi néni csodálatos élete / The Extraordinary Life of Emma Nemeskéri*, director and screenwriter, Eszter Száraz, 2020.

with their efforts. Their active memory work is being shared with the public through their publications, performances, and social media activities, so one can follow how family memories are gradually being transferred to the public sphere.

The Hermans Family

The members of the Hermans family are among the most ardent participants in the public memory work. They have been recreating and recontextualizing the story of their mother, Magda Horváth. Magda was the mother of ten children from two marriages. She was thirteen when she arrived in Belgium as part of the Belgian-Hungarian child relief project on March 14, 1927. She was not lucky with her Belgian host family. They did not treat her well. When she first went back to Hungary in 1929 and decided a year later to return to Belgium for good, she was only sixteen years old and did not know what a hard and emotionally lonely life was waiting for her. According to her son Edgar Hermans, his mother had “a very tough and at times tragic, but also a very courageous and meaningful life.”²⁰ When she was only 23 and pregnant with her second child, she was tragically widowed. For eight long years, including the years of World War II, Magda supported her two young children entirely on her own, as well as her elderly parents-in-laws and her young sister, who arrived from Hungary to stay with her. As she wrote in one of her letters to her family, “I tried to earn some money: I sewed, I knitted stockings, and sheared sheep so that we would have enough to eat.”²¹ In 1945, she made another life-altering decision. At the recommendation of the local priest, she married the local baker Eugène Hermans, who “was also widowed and had three children, while I had two. It was very difficult to start afresh, but we promised each other to be good for the children’s sake.”²² It became a difficult and complicated marriage, and Eugène and Magda had five children of their own. They thus formed a household of twelve people, in which the mother and father ran their own bakery downstairs. Eugène showed little interest in or concern for Magda’s Hungarian roots, so she had to deal with the traumas and painful memories of migration and homesickness on her own.

The events of her life had a significant influence on her children, more specifically, her two youngest sons, Edgar and Rudi, who were the most

20 Hermans, *Kedves Magda*, 9.

21 *Ibid.*, 29.

22 *Ibid.*, 30.

receptive to their mother's difficulties with her private memories of migration and integration and are still processing her legacy. Rudi Hermans is a well-known Flemish writer. His oeuvre is inspired by and touches closely on his knowledge and experience of his mother's story.²³ His narratives are fictionalized versions of her story. These works are part of the public canon, as they are available to the general public in print by well-known publishers.²⁴ These widely disseminated literary works thus offer an opportunity for rereading and re-interpretation, which are fundamental conditions for cultural memory creation.²⁵ Rudi's brother Edgar also wrote a book about Magda. He too took a strong interest in her history and the nature of his connection to her and to her painful past. As Judit Gera states, while Rudi's writings are widely disseminated and thus form part of the public canon, Edgar's book is a non-fiction story based on historical facts which was privately published as part of an archive.²⁶ However, Edgar's publication, which resembles a detective story²⁷ and intertwines the story of his own research and the biographical facts he discovered about his mother's life, was just the beginning of his process of joining Rudi in bringing the story of Magda and with it the story of the relief project into the public canon. This is how Edgar describes the beginning of his research:

Initially, the book was intended for my family. My mother was 100 years old in 2014 and I stood there at that grave, and I thought, my children remember that she is from Hungary and that's it. My brothers, some know something, some nothing. I thought, I'm going to write down what I know. Just like that, short. I thought five pages will be enough. By chance, I ended up with you [Vera Hajtó] through an ad in the newspaper [...]. And that is how it started to come to life. That was unbelievable. And that search took almost two years, a year and a half and it was something different every week.²⁸

23 Hermans, *Terug naar Törökbalint*; Hermans, *De Troonpretendent*; Hermans, *Liefdesverklaringen*; Hermans, *Levenswerk*.

24 A very interesting and most inspiring study was written by Judit Gera, who analyzed four literary works by Rudi Hermans and uncovered the traces of postmemory in them. She also demonstrated how the writings of Rudi Hermans have contributed to the process of transfer from the family archive to the public canon. Gera, *Postmemory és kulturális emlékezet mint a tények és a fikció kötélemei Rudi Hermans műveiben*.

25 Erll and Rigney, *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*.

26 Gera, *Postmemory és kulturális emlékezet mint a tények és a fikció kötélemei Rudi Hermans műveiben*, 119.

27 Expression used by Judit Gera, *ibid.*

28 Interview with Edgar Hermans, June 17, 2022, Houthalen, Belgium. All interviews in this article were conducted in Flemish by Vera Hajtó.

Edgar started a journey to collect everything in the family archive:

I started talking to my brothers, who knew a bit, but that wasn't really much. Then you [Vera Hajt6] found everything for me in Brussels. Then I accidentally came into contact with Zsuzsanna B6lint [a historian in T6r6rkb6lint]. I sent a message to the municipality in German, French, and English asking if someone would speak to me. [...] One thing led to another. Then I started talking to old people, etc., etc.²⁹

Edgar describes how, while he was collecting information within the family (i.e. as part of the private archive), he also started to build connections with the public sphere. He contacted me, a professional historian, and also the aforementioned Zsuzsanna B6lint, who is a local historian in T6r6rkb6lint, Hungary, the town from which Edgar's mother Magda had come. That also proves that the archive of family memories is not entirely separated from the public canon.³⁰ They are close to each other and feed off each other. Transfer between the two can take place at almost any point.

Edgar's research and writing had an influence on the family across generations, as he himself mentioned. “After my book was published, one of Rudi's sons, who was 30–35 years old, called me, I have had little contact with him. [He said,] I just called to thank you for making that book. [...] the idea of what is in Rudi's book. That is very heavy stuff... [...] When they read my book, it became completely different.”³¹ And at a certain moment, some of them joined Edgar's efforts to share the story of the mother and grandmother with the public in the form of a play: “Then came my brother Jean Pierre, who is an actor, and he said to Rudi, the writer, couldn't you do anything with that [Edgar's book], couldn't you write a play out of that.”³² Through the cooperative efforts of the different members of the second generation, the self-published book, which was meant for the limited circle of the family, became the source on which the script of the theater play *Een bijzondere vrouw* (A special woman) was based. The play was first staged during the annual Heritage Day of the Flemish community in the small church Kerkje van Laak in Houthalen-Helchteren on March 14, 2018. The Hermans brothers also organized a small exhibition dedicated to their mother in

29 Interview with Edgar Hermans, June 17, 2022, Houthalen, Belgium.

30 According to Kuhn, private memories could not exist without the outside world. They are “at the center of a radiating web of associations, reflections and interpretations. But if the memories are one individual's their associations extend far beyond the personal [...] in all memory texts, personal and collective remembering emerge again and again.” Kuhn, *Family Secrets*. 5.

31 Interview with Edgar Hermans, June 17, 2022, Houthalen, Belgium.

32 Interview with Edgar Hermans, June 17, 2022, Houthalen, Belgium.

the church, which helped them establish many contacts with other families who shared similar memories of the parents' histories.

There are often silences in painful family stories, and there is one such silenced memory in the case of the Hermans family as well.³³ Magda's return to Hungary as a young girl in 1929 and her own choice to live her life in Belgium remained hidden from her children for decades. The decision to return was a crucial choice for her, since it altered her future. It also clearly had significant consequences for her children. Edgar and Rudi believed that their mother could not return to Hungary before 1964. They thought that her troubled family circumstances had not allowed her to return earlier and that these circumstances had decided her future and that she herself had been helpless in this matter. However, in the course of his research, Edgar discovered that she had had a choice. This came as a shock to Magda's sons. This key fact stands in the middle of the story of the play. Magda has to answer this question, posed by Saint Peter at the gates of Heaven, who was played by her actor son Jean Pierre. Curiously, the play was staged in a church. Magda speaks with Saint Peter about her wonderous journey, much as her son, Edgar, spoke about his ongoing journey in his interview:

And just keep going. Moreover, I have discovered so much in the meantime, I am still busy. [...] Moreover, the last time in Budapest, the two cineastes, I find that unbelievable. When I showed my first book to my cousin in Hasselt, he said Edgar that should be made into a movie. [...] And now those people just come up to us and say, we want to make a movie. Unimaginable!³⁴

Alongside the books, the play, and the plans for a film, the activities of Edgar and his family in the public sphere also extend to a place of remembrance in Belgium. As it so happens, Magda Horváth has a *lieux de memoire* in Belgium. In 1956, the old farmhouse where she lived as a young widow with her small children and her parents-in-laws was dismantled and placed in the Flemish openair folklore museum of Bokrijk due to its architectural value. Edgar and his family are currently working with the heritage experts at the museum on making the family story publicly visible in the museum.

33 Leydesdorff, *Oral History*; and Thomson and Perks, *The Oral History Reader*.

34 Interview with Edgar Hermans, June 17, 2022, Houthalen, Belgium.

Une Petite Hongroise

Like the Hermans brothers, Betty Leruitte also wrote a biographical book about her mother, Teréz or Terry Beck.³⁵ Betty's book is a narrative of Terry's life story. As she puts it, “what I told in my book, everything is true, down to the smallest anecdotes, everything is true. She told me it all, and it seems a bit like a novel.”³⁶

Betty describes the chain of events that led to her discovery of her mother's childhood home in Belgium, but compared to Edgar's book, she brings a new dimension to her writing. She intentionally goes into dialogue mostly with her mother and, at the end of the book, with her father as well. Betty Leruitte is concerned not simply with learning more about her mother's past, including how and why she came to Belgium, how she grew up there, how she found work, and when she got married, had a child, and faced many difficult choices. Betty also seems eager to learn more about her own place in her mother's life. She confronts her own fears and childhood traumas in the dialogues in her text, which she puts in italics. In certain cases, she also uses photos as a gateway to her mother's past.³⁷ Betty does not always provide the information that one would usually expect from a photo in her captions, such as the names of the people depicted or the occasion of the picture. Instead, she shares her own impressions or memories, and by doing so she brings past, present and future into a very close relationship. She also interrupts her narrative at times to make comments situated in the moment of narration rather than the narrated moment:

Freeze frame: I am looking at this photo where you are looking at me. I want to tell you that much later, in eighty years exactly, your daughter will find this photo at the neighbors'. But you're there with your doll, you don't know yet that you'll have a girl. Many peripeteias await you before I show up. So I can only shut up, and let you live.³⁸

Above this text we see a group photo of nine people. The photo was made on the occasion of a trip made by Terry's Hungarian father to Habay-la-Neuve, a small Walloon village where Terry was placed by the relief project. She lived

35 Leruitte, *Une Petite Hongroise*.

36 Interview with Betty Leruitte, December 2, 2022, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.

37 According to Susan Sontag, “Any photograph has multiple meanings; indeed, to see something in the form of a photograph is to encounter a potential object of fascination. The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: ‘There is the surface. Now think – or rather feel, intuit – what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way.’ Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.” Sontag, *On Photography*, 23.

38 Leruitte, *Une Petite Hongroise*, 44. Italics in the original.

with two sisters in the Belgian Ardennes. Unlike Magda Horváth, she had a very happy, idyllic childhood with them. The picture, at least, gives this idyllic impression. Everybody and everything that presumably was dear to the little girl can be seen on the photo. Terry is sitting in the middle of the group with her doll in her hand, and the family dog is at her feet. Her father is next to her, as is her elder sister, who was also staying with a family in the neighborhood. Next to her Hungarian relatives, we see her Belgian family as well. They are all sitting in a line in front of the house in Habay. Sometimes Betty makes mention in her narrative of memories she has of a photograph that no longer exists, or a “memory of a memory,” to borrow a phrase from poet Maria Stepanova.³⁹



Figure 1. Terry Beck with her father, her sister and her Belgian foster family around 1930, Habay-la-Neuve (Private collection of Betty Leruitte, Louvain-la-Neuve)

The main narrative of the book is written in the second person, which emphasizes the intimate relationship between the mother and daughter. In the excerpts attached to the photograph's, on the other hand, Betty addresses her mother directly in the first-person. She asks her questions and pleads with her, especially in the second part of the book, in which these discussions and arguments are increasingly intense due to the childhood traumas Betty suffered because of her parents' stormy relationship:

39 See Stepanova, *In Memory of Memory*. “This book about my family is not about my family at all, but something quite different: the way memory works, and what memory wants from me,” 51.

A comedy? I don't understand what I'm hearing, but I've learned everything, and the day will come when I'll ask you questions. I know it's none of my business, but you shouldn't tear yourself apart in front of me. What comedy is he talking about, mom? Tell me, you didn't play comedy to make him believe that... no! ... Yes?⁴⁰

Another important feature of Betty Leruitte's book is how she incorporates the kaleidoscopic images and impressions of the many different national and regional identities of her family. Betty is Hungarian on her mother's side and Belgian on her father's side. Her father had a Dutch mother and a Belgian father. Moreover, Terry grew up in the French speaking part of Belgium, in Wallonia, and she acquired from her host family a strong sense of regional Walloon identity, which she passed on to her daughter. The folklore, legends, and habits of the region are prominent features of her story. And she notes, with a specific reference to place, “among the Ardennes, the pain is discreet, feelings do not spread out in the public square, one keeps one's grief for oneself.”⁴¹ She also mentions how her mother, “an incorrigible romantic, told me more than once the story of Louise de Lambertye, last Marquise du Pont d'Oye where, according to legend, Voltaire sometimes came to rest.”⁴²

Betty Leruitte's use of imaginary dialogues with her mother and her references to Walloon identity suggest a great deal about her possible intentions. After the death of her own son, Betty wrote a book about his life, which was followed by *Une Petite Hongroise*, the book about her mother. She contended in *Une Petite Hongroise* that “those two books have been like therapy for me, I felt so good after writing those two books, [...] I didn't expect it to do so much good.”⁴³

In an interview, Betty spoke about her intention to write a story of a Hungarian girl who ended up in Wallonia and not in Flanders:

I searched for information for five years before I could write my book, and it is thanks to your [Vera Hajtós] book that I could find my information, [...] so I wrote my book and my intention was to make the case of the Hungarian children known because no one knew anything about it among the French speakers (Walloons).⁴⁴

40 Leruitte, *Une Petite Hongroise*, 112.

41 Leruitte, *Une Petite Hongroise*, 47.

42 Leruitte, *Une Petite Hongroise*, 149. The story of the marquise Louise de Lambertye (1720–1773) and her domain in Habay-la-Neuve with Castle Pont d'Oye form a prominent part of the Walloon cultural memory and heritage.

43 Interview with Betty Leruitte, December 2, 2022, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.

44 Interview with Betty Leruitte, December 2, 2022, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.

Indeed, due to the smaller influence of the Catholic Church in Wallonia, far more Hungarian children were placed in Flanders during the relief project. The story of the child relief project is thus also more forgotten in Wallonia than in Flanders. Betty Leruitte's book is the first attempt in this region to make the story part of public memory. As it was published by L'Harmattan (a well-known publishing house), the book is widely available to the public, which will increase its chances of becoming part of the public canon. It is also on permanent display in the Migration Museum Migration in Brussels. Betty is currently working with the cultural center of Habay-le-Neuve on a play based on the story of her mother and the other fourteen Hungarian children who were welcomed in the village in the 1920s. While Betty and the Herman brothers were authors of their creative endeavors, others choose social media to share, process, re-imagine and contextualize their family memories.

Facebook – Forming an Online Community

“Dear members of this group. This group is especially intended for (grand) children and those involved with children from Hungary who went to the Netherlands after World War I. Much is still unknown. With this group, I hope to collect stories and information, which may benefit everyone in his or her own way.” – These were the first welcoming words of the founder of the Facebook group *Hongaarse Kindertreinen bestemming Nederland en België*. The group was formed in October 2018, and it now has 181 members. It was established by a Dutch woman whose grandmother participated in the Dutch part of the Hungarian child relief project and who remained in the host country for the rest of her life. Although in her introductory words she only mentions the Netherlands and indicates that the group is meant to be open to the descendants of the children who went there, the group was from the outset open to people whose parents or grandparents had come to Belgium. By organizing an online community, they became publicly visible, even if this Facebook group is a closed group, which means that if someone wants to join, he or she needs the permission of the host. One can only post to the page and read the comments posted by others after having obtained the permission of the host. The group is supposed to provide a safe place to share private information. Still, it remains a relatively small community the members of which are sporadically active. There are very different expectations regarding the purpose of the group among its members. For many of them, it is a forum to which they come primarily for

information. They are looking for information on experts, books, genealogical sites, and other sources on the history of the relief projects. Some of them share photos and stories, but in spite of the organizers repeated requests that every new member share the history of their family and the relatively safe, private environment, many members remain reluctant. Willem Suys is the most active member of the group. He often coordinates among members and helps them find information, and he also shares his own family history as well as his own private quest for information.

I think there is still a lot of interest in the group in getting information and that people are also willing to comment in the group if the subject is not too private, but it is a bit of a difficult group. I am also in a number of other groups, mostly public, sometimes private, and there I see, if I compare it with the children's trains, [...] that this group also has a little information that would be of interest to others, or the information is too personal and they feel they cannot even share it with a private group.⁴⁵

With the information he provides, Willem often triggers members to react and share more private experiences. Sometimes there are dialogues through which members of the group confront experiences of painful unresolved family memories. Anne Marie Himpe is one of the few members who very openly shares her struggles to come to terms with her mother's past. For her, the Facebook group is a platform where she can join discussions and compare her experiences with the experiences of others who might share her struggles. She uses this public sphere to post her private family memories and confront them. In October 2016, Willem shared a Swiss online article on new research about the biological transmission of family traumas from parent to child.⁴⁶ Eleven people posted comments concerning the article, including Anne Marie: “Interesting, but what can we do about it now? I really believe that acceptance of our body and those of our descendants sends good signals. Lett -ing- go.” She adds, “We cannot change or undo what happened, although we so often wish we could. I

45 Interview with Willem Suys, Kluisbergen, December 10, 2022. I conducted two separate interviews with the two most active members of the group. I did one interview with Willem Suys and one with Anne Marie Himpe. The daughter of Anne Marie, Lieselotte Maertens, joined us during the interview. Lieselotte is also member of the group, but she is not as active as her mother.

46 https://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/kindheitstraumata-koennen-an-nachkommen-vererbt-werden/46100764?fbclid=IwAR3DUC1FSEzBiG_-Q2nm9PyKUhPO8pSwVTMM_O12pM1Pslavkz-doCZs-tY

would like to believe that what was possible then would be unthinkable today. I consider it one big learning process.”

Anne Marie’s daughter Lieselotte, who is a member of the third generation, is part of the group but is not very active. She seems also to struggle with the memories of the migration experience of her mother and grandmother, but she tries to distance herself from the painful, ongoing memory reconstruction process. As she said in the course of an interview,

I understand that the past has happened and that this must be given a place [...] You have been given a life, you must move forward. And I do think that people like me read messages on the Facebook page about the children’s trains. You cannot solve the pains of your mother, grandmother. You can’t, you can’t heal those wounds. I don’t want them to become my wounds.⁴⁷

The Facebook group also offers Anne Marie a chance not only to see her memories echoed in other people’s work but at the same time to distance herself in order better to understand what particular memories might mean to her. As she commented in a post to the page,

Nice weather, ideal for retreating with Rudi Hermans’ *De Troonpretendent*. Not reading it at once, it came too close to me for that, too recognizable, which was pleasant on the one hand and quite difficult at times on the other. [...] Because mother is always silent, the son interviews the mother. Come on, I did exactly the same thing, and when mother prompts him not to share her experience with strangers, then I know better than anyone what possesses the mother, but also what the son wants and needs to know.⁴⁸

Both Anne Marie and Lieselotte testify that with the creation of the Facebook group, the history of the Belgian-Hungarian child relief project gained more visibility in the public space. There is one more source to which they can turn and where they have an opportunity to be heard, because, as Anne Marie commented, “that story, that story never comes up. There is no information about it. That is like it never happened.”⁴⁹ And as Lieselotte puts it,

That [Facebook group] is indeed, together with you [Vera Hajtó], one of the two pillars on which we can finally relax a bit. Yes... Otherwise that’s exactly the same, I’m not going to say a secret, but an unknown

47 Lieselotte Maertens, Interview with Anne Marie Himpe and Lieselotte Maertens, July 16, 2022, Bruges.

48 Anne Marie Himpe, Facebook post, July 25, 2019.

49 Anne Marie Himpe, Interview with Anne Marie Himpe and Lieselotte Maertens, July 16, 2022, Bruges.

piece of something that you couldn't talk about with other people, or didn't want to because you were convinced that no one knew anything about it anymore. [...] to us that's just a piece of family history, but it turns out to be a piece of family history for many other people as well.⁵⁰

It is a family history that is being shared by many Belgian-Hungarian families so that the larger community of the country in which they live and to which they belong can acknowledge their existence and history: “I think that would be a great relief to many people. Somewhere an official recognition.”⁵¹

Conclusion

Memories of migration experiences, even if sometimes second-hand memories, are still very much part of the identities of the people who belong to the Belgian families whose parents or grandparents participated in the Belgian-Hungarian child relief project between 1923 and 1927. The transgenerational transfer of memories of migration and of the integration process and painful but healing memory work is actively being pursued by the children and grandchildren. While these children were born in and grew up in Belgium, their complete integration into Belgian society as people who identify exclusively as Belgians is an ongoing process from generation to generation. Their family stories and family heritages have found their way into the collective public memory of Belgian society as a result of the intense public activity of the descendants who belong to the second and third generations. One might think that these personal histories or elements of family heritage are relevant only in private circles, but in some cases they can become important for or interesting to the larger public as responses to external pressures. The histories and thus cultural identities of migrant communities are based on individual or family stories, and they are formed in the host society in symbiosis with mainstream histories. However, the story of migration seems to remain alive in different social forms and interactions, and it can resurface in public or in private unexpectedly. Migrant heritage, which is easily seen as fading with the arrival of younger generations, suddenly becomes visible with every new attempt to define, whether individually or collectively, who we are and where we come from.

50 Lieselotte Maertens, Interview with Anne Marie Himpe and Lieselotte Maertens, July 16, 2022, Bruges.

51 Lieselotte Maertens, Interview with Anne Marie Himpe and Lieselotte Maertens, July 16, 2022, Bruges.

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