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## The Lives of Migrants With, and Through, Their Objects

In 2011, the Budapest Museum of Ethnography, with the support of the Országos Tudományos Kutatási Alapprogramok (The National Scientific Research Fund, or OTKA), embarked on a three-year project to study the material culture of immigrants residing in the Hungarian capital. This paper, which examines the particulars of an initiative unique to the institution in terms of subject matter, methodology, and findings, prefaces its discussion with a review of migration-related studies, exhibitions, and programmes led or sponsored by the museum in the years prior, and concludes with accounts of both events pursued as a result, and the institution's long-term plans.

### **Museum Exhibitions on the Topic of Transnational/Transcontinental Migration**

The first museum initiative to deal with the issue of transnational/transcontinental migration took the form of a 1976<sup>1</sup> exhibition entitled *A People Safeguards Its Culture: Artefacts Belonging to Chileans in Hungary at the Museum of Ethnography*. It is perhaps no coincidence that one of the curators of the project was museum employee Irma Agüero,<sup>2</sup> a native Cuban then living in Hungary as a consequence of marriage. Organised with the collaboration of the Hungarian Branch of the Chilean Antifascist Commission, the event was politically motivated and took place within a particular political environment.<sup>3</sup> Its significance, as stated in a brief introductory article, was to “contribute to the struggle of democratic forces in Chile” (Agüero 1978: 455). The exhibition was likely the first to present macro-history – in this case, the 1973 putsch that toppled the Allende government and events that followed – via personal micro-histories – at least as far as the article penned by curator

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1 The exhibition remained on view at the Museum of Ethnography's newly occupied building on Kossuth Square for three months.

2 Irma Agüero was head curator of the Indonesian and American Collections from 1975–1984, and the African Collection from 1979–1982.

3 Hungary accepted approximately 200 Chilean families, offering them a chance a brand new start, including residence permits, work, and education for their children.

Agüero would appear to imply (Agüero 1978). Responding to the call for material contributions to the exhibition were 21 individuals offering 333 objects, 70 of which were eventually put on display. In the phrasing of Agüero: “They brought not only their objects, but also the personal stories, histories – even feelings – that went with them, all woven together as in a rich and layered tapestry.” (Agüero 1978: 454.)

Although the Chilean families that furnished the material spanned multiple social strata, the curator noted with interest that, “regardless of social class, they [had] all brought the same, or nearly the same, articles with them into emigration”. The examples cited in her article give a sense of how “people’s relationships with their material effects can change in certain ‘extreme situations,’ that is, how items of folk art and artifice – objects that bear perpetual personal cultural identity – are filled with new and extraordinarily potent, emotionally charged symbolic content in historic situations” such as the one at hand (Agüero 1978: 455). The exhibition featured not only personal mementoes brought from Chile, but also items the political prisoners and refugees had crafted after leaving home. (*Picture 1.*) Although the article on the exhibition sought to emphasise the refugees’ personal stories, extant documents and personal accounts suggest that these may not have featured in the exhibition directly. Instead, artefacts were grouped by ethnographic criteria – i.e. by craft or material – and displayed, accompanied by the appropriate text, so as to illustrate various forms of Chilean folk art and handicrafts. Still, the refugees did share their stories with curator Agüero, and the relationship that developed between them endured even after the exhibition closed. In the end, given the political environment that dominated in that period, *A People...* remained a unique and unrepeated event, one whose thematics (migration, refugeeism) and methodologies (use of material loaned by private parties) were not applied in subsequent museum practice, nor used as a model toward the development of the much more recent OTKA project on immigrant material culture.

The next occasion on which the Museum of Ethnography tackled the issue of migration came several decades later, following the political system change of 1989. *The Other: Ancient Myths, Fatal Delusions, Cultural Diversity*,<sup>4</sup> an exhibition brought in on loan from the Ethnographic Museum of Geneva in 2008, aimed to offer a historical retrospective on the relationship between Europeans and peoples of other cultures. The exhibition was held as an initiative of – and with the close cooperation of – the Artemisszio Foundation, an organisation active in the area of intercultural communication, during the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. It was, in fact, the first project in which the museum partnered with a non-governmental organisation to finance, implement, and operate an exhibition and related publishing activities. The final room was updated with respect to the display seen in Geneva to illustrate the concept of international mobility, including

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4 The exhibition remained on display from 27 September 2008 until 6 April 2009. The Budapest Museum of Ethnography borrowed the concept and design, along with the exhibition’s 100 artefacts, from the Ethnographic Museum of Geneva, adding from its own and other Hungarian public collections a number of Hungarian-themed units to a tune of around 700 addition objects.

both immigration and emigration, using material presented by the Foundation: life-sized photographs of the faces and figures of both famous people who had emigrated from Hungary, and immigrants then settled in Hungary, intended to embody global historical processes and personal life courses. (*Picture 2.*) The exhibition was accompanied by various theatrical performances probing the topic of migration, along with a variety of museum education programmes.

## Contact Zone

In 2009, some of the museum's younger employees won the support of a programme called "Museums as Places for Intercultural Dialogue"<sup>5</sup> toward the development and implementation of a multi-phase project known as "Contact Zone – Intercultural Dialogue and Co-operation". The initial phase, conducted in 2009 and 2010, involved an experiment aimed at co-operation between museum employees and immigrants from various countries living in Budapest. Together, participants worked to determine how the cultures in question were represented in the museum's collections, then examine how immigrants viewed their current personal life worlds and cultures through the objects discovered. In this way, the museum's historic holdings were drawn into an exciting dialogue with contemporary material culture in which various representations and scientific / subjective readings were pitted against each other.<sup>6</sup> (*Picture 3.*) The express aim of the project was to "enhance skills (i.e. communication) and build community (i.e. increase awareness of and resistance to prejudice) through non-formal learning methods". Also organised by the Artemisszio Foundation as part of the project were visits to the museum by several groups of immigrants, who attended programmes held by institution curators and educators at the sites of ongoing exhibitions, presented objects of their own that were meaningful to them, and used the same objects to develop their own miniature exhibition.

Though to date, the museum has not given the theme of emigration exclusive treatment in any presentational form, Zoltán Fejős, museum director from 1997 until 2013, did study the situation of Hungarians living abroad, particularly in Chicago, for a period beginning in 1984. Fejős's research, which employed modern methodology, merged social history drawn from primary sources with an anthropological-ethnographic perspective in order to unpack the whole of the subject matter from the access point of the "common man".<sup>7</sup> Follow-up on the theoretical work

5 The project handbook is available online at [http://www.ne-mo.org/fileadmin/Dateien/public/service/Handbook\\_MAPforID\\_EN.pdf](http://www.ne-mo.org/fileadmin/Dateien/public/service/Handbook_MAPforID_EN.pdf)

6 The Vienna Weltmuseum held a temporary exhibition based on a similar project from April to September of 2018. *Out of the Box: Moving Worlds* presented objects from museum holdings in the company of testimonials and interpretations provided by some of the city's own immigrants.

7 For further information, see the interview with Zoltán Fejős available at <http://www.agt.bme.hu/balassi/fejoszoltan.html>

included both journal articles and a book (Fejős 1991, 1993, 1999).<sup>8</sup> Though the museum director's findings were never translated into the language of a museum exhibition, Fejős has the distinction of being the one individual to have supported study of the material culture of immigrants living in Budapest.

## The OTKA Study

The idea for the study arose from several glaring observations: namely, that while Western European countries, with particular reference to the larger cities of former colonial powers, have experience with multiculturalism going back more than a half (or even full) century, in Hungary, the phenomenon is limited to the period following the shift to democratic rule and opening of borders that occurred in 1989. Additionally, this experience takes a considerably milder form, as Hungary is primarily a transit country with but a tiny immigrant population (less than 2% and of a composition differing from that of Western European countries) and no significant diasporic communities. Hungarian citizens, for their part, have little realistic knowledge of those who have arrived from other parts of the world, nor have immigrants in Hungary had, to date, much opportunity at self-representation. From the museum's standpoint, the academic examination of this social change means the ability to study the cultures that produced the objects in its overseas collections not only in the distant geographic locations they occupy, but also "next door," i.e. within its own society. This circumstance alters the entire concept of fieldwork to one in which researchers, in order to study "otherness," need no longer travel the globe; in which the academic pursues knowledge not as a lone "white person" stationed in isolation, but among individuals embedded within his or her own society; in which the scholar in the field paints a picture of two cultures and how they interact, while simultaneously offering insight into intercultural situations.

Even in the international academic world, the idea of uniting the topics of migration and material culture studies – of approaching migration from a material perspective – has arisen only recently;<sup>9</sup> but in Hungary, the OKTA study was, truly, the very first such experiment. The questions posed at the outset included: How are people and objects connected? What relationships exist between objects, narratives, human beings, and memory? How can one understand or approach the topic of migration in the mirror of the objects involved? Of the curators of the museum's international collections, four, together with an archivist from the Contact Zone project and a number of extra-institutional scholars, took part in conducting the required research. The former were aided both by research experience in

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8 The Hungarian Open Air Museum (Szentendre), relying on the work of Balázs Balogh, acquired a collection of objects from Hungarians living in the United States, consisting of the complete furnishings of a "Burdos House" in Vintondale, Pennsylvania. In the long term, the museum plans on a public treatment of the topic that includes display of the material.

9 For an overview of research on this topic, see Árendás 2014a: 70–73; Wilhelm 2014a: 48–51.

the immigrants' countries of origin and surrounding areas, and by knowledge of their cultural backgrounds, factors which helped both researcher, and "researched" to develop a personal connection, pose questions, and interpret answers. This advantage notwithstanding, with the exception of a single researcher, each participant was assigned an area he or she had never worked in before, a circumstance that came with certain challenges. Interview subjects were recruited both from among acquaintances, and by other means, at times by way of the "snowball effect". In my own case, it became necessary to replace contacts I had begun to make at one of the mosques in Budapest with individuals I met through family and friends, as the women in question were mostly Hungarians converted to Islam who, though a source of useful information on certain topics, did not actually belong to the group under scrutiny. A notable difficulty experienced at the outset of the project arose from the situation of Zsuzsa Árendás, who worked among Indian immigrants. Because Árendás had both an Indian husband, and other Indian friends and family, she found herself faced with the dilemma of how to manage her personal relationships within the academic context – to use them to the project's benefit – without damaging them. It was also Árendás's experience that illuminated the problem of differences in terminology usage between researchers and subjects, caused by the frequent relocations and cosmopolitan lifestyles of the highly qualified employees of multinational companies and other peculiarities of the global labour flow. Specifically, the word "migrant," used by the researchers to indicate a mere state of mobility, was rejected by their Indian interviewees (employees of multinational companies) as applying to the classic, narrowly defined concept typical of the period prior to the onset of transnational migration, when the phenomenon was both unidirectional and, usually, permanent. The problem was resolved by making sure to describe their situation carefully in all communication. It bears noting in this regard that while at the outset of the project, the term "migrant" – referring to people who cross national borders to settle in places outside their own lands – bore a meaning that was, for the most part, neutral and an accepted part of social scientific thinking, in the period that followed the study's completion, it was to acquire a markedly negative connotation in public discourse, tinged by a political interpretation of the migrant wave of 2015 that conflated concepts previously held distinct. This eventuality has inevitably affected the language used by researchers ever since, who have returned to using the earlier designations of *immigrant* and *emigrant*.

Experiences gained in the first phase of the study worked to modify several of its original ideas. First, the preconception that the study would be examining various *groups* was abandoned: interview subjects were found to have travelled such complicated life paths and assembled such a broad array of life experiences, it was practically impossible to analyse them in terms of cohesive ethnicities. Thus, the focus remained trained on the individual, leaving theoretical generalisations to be expressed at the thematic, rather than group (i.e. ethnic) level. This was the case even if, to promote framework thinking, the headings under which findings were

published did make consistent use of place of origin as a reference point, while individual analyses were found to include findings that, given subjects' identical cultural backgrounds, provided useful information on the broader groups to which they belonged. Additionally, as is generally the case with such projects, the study's initially broad and relatively complex subject matter underwent a certain degree of change as the interviews broached new themes, the collected material was systematised, focus points for publication were identified, and the topics for discussion were narrowed. An external expert – the aforementioned Zsuzsa Árendás<sup>10</sup> – was asked to familiarise the museum team with current scholarship on migration and instruct its members regarding the theory they would be applying to fieldwork, analysis and interpretation of material, and publication. As the irrelevance of the group approach was realised early on (i.e. at the time interview subjects were recruited), the individual approach was applied from the outset. Most team members found a ready hand-hold in the methodologies of participant observation and life course interviews, which could be focused, through the lens of material culture (the central point of the study), on migration stories, either in isolation, or as part of the family story or broader social context. In total, nearly 80 interviews were conducted, most of them with first-generation immigrants. The conversations took place at numerous locations around Budapest, including immigrants' homes and places of work, coffee houses, and the museum. The exact choice depended on how open subjects seemed toward the project, the ideal location being the subject's home, where objects could be seen in context. Where this was not the case, interviewees “merely” told stories about them, thus limiting interpretation to the viewpoints they provided. As there was no opportunity of extending fieldwork to areas that included the immigrants' countries of origin, work in Budapest concentrated on the intercultural relationships between immigrants and members of the countries that received them, and the problems they experienced in creating a new home. As a future step, the project might also investigate virtual relationships with people in the subjects' home countries and/or the characteristics of various transnational lifestyles in virtual space.<sup>11</sup>

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10 Zsuzsa Árendás, who wrote her PhD dissertation on the topic of migration and was formerly on the staff of the Central American University, currently works at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Social Sciences Research Centre, Sociology Institute. As an immigrant from Slovakia and partner in a mixed marriage (her husband is Indian), Árendás has personal experience with mobility and all that comes with it.

11 During the planning phase of the project, researchers learned of a project to be conducted on Facebook that would examine the process by which Hungarian Romany living in Canada built homes and achieved identity representation in light of the objects appearing overtly in their posts or incidentally in the backgrounds of photos. Such a study would have illuminated the topic of immigrant material culture from an entirely new perspective. One of the book's reviewers, too, stressed the importance of this type of online research and urged academics to make comparisons with online results (Lajos 2015).



## Publication

One result of the study was the publication of *Migrating Objects: The Material Culture of Immigrants in Hungary*, a Hungarian-language book in the museum's Tabula Series (Árendás–Szeljak eds. 2014). Among the ideas expressed at the commencement of the project was that of collective preparatory instruction, which it was hoped would provide researchers with a common knowledge base from which to effect identical language and terminology usage. The thought here was primarily for some of the broader concepts – transnationalism, home, intercultural negotiations, boundary objects, and “migrant worlds” – in which humans and objects share in the creation of meaning. At the same time, because different field situations presented researchers with different topics to consider, no consistent set of criteria was developed toward the systematisation and analysis of the materials collected by all team members; as a result, each researcher took the theoretical tack deemed to best fit his or her own material. Because the project was experimental, this method seemed acceptable despite its heterogeneous character, a judgment that demonstrates, as the book itself reflects, just how many perspectives, conceptual planes, systems of classification, approaches, and methods of interpretation can be applied to the subject matter of a single project, such as this one on the material culture of migrants. It should be noted that a similar degree of experimentation and methodological wayfinding went into the studies conducted at the international level.

In the final product, the book began with an introduction and two theoretical pieces, followed by a series of seven articles written by the project's six authors. An additional topic dealing not with the movement of human beings and their belongings, but with the transplantation of religious trappings into a foreign setting, was appended to the book at the decision of the editors, despite its disjuncture from the group's actual work. The idea was to show what happens when ideas or religious images travel from one place to another to then take form in a new location. Written by Judit Farkas, the article in question discusses how adherents of the Hare Krishna movement constructed a shrine and pilgrimage site in the Hungarian municipality of Somogyvámos and examines the roles played by the objects inside it (Farkas 2014). While five of the articles deal with the material cultures of other parts of the world – India, Egypt, the Middle East, Russia, and East and Southeast Asia – as featured in homes (i.e. personal, intimate spaces) (Árendás 2014b; Földessy 2014a, 2014b; Kerezsi 2014; Wilhelm 2014b), two others (in addition to that written by Judit Farkas) explore strategies associated with ethnic representations in the urban sphere as expressed through objects (of Andean musicians and Turkish fast food restaurant owners) appearing in a business context (Szeljak–Széli 2014; Vörös 2014).

The academic approaches used in dealing with the topics of migration and material culture feature a number of key concepts and points of theory that bear mentioning. In the volume's first theoretical exposition, for example, Gábor Wilhelm examines the seemingly universal concept of *home*, with specific reference to

interactions within the intricate web of relationships existing between the migrant, the home left behind, and the home developed elsewhere. What connects them, frequently, are objects, if not necessarily in their physical state (Wilhelm 2014a). Inseparable from the concept of home is that of *place*, interpreted to mean not only the site of permanent residence, but also the particular category of translocation. As Wilhelm notes, “expressing both the connections between places, and one’s relationship to that connection” forms part of the migrant’s life (Wilhelm 2014a: 26). In some cases, for example, an immigrant feels most profoundly at home in a place other than the one shared with spouse and family. In particular, the work done among immigrants from the Middle East demonstrated how the concepts of “the home where I live” and “the home that I came from” can sometimes diverge, the latter taking the form of a secondary space – such as an office, summer home, or even automobile interior – that can be furnished to resemble a second residence, where – for instance – smuggled in music can be played or telecommunications devices used to exchange musical experiences with relatives in America (Földessy 2014b: 269).

A concept useful in analysing both the connection between two (or, when family and employer relationships are considered, often even more) locations, and the ties migrants maintain with others is that of the *transnational social space*, described by Zsuzsa Árendás in her introductory essay on migration, migrant identities, and migrant material culture. To tackle the various parallels, complexities, and mixed cultural situations involved in living a transnational existence, Árendás introduces the approach of hybridisation as an alternative to *mélange* theory and the concept of creolisation, whose development, meaning, and pitfalls she also outlines (Árendás 2014a). Examples of multilocality, home establishment, and hybridisation arise in conjunction with various aspects of meal preparation (procurement, preparation, storage, service, consumption, tools), a topic broached by several studies referencing Indian, Russian, and Turkish immigrants, in which both public, and private spaces in individual and hospitality industry use were considered (Árendás 2014b, Kerecsi 2014, Vörös 2014).

Among theories bringing results in the study of material culture was that of the *boundary object*, which featured heavily in Gábor Wilhelm’s introductory thesis and research interpretations (Wilhelm 2014a; 2014b). Boundary objects are objects that “intermediate between various people and groups in the course of everyday communication because they are accessible to all and all can relate to them. Accordingly, the concept of a boundary object was born as a tool for examining the interactions of communities with different knowledge bases, modes of discourse, and routines, and it is in this context that the notion has meaning.” (Wilhelm 2014a: 42.) “At the same time, the concept of a boundary object can only be understood within a network-type theory of objects, as it is the relationships between individual participants that define them.” (Wilhelm 2014a: 42.)

Recommending a different type of classification of the objects presented by immigrants was Ágnes Kerecsi, who approached her work among Russian wives



from two different points of departure: the personal ethnicity constructions involved in the migrants' situation, and the function of their objects in expressing Russian identity. In this way, in the system of classification she devises, nostalgic and symbolic objects, such as photographs, albums, souvenirs, gift items, and articles indicative of the Russian mentality and language, along with the material world of foods and flavours, are all strongly demarcated (Kerezsi 2014).

Another concept that stood out was that of authenticity. György Szelják and Júlia Széli, for example, showed how the range of objects owned by ethnic Andeans who play street music and sell ethnic articles has adapted continuously since the 1990s to the changing discourse in Hungary about both the entrepreneurs themselves, and the subject of authenticity, dedicating an entire chapter to the process by which shirts produced in South America, having patterns embroidered onto them in Hungary, are sold to customers as items of traditional Hungarian folk art (Szelják–Széli 2014). The same concept is illuminated by Judit Farkas in connection with the holy places of Krishna followers, which are validated, along with the objects placed in them, by the person of the guru. Regarding the objects, it is important not that “they adhere to the original pattern, but that they meet the expectation of the spiritual master – whose knowledge of the original is deepest” (Farkas 2014: 219).

Concepts in anthropology receiving pronounced attention included *identity*, *ethnicity*, and in sensual anthropology, *vision* and *touch*. The sensual approach, for example, was applied by the present author to a study of the personal effects of immigrants from Egypt and the Middle East, examined – among other ways – in their relation to the places associated with their owner's arrival, stay, and permanent settlement in Hungary, and to other spaces they had used – dormitories, rental units, homes shared with spouses, offices, and passenger automobiles. By tracing the paths taken by individual objects / object types in their owners' adaptation to the target society, one can learn, among other things, what strategies an object's owner favours and what role the object plays in shaping the relationship between immigrant and new homeland (Földessy 2014a, 2014b).

## Album

In addition to studies written primarily for academic audiences, the project also undertook publication of a volume intended for a broader readership. From the working title *One Person – One Object – One Story*, the album in question eventually saw print as *The Objects of Home* (Szuhay–Kerék eds. 2014). Work on the book progressed in parallel with that of the studies, focusing on those of the project's previously known participants who were willing to have their faces, names, and personal stories appear in it. In this, it was the Asians who proved most reserved, so that in the end, not one actually agreed to the public display. At the same time, others were found who had not participated in the project, but were happy to share their stories for the purpose. Also, one museum staff member's participation in the

project was limited to this phase only. As its objective, the album asked individual interviewees to select a maximum of one or two of their personal possessions and provide an in-depth look at the meanings and stories behind them, so as to spotlight their owners' personal narratives.<sup>12</sup>

Compared to other books on similar themes, the volume's final section, which expresses the authors' own ethical stance, may be considered unique: in it, the academics ask themselves the same questions as those put to the immigrants, forcing themselves to articulate the meanings carried by or attributed to objects taken with them in their own travels. In doing so, the researchers realise, as their informants had, how much of themselves the effort forces them to reveal and what emotional effects it carries, even where the change of locations in question is voluntary and temporary, rather than a permanent abandonment of homeland. It is precisely for this reason, and by including persons falling outside the scope of the original project, that the volume steps outside the limits of the theme of migration and into the broader topic of mobility in general, providing insight into the complex systems of relationships, in all their different meanings and functions, that can exist between people and the things they possess.

In planning this volume, the researchers held it important that they create an opportunity for immigrants to represent themselves, to appear in ways not limited to their own scientific interpretations, to present themselves freely, and to speak of their lives. With this concept, the team wished to show who these immigrants really were, and in doing so, to put pressure on – and hopefully diminish – the forces shaping prejudice against them.

## Conclusion and Future

The publication of the studies conducted for this project introduced numerous new concepts, themes, and scientific approaches into Hungarian museological and object-theoretical thinking. As with any pioneering initiative, however, both the project itself, and the methodological experimentation it entailed would no doubt benefit from ex-post synthesis and comparative analysis, permitting the team's experiences (both positive, and negative) to be applied to future research and its findings published in other forms. Given that to date, the project's findings have been published only in Hungarian [although team members did strive to unveil them to as broad an audience as possible through international conferences,<sup>13</sup> and various writings on the volume of studies, too, have been published in English, as well as Hungarian (Lajos 2015, Turai 2016, Gergely 2018), long-term plans include

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12 The Viennese Völkerkundemuseum (known starting in 2013 as the Weltmuseum) held a panel exhibition on a similar theme using photographs of immigrants and their effects in its aula in 2012.

13 Presentations were given in various forums, including Kerala, Kolozsvár, Moscow, Paris, and Washington, and at international conferences in Budapest. For more on these, see the project home page at <http://migrantsinbudapest.blogspot.com/p/events.html>.

making the material of the book available in English in a sufficiently detailed, re-edited version, if not in its original form. As for the artefacts collected, original plans called for the development of a database to be made available to other researchers studying the subject.

## Refugee's Personal Possessions

In September of 2015, project team members, including Gabriella Vörös, Gábor Wilhelm, and project leader György Szeljak, along with museum staff member Ildikó Marton and museum photographer Eszter Kerék, undertook an initiative to collect objects left behind by refugees crossing the country's southern border at Röszke and Ásotthalom.<sup>14</sup> (Picture 4.) Entitled *The Ethnography of Objects Left Behind*, the project was regarded by the museum as an experiment that was simultaneously theoretical and practical. The items in question, classified as “trash” in the common mind, may be viewed by social scientists as a type of contemporary archaeological evidence: “What we are doing can be interpreted as archaeology: the finds originate from a momentary place of residence abandoned by its occupants, which we use to reconstruct their lives. Only the scale is different: days, weeks, months, not millennia.”<sup>15</sup>

From the standpoint of institutional practice, once inside the building, the collection raised a number of substantive questions: How should the museum relate to artefacts of unknown provenance? Should they be inventoried, and if so, into what collection? (The museum's non-Hungarian collections, it was noted, are grouped by continent of origin.) Indeed, these questions remain unanswered to the present day. To enable the use of the objects for museum education purposes, however, a demand that arose almost immediately, or to carry them to places such as schools, festivals, or other institutions, it would seem appropriate that a representative sample be included in the museum's core collection and the rest placed in what is known as the demo collection (currently under development), used specifically for pre-planned museum education functions. In the case of this particular collection, the “multi-meaningful objects” it encompasses can be effective as tools for generating understanding and empathy. This is especially true of those lacking any ethnic character, which, because they resemble the everyday objects we use ourselves, can prompt the observer to relive situations experienced by the former owner. In fact, as a result of their open-ended nature, such objects have the power of manifesting certain human experiences: the loss of one's home, economic uncertainty, transience, survival.

<sup>14</sup> The refugees left the area starting 16 September, following the Röszke riots, while collecting began on 22 September at sites that had not yet been cleared of litter.

<sup>15</sup> Quote by Gábor Wilhelm (Pálos 2016).

## Artefact of the Month

Among objects collected in Ásotthalom was a Muslim headscarf, found impaled on a barbed wire fence, which the museum displayed as its November “artefact of the month”. (*Picture 5*.) Its exhibition represented an attempt by the museum to introduce a new tone – one possible socio-scientific approach – into the discourse surrounding and following the recent wave of refugees. As nothing concrete is – or could be – known about the scarf, the text accompanying it focused on questions related to the general phenomenon of refugeeism and the dilemmas they present for the museum.<sup>16</sup> The exhibit created a considerable stir in the media, in particular in the left-wing press.

## The Sziget Festival Exhibition

The intense press response to the Muslim headscarf and the discussion of what lay behind it, combined with the recognition that the museum had reacted to a contemporary phenomenon so swiftly and, for that matter, in this particular way led to one further development: an invitation by the organisers of the Sziget Festival to set up a stand on the topic of migration, in collaboration with the Paris National Museum of Immigration History, in the festival’s “museum quarter”. The result was an installation dubbed “Tent Without Borders,” a programme that, given its stand-alone character, was accorded special privileges (in contrast to previous occasions, when the museum had participated in a capacity similar to that of other institutions). Inside, the objects collected from refugees were showcased in the manner of a studio exhibition under the title *Objects Left Behind*. The material itself was organised into six categories based on presumed original use and placed in Plexiglas boxes on the ground. The surrounding walls were furnished with information explaining both the manner in which the objects had been collected, and the professional and ethical dilemmas involved, including those associated with restoration. (*Picture 6*.) Visitors were given guided tours and asked to invent stories about the objects they saw. These were then published on the museum Web page. Visitors were also introduced to individual objects from the project’s photographic volume, the personal stories that went with them, and the content of the books published upon project conclusion. On the whole, the installation represented an experiment on the part of the museum at reaching a young, international audience with the aim of gaining a better understanding of how the material might later be used in a museum education setting.

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<sup>16</sup> For the text accompanying the scarf, see the museum Web page at <http://www.neprajz.hu/gyujtemenyek/a-honap-mutargya/muszlim-noi-kendo.html>

## Exhibition on Mixed Marriages

In 2017, the Museum of Ethnography – under a multiannual contract with the Hungarian State Opera House – was tasked with developing an exhibition to accompany the latter's production of *West Side Story*. One of four studio exhibitions on topics related to ongoing performances installed each year at Erkel Theatre, “*Ísztszázjd sztori*” (East Side Story) – *Boundless Love: Stories of Mixed Marriages and their Material Manifestations*<sup>17</sup> offered a counterpoint to the musical's original tragic theme. (Picture 7.) The exhibition examined romantic relationships between immigrants and Hungarians that had ended in cohabitation, marriage, and family. During the preparatory phase, the museum team reinitiated contact with couples interviewed previously for the project on immigrant material culture, in the end managing to recruit five to the new purpose. In each case, husband, wife, or both offered perspective on the relationship by answering the following questions: 1. How did you meet? 2. How did others in your environment react to the ways in which the foreign spouse was different? and 3. What does the fact that one of you is from a foreign culture mean to you? All material showcased for the exhibition – a total of nearly twenty artefacts in all – were, with a single exception, supplied on loan by the couples themselves. Also spotlighted were the texts of the interviews. Though in the course of the original project, the researchers had already largely acquainted themselves with the objects each immigrant spouse associated with home, the new set of questions saw a variety of new material surface: items that witnessed to the couples' personal relationships (e.g. wedding photos), along with others reflecting a desire or effort to teach about or promote understanding of the “otherness” manifested in the relationship between their respective cultures. This project, like *Migrating Objects* before it, represented an experiment in giving voice, via the exhibitory environment, to a body of material whose meaning resides primarily in the personal stories attached to it.

## Future Museum Plans on the Topic of Migration

The Museum of Ethnography, as it works to cast itself in the mould of a social science museum, judges some treatment of the topic of migration – as part of the greater subject area of mobility, cultural connection, and mutual cultural impact – to be of an imperative nature. An important (indeed, perhaps the most important) opportunity in this regard is the new permanent exhibition to be installed in the museum's new building currently under construction in Budapest's historic City Park as part of the Liget Budapest Project. In covering the topics of mobility and intercultural relationships, this new exhibition will touch on such integrally related concepts as

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17 Although, after several postponements, the opening ceremony was eventually abandoned, the exhibition itself was open to the public from 17 May until 16 July 2017.

immigration, emigration, wayfaring and its various forms, home, and “hominess,” with specific illustrations coming in part from the museum’s own core material (the wanderings of the Bukovinian Székely, the forced emigration of Hungarian Slovaks and Swabians, population exchanges, the repatriation of ethnic Hungarians from Transylvania), and in part from future research into such contemporary phenomena as the emigration of Hungarians to other countries in the European Union. Because (with the exception of its collection of objects left by refugees along country’s southern border) institutional holdings related to the material possessions of Third World immigrants consists primarily in textual and audio-visual documentation, it is not inconceivable that the presentation of this corpus in the museum’s new permanent exhibition will take the form of a modern multi-media installation.

*Translated by Rachel Maltese*

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### **Bevándorlók élete a tárgyaikkal és a tárgyaikon keresztül**

A cikk a Néprajzi Múzeum hat kutatója által 2011 és 2014 között az OTKA-kutatási Alap (ma Nemzeti Kutatási, Fejlesztési és Innovációs Hivatal) támogatásával végzett, budapesti bevándorlók tárgykultúrájáról folytatott kutatását és annak tudományos kihívásait és hozadékát mutatja be. A különböző etnikai (latin-amerikai, arab, török, orosz, indiai és kelet-ázsiai) származású bevándorlók élet- és migrációtörténetének megközelítése a jelentésteli tárgyaikon keresztül a migráció- és a tárgykultúra-kutatás összekötésének több általános elméleti kérdését és fogalmát (pl. transznacionalizmus, hibriditás, otthon, határtárgy, autenticitás) vetette föl, amelyek a kutatók egyénileg választott megközelítéseivel (tárgyrendszerek, észleleti antropológia) gazdagodtak. A szóban forgó kutatáson túl a migráció tematikáját érintő múzeumi kiállítások és egyéb programok is említésre kerülnek, csakúgy, mint a kutatás anyagának további múzeumi és azon kívüli felhasználási lehetőségei, valamint az általa ösztönzött további gyűjtési (menekültek hátrahagyott tárgyai), kiállítás (vegyes házasságok jelentésteljes tárgyai), tervek.

### **Viața imigranților cu și prin obiectele acestora**

Studiul de față prezintă o cercetarea efectuată de șase cercetători ai Muzeului Etnografic din Budapesta între anii 2011 și 2014, susținută de Fondul Național de Cercetare Științifică (astăzi Oficiul Național de Cercetare, Dezvoltare și Inovare), despre cultura materială a imigranților din Budapesta, dar și provocările, respectiv consecințele științifice ale acesteia. Abordarea povestirii vieții și istoriei migrației prin obiecte pline de semnificații a imigranților de diferite origini etnice (proveniți din America Latină, țările arabe, Turcia, Rusia, India, Asia de Est) a ridicat mai multe întrebări și noțiuni teoretice de conexiune a cercetării migrației și cea a culturii materiale (de ex. transnaționalism, hibridizare, vatră, obiect hotar, autenticitate), care au fost îmbogățite și cu abordările individuale ale cercetătorilor (sisteme de obiecte, antropológia sensurilor). Pe lângă cercetarea în cauză se face referire și la alte expoziții, programe legate de migrație, dar și la alte posibile utilizări ale materialului sub diverse forme, lucrări de colectare ulterioare (obiectele lăsate în urmă de imigranți), noi expoziții (obiectele pline de semnificații ale unei căsătorii mixte), noi planuri.

### **The Lives of Migrants With, and Through, Their Objects**

This article presents a research which was carried out by 6 curators of the Museum of Ethnography between 2011 and 2014 about the material culture of immigrants settled in Budapest, and was supported by the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund (nowadays National Research, Development and Innovation Office), as well as its scientific challenges and results. It focused on the approach of life and migration history of migrants of different ethnic origin (Latin American, Arabic, Turkish, Russian, Indian, and East Asian) through their meaningful objects. This interconnection of migration and material culture studies has revealed several general theoretical questions and notions such as transnationalism, hybridisation, home, boundary object, authenticity, enriched by the researchers' individually chosen approaches (system of objects, anthropology of the senses). Putting the research in question in a wider context, past exhibitions and other projects in the museum touching the thematic of migration are also discussed, as well as the future possibilities of utilisation of the collected material and further collecting (refugees' left behind objects), exhibition (mixed couples' meaningful objects) and museum plans which were based on or inspired by the given research.

## Pictures



1. Culture exhibition, 1976  
(Photo: Museum of Ethnography)



2. Room on the topic of migration from The Other exhibition,  
at the Museum of Ethnography, 2008 (Photo: Krisztina Sarnyai)



3. Object-centred activity conducted with immigrants as part of the Contact Zone project, 2009 (Photo: György Máté)



4. Collecting artefacts in Rösztke in the wake of the 2015 migrant wave, 2015 (Photo: Eszter Kerék)





5. Muslim women's headscarf exhibited as part of the Artefact of the Month series, 2015  
(Photo: Eszter Kerék)



6. Refugee's effects from Objects Left Behind exhibition at the Sziget Festival, 2016  
(Photo: Eszter Kerék)





7. "Íszt szájd sztori" (East Side Story) – Boundless Love exhibition at Erkel Theatre, 2017  
(Photo: Krisztina Sarnyai)