

# Hungarian domestics in Belgium, 1930-1949<sup>1</sup>

VERA HAJTÓ

\_\_\_ PhD student at the RU 'Modernity & Society 1800-2000' – Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

## 1. INTRODUCTION

"I am not beautiful,  
Yet, I am the most wanted woman.  
I am not rich,  
Yet I am worth my weight in gold.  
I might be dull, stupid,  
Dirty and mean,  
Yet, all the doors are open for me.  
I am a welcome guest  
All of the elite compete for me.  
I am a maid."<sup>2</sup>

This riddle was published in a Finnish newspaper in 1925 when hundreds of young, single women entered a world migration system to find their future in domestic service. Hungarian migrant women were just one of the many groups of young females who participated in an intra-European migration wave and who arrived in a foreign country to work in households in need of their help. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the employment sector for domestic service continued to form a serious social problem in Europe and North-America. Young, single women left their family and their home country to cross borders, sometimes even the ocean, to be engaged in personal service to a foreign household as a live-in maid, becoming either a cook, a chamber maid or a nanny or, more often than not during the period, responsible for all domestic chores. Hungarian women were part of a migration wave very similar to that of German, Irish, Finnish or Luxembourgian women, but it did have its peculiarities. These Hungarian women were recruited for domestic service to Belgium and I argue that they were a partial solution to the social crisis which was occurring in Belgian society. This

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<sup>2</sup> Toveritar 10 Febr. 1925, poem by Arvo Lindewall, in Burnet (1986, 167).

social crisis was caused by a shortage in indigenous labour and it was within the middle to upper-middle class households of Brussels, Antwerp, Gent and Liège where these women were needed. Despite their lack of knowledge of French or Dutch, they were readily welcomed and the initiative to recruit them became a major success.

The interwar period brought a revival of domesticity: the family was held in high esteem, as were children, and gender roles were strictly divided.<sup>3</sup> After the devastation of the war, women were often forced to return to their 'female' duties and the fertility balance had to be restored. This view was clearly propagated by catholic organizations who did not favour the parting of young women from their families to work outside of the home. If that proved to be necessary, catholic newspapers and organizations preferred an employment that kept women within domestic related activities. They firmly emphasized the temporary feature of the work and in such cases it could then even be practice for a future life as a wife and mother.

These requirements for female employment made it possible for catholic and social organizations to initiate, facilitate and coordinate the recruitment and settlement of Hungarian women as domestic servants in Belgium.

This article mainly focuses on the social integration of Hungarian women who came to Belgium as domestic servants, but also contributes to a discussion concerning the crisis of domestic service in Europe and Belgium during the interwar period. It analyses the push and pull factors influencing the migration of Hungarian domestic servants, as well as the important role played by the household crisis with regards to the experiences of Hungarian maids. It examines in particular the crucial role of Catholic social organisations in the recruitment program and in the integration process of the servants.

Belgium hosted many migrant women and provided them with employment in a household. The experiences of those women may differ from one another. Drawing on a variety of written and oral sources, this article outlines the case of the recruitment program of Hungarian domestic workers and the work of social organisations facilitating the migration. Oral sources help to reveal the individual experiences and decision making processes of these migrants, as well as looking at the interaction between them and the social agencies in the 1930s.

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<sup>3</sup>. The following works give a general overview about the situation of women, work and domesticity during the interwar period in Europe: Simonton (1998, 2006), Beddoe (1989) and McBride (1976).

## 2. MIGRANT DOMESTICS AND THE DOMESTIC SERVICE IN EUROPE

"The era of World War I witnessed the end of the middle-class live-in servant. Although service continued to be the major occupier of women until 1940 [...], the middle-class employment of live-in domestics had ended by 1920"

Theresa McBride argues (1976, 111). However, its existence was prolonged with the help of the non-indigenous workforce. Migrants continued to fulfil the needs of the middle-class household that considerably and traditionally relied on the help of live-in servants.

From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the local workforce had already started to move into other occupations such as industrial employment. The traditional supplier of domestic servants, the countryside, no longer provided the urban households with enough employees as it had done previously. Live-in domestic service slowly lost its attractiveness and started to be seen as an occupation where the worker had to work long and hard without any social security and with no privacy or freedom. Live-in employees worked a good deal more than 8 hours a day, and in many instances without knowing exactly how many they actually had worked and without a proper night's rest. Concerning their personal privacy, their rooms often lacked a lock meaning they could neither lock away their personal belongings, nor secure themselves at night.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, an employment in a factory or in an office offered a contract with fixed working hours and the company of other young working people at the work place. Employment did not interfere with leisure time so the worker enjoyed free evenings in an urban environment and personal freedom without any domestic control (Gubin, 2001).

But there remained other options in the sector of domestic service, which started to change naturally. Households could appeal to one of the rapidly growing number of day-workers or non-residential servants who arrived in the morning and returned home in the evening. Already by around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the bulk of domestic servants remained as live-in maids, the number of non-residential servants began to rise (Simonton, 1998, 202). They were needed to provide extra help alongside the residential

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<sup>4</sup> Verbeke (N.), *Het meidenprobleem in het Brusselsche*, Typewritten manuscript in the archive of Kadoc, KC3614. This manuscript contains a survey conducted in 1942 about the life conditions of domestic servants living in or around Brussels, prepared on the initiative of the Belgian youth organization, Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne Féminine. Verbeke prepared 250 interviews with domestic servants, three of whom were Hungarian. She also made inquiries among the organizations that supported the maids.

servants within the household, mainly contributing to the hard physical work required around the house, such as the big weekly or monthly laundry work or ironing. After World War II, non-residential servants were able to become cooks or nannies, although this took a long time when it did happen. The growing number of women willing to go into non-residential service was due to the different type of daily work available, compared to that which was on offer in residential service. It provided the employee with fixed working hours and, most importantly; it allowed the maid to have a family, her own household and a private life. The employment sector for domestic service, in this way, became more attractive to many women (Gubin, 2001, 40-41).

During the interwar period, private organizations found another solution for easing the labour shortage by recruiting the workforce from abroad. Interestingly, the economic crisis of the 1930s certainly helped the recruitment, as those who could not find employment at home were willing to leave in search for it elsewhere. The economic push and pull factors played a great roll in the migratory waves of young women all over Europe. Such was the case of German girls who streamed into the Netherlands from the early 1920s onwards looking for domestic work. They escaped from the poverty and misery of post-war German reality caused by huge unemployment and the economic crisis (Henkes, 1995). Another example is the migration of Irish women to England in search of better wages and a better life than they could find back home to Ireland (Ryan, 2003, 2004).

The employment of a live-in servant should have offered something more to a migrant employee than it did to a local worker. In fact it offered quite the opposite. Many of the migrants experienced their migration as something unusual, an adventure. They travelled alone to a foreign country where they heard people talking in a foreign language and who lived according to their own "foreign" habits. Many migrants considered their journey and employment as a once in a lifetime experience as they intended to return after some years of work. The closed nature of domestic work did not scare them away; on the contrary, it meant fixed and safe accommodation upon arrival and throughout their stay, allowing them to acclimatise and to settle in. When they had gradually established a social network within the host country, they were able to open a window onto the outside world and break away from their isolation by changing their place of service and employer, or by attending meetings of migrant organizations. Most importantly and without any doubt, they could earn much more than was possible back home in their own country. This explains why, while young German women went to

Hungary to become child nurses in Hungarian families, Hungarian girls often went to Belgium in order to do similar jobs in Belgian households.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, migrant domestic workers came into contact with dangerous elements, as their local colleagues did, but often much more pronounced. It was certainly the case regarding the "moral safety" of these young, mostly single women travelling alone and living without the parental supervision in an urban environment. It was a problem that the local authorities, the private organizations that organized the recruitment, and also the governments involved, had to face and solve. It proved to be a time consuming task as, in contrast with local girls, a young, single migrant woman did not have her family close by to advise her in cases of abuse.

Domestic service provided employment for women during economically hard times and, at the same time, migrant women could fill the vacancies left by the high turnover of live-in domestics. Without a shadow of a doubt, the domestic service sector contributed greatly to the increasing number of female participants within the migratory system in Europe.

### 3. BELGIUM AND THE CRISIS

International developments within the domestic service sector evidently also existed in Belgium. Up until World War I, migrants working as domestic workers in Belgian households mainly came from neighbouring countries such as France, the Netherlands or Luxembourg. After the war, there was a growing tendency for migrants to come from greater distances such as Central and Eastern Europe or from the Southern part of Europe. They did not arrive spontaneously as previous migrants had done but as members of specifically recruited worker groups (Morelli, 2001; Caestecker, 1990).

After 1918, the number of domestic servants in Belgium decreased as a result of the unwillingness of the local workforce to fill this type of employment combined with the preference for working in other sectors. According to Eliane Gubin, another reason why the traditional source of domestic help, the countryside, no longer provided so many employees was the growing prosperity of farmers. Economic wealth took away the economical pressure of sending young girls out to service as a means of contributing to the family household. However, the economic crisis of the 1930s brought a sudden change to the situation. Once more, young girls from

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<sup>5</sup>. *Katolikus Háziasszonyok Lapja* (The newspaper of the Catholic Housewives), Budapest, no. 5, May 1930.

the countryside decided to work in urban households as live-in servants alongside their foreign counterparts (Gubin, 2001, 41-44).

Another result of the shortage of live-in servants during the first decade of the interwar period is the considerable growth of the employment of non-residential workers in Belgian households. This growth precisely corresponds to the international tendency for the changing position of residential and non-residential workers in the domestic service sector. This development within households stopped with the increasing recruitment of domestic workers from abroad and the blow from the economic crisis of the 1930s (*Ibid.*, 40, 58).

The changes and the general problem of labour shortage grabbed the attention of the Belgian public and the problems became widely known and discussed. Catholic and other private organizations tried to trigger public debates in magazines and through other channels in order to find solutions to the problematic issues within households.<sup>6</sup> I believe that the wide publicity made the problem look larger than it was, but it does not mean that the need for domestic servants did not exist. The recruitment and experience of Hungarian maids illustrate this assumption. In 1929, Father Valère Fallon, a prominent member of the League for Families with Numerous Children (*Bond voor Kroostrijke Gezinnen*), visited Hungary on the occasion of an international conference and, with the support of others, initiated the idea of recruiting Hungarian women for the service of families with numerous children.<sup>7</sup> Later that year, another member of the League for Families with Numerous Children visited Hungary and met with highly ranked Hungarian catholic social workers in order to win their support for a bilateral recruitment program for domestic servants. The League was so determined in its ambition to meet the needs of its Belgian members that it declared to the Hungarian organisations and officials that the League would take responsibility for all kinds of administrative burdens. It carried out negotiations with the Hungarian government as well as with the Belgian Ministry of Work, officially took on the task and responsibility of providing the girls with employment, advanced the travelling costs of the maids, as well as providing a deposit for their possible return journey and, most importantly, as was

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<sup>6</sup>. There was a column during the entire year of 1930, in the monthly women magazine *La femme belge* about the different aspects of the domestic service crisis in Belgium. The readers could make comments and participate in the debate. By bringing up successful solutions from foreign countries as examples, the magazine tried to widen the horizons of its readers and placed the Belgian case into context.

<sup>7</sup>. *La femme belge*, November, 1930, p. 529.

unique in the domestic service sector in the period; introduced an obligatory working contract between employers and employees.<sup>8</sup>

The November 1929 issue of the monthly review of the League announced that its member families could obtain the services of a Hungarian domestic worker. It requested that those amongst its readers who needed domestic help should report and apply to the Chief Secretary of the League in order to obtain a 'Hungarian' maid. The reaction of the families illustrates the sense of crises and the actual circumstances of the households.

"After publishing the news about the activities of the League concerning the employment of the Hungarian maids, many applications arrived to the General-secretary. After several days, more than hundred of them came in and they keep coming. The letters express thanks for the initiative of the League. The situations described in some letters are distressing. So wrote to us a father: 'We have eight children: the oldest is 15 years old and the youngest is 18 months old; we have been without a maid already three years. My wife is exhausted by the work. Whatever the outcome of your initiative will be, we are very grateful for the efforts of the League'.<sup>9</sup>

The first group of domestic servants arrived in January 1930 and the League managed to place more than 300 Hungarian domestic workers during the first half year of the action.<sup>10</sup> The maids arrived in monthly groups of approximately 15-20 people and the process accelerated quickly.<sup>11</sup> According to data from the Belgian National Institute of Statistics in the year 1938, 1270 Hungarian maids worked in the Belgian domestic sphere. However, their number would drastically drop after World War II.<sup>12</sup>

Approximately 2000 young Hungarian women came to Belgium in the framework of this recruitment program between 1930 and 1949. Most interesting to note is that these Hungarian migrant women did not arrive in an empty vacuum. The Hungarians had already had a short migration history with Belgium. Between 1923 and 1930, approximately 22,000 Hungarian children received temporary home and parents for one or several vacation periods in Belgium (Rottenbiller, 1936, 31-32). This humanitarian action

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<sup>8</sup> MOL (Magyar Országos Levéltár) (Hungarian National Archive) K71 5cs. A report from the Hungarian embassy in Brussels to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry.

<sup>9</sup> *Maandblad van den Bond der Kroostrijke Gezinnen in België*, Vol. 10, no.1, January 1930, p. 14 (Translation from Dutch to English by V.H.).

<sup>10</sup> *Maandblad van den Bond der Kroostrijke Gezinnen in België*, Vol.11, no.8, Aug.-Sept., 1931, p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> *Belgumi Magyar Könyv* (Hungarian Book in Belgium), Brussels, 1934, p. 57. It was a newspaper/calendar/handbook published for the Hungarian migrant community in Belgium.

<sup>12</sup> *Statistique des Étrangers*, Ministère Des Affaires Économiques, Office central de Statistique, 30 juin 1938, pp. 58-59.

attracted great public attention, especially from catholic circles, and resulted in many personal relationships developing between the two countries. These relationships later facilitated the organization of the recruitment program of the maids.

#### 4. GIRLS WITH A CONTRACT

Two offices worked for the coordination of the recruitment program. One of them was in Budapest, where information was kept about the girls. This so called Nemzetközi Elhelyező Iroda (International Placement Bureau) intermediated between the migrants and the Hungarian authorities and organised the travelling. The employees of the bureau accompanied the girls to the railway station and gave detailed travel information.

In Brussels, the League maintained the other office which looked after the placement of the arriving maids and accommodation within a special home. This office provided guidance in familiarising migrants to the foreign environment and was intended as support for the girls throughout their stay. This placement office was led by a missionary priest and, during the first months of the program, a female Catholic social worker; this was later increased to two, all of whom had come to Belgium during the action to home children. These social workers had built up very efficient social networks among prominent members of the Belgian middle class during their work to accommodate the needs of their protégées. They helped the girls during their stay and they stood at the centre of the social life of many 'Hungarian maids'.<sup>13</sup>

The maids could not leave Hungary before they had received a working contract, proof that they had secured employment and would begin to work at their destination upon arrival. The contract offered certainty for the Hungarian and Belgian authorities and information for the migrants about their employment and future life. A standard contract was drawn up by Father Valère Fallon and a Hungarian social sister.<sup>14</sup> By writing a working contract, they became involved in pioneering work. As the 1942 survey regarding the living and working conditions of domestic workers around Brussels showed, among the 250 domestic servants who filled out the questionnaire, there were only three who had a signed working agreement. Those three were

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<sup>13</sup>. *Belgiumi Magyar Könyv* (Hungarian Book in Belgium), Brussels, 1934, p. 54.

<sup>14</sup>. *La femme belge*, November, 1930, p. 529.

Hungarians.<sup>15</sup> The necessity of a working contract was already on the agenda of Belgian politicians and social workers. Though during the interwar period several European countries introduced social laws and working contracts regulating the domestic service sector, this was not the case in Belgium before World War II. Although between 1923 and 1940 five legislative measures had tentatively been discussed within the Belgian parliament, none of them had survived. During the interwar period, only a handful of sporadic legislative measures were introduced, none of which provided real guidance or a framework for domestic service employment. Perhaps this was because of a lack of trade union support as employees of the domestic service sector did not form trade unions during the interwar period and only did so after World War II (De Mayer & Van Rompaey, 1996, 69-71).

Providing migrants with an obligatory working agreement could make working as a live-in servant more attractive to a foreign workforce. It also stabilized the position of residential service in contrast to a non-residential one. The Hungarian maids signed a contract for two years which bound them to a family with numerous children. The contract included a minimum wage, payable to the employee and thereby preventing them from being underpaid.<sup>16</sup> Employers had to provide the domestic servant with a healthy diet and proper accommodation. The cost of insurance in the case of accident was also paid by them, thereby guaranteeing social security regulations applied to Hungarian servants as it did to their Belgian colleagues. The maid was entitled to receive at least one half day off per week, which should preferably fall on a Sunday. The travelling costs from and, where applicable, back to Hungary were advanced by the League of Families with Numerous Children. The employers had to pay these costs back to the League when the servants arrived at their household. However, the families were allowed to retain travelling costs from the salary of the servants whose contract was for a longer period.<sup>17</sup>

The fact that Belgian employers were willing to sign a contract which obliged them to except unusual financial and administrative demands gives us other proof of the lack of available residential service. The crisis was present within households.

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<sup>15</sup>. Verbeke (N.), *Het meidenprobleem in het Brusselsche*. The questionnaires filled in by the maids can be found in the appendix of the survey.

<sup>16</sup>. In 1942, their minimum wage was 350 BEF, but according to the survey of Verbeke, they received more than that, 400 or 500 BEF. This lay in the higher ranks of the salaries local maids received. In Verbeke (N.), *Het meidenprobleem in het Brusselsche*, p. 102.

<sup>17</sup>. Verbeke (N.), *Het meidenprobleem in het Brusselsche*, pp.102-103 and *La femme belge*, November, 1930, p. 529.

The emphasis on the Sunday off shows that those who drew up the contract were concerned not only with the physical well being of the maids, but also with their religious and moral lives. Already in Hungary during the application and selection procedure, it was an important criterion to be in possession of a letter of recommendation from the priest of the local parish where the migrant belonged to.<sup>18</sup> The organizers of the recruitment and all the catholic organizations supporting it tried to assemble such a group of young females, so called "good Catholics", who would not form a moral threat to the host society by sharing the standards of the catholic conservative circles. For the need of the middle class Belgian households, catholic organisations were willing to provide hard working and reliable live-in servants.

## 5. WHO MIGRATED AND WHY?

The placement bureau in Brussels found employment for the diverse needs of the Belgian households. There was a wide pool of girls with different social and educational backgrounds to choose from; although it is not certain if the bureau always took the social background of the women into consideration while it assigned the workplaces. However, the employers did have to indicate in the working agreement the type of employment which they were hiring the servant for, e.g., chamber maid, cook, nanny.

Often the social background of the migrants defined their motivation to come. We can clearly distinguish three main groups of migrants based on their social background and personal intentions.

Firstly, there were women from middle and upper-middle class families. Many amongst them received higher education. Their motivation was often to learn languages and educate themselves further and they considered these jobs abroad as a traineeship. They were employed in the higher ranked household jobs, such as child-nurse or governess.<sup>19</sup> The financial advantages of the employment in their case were secondary. This particular group of migrant shows how the initiative to recruit women to work in households had a good standing reputation. The image and perception of domestic service suddenly became positive in the narrative of catholic literature. In the

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<sup>18</sup>. "At the parish, I was lucky because the priest talked French and he gave me a letter of recommendation in French. It was very helpful" (Translation from Hungarian to English by V.H.). Interview carried out with E.M., Brussels, 8th of July, 2005.

<sup>19</sup>. Verbeke (N.), *Het meidenprobleem in het Brusselsche*, p. 101.

monthly magazine of the Hungarian catholic organization supervising the recruitment program, the message is obvious for girls willing to go into service, though it is equally clear that there existed other, far less positive attributes of this kind of work.

"It is not shameful to go into service. It is a well known habit abroad that girls from middle-class families decide to work in another's household. For example, in Switzerland the German speaking girls work for French speaking families... Girls who are coming from less well-to-do families, service at an upper middle-class family can be comparable to the years of college education of the wealthy young ladies..."<sup>20</sup>

The chance to go into service abroad was considered to be beneficial for each and every girl, regardless of their social background. Domestic service was viewed not only as useful training for the future married life of a young woman, but such an employment in a middle-class environment was also educative and taught "good tastes and manners".<sup>21</sup> It fulfilled all the educational objectives, which made up for the curricula for the gendered education system. Future domestic servants, as in the official school system, learned "girl-specific" subjects, such as modern languages, etiquette and household related activities. Moreover, domestic service preserved the familial context for work, where young, single women were expected to live in. However, it is important to note that a girl from a Hungarian middle-class family would never have gone to work as a domestic servant in another Hungarian household, especially not as a paid employee. The opportunity to go abroad far from the home environment, to work for a good salary far better than in Hungary, and the adventurous nature of such a trip, all combined to suddenly make domestic service an option for many girls from a middle-class background.

The second group consisted of daughters of artisans, tradesmen or clerks. They regularly sent money back to their families, but also tried to save for their own reasons, for example for their dowry.<sup>22</sup> The opportunity to learn French and occasionally practice their German language skills also encouraged them to leave and participate in the recruitment program.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Katolikus Háziasszonyok Lapja* (The newspaper of the Catholic Housewives), Budapest, no. 5, May 1930, pp. 56-57 (Translation from Hungarian to English by V.H.).

<sup>21</sup> *Katolikus Háziasszonyok Lapja* (The newspaper of the Catholic Housewives), Budapest, no. 5, May 1930, p. 57.

<sup>22</sup> Verbeke (N.), *Het meidenprobleem in het Brusselsche*, p. 101.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with K.L., Tapolca, Hungary, 19th July 2006. She worked as a domestic servant in several households in Belgium. Her father was a shoe-maker and she had one brother.

The background of the third group was the least advantageous. They came from large farming families where allowing one of their own to earn a wage and to send money back meant considerable help for the family.<sup>24</sup>

Although this female migration consisted mainly of young, unmarried women, there were also older women who joined in order to be able to escape from a difficult domestic situation such as a divorce and in spite of the religious and moral criteria the applicants had to meet. These cases did not form the mainstream of this migratory process. A daughter of such a woman testifies:

"I know, that my parents divorced, because they had lived with the grandmother and the grandmother wasn't the person... and my mum was coming from a decent family, but not wealthy... there they had their sons educated... She wanted to become a nurse, but it didn't work out. She was given in marriage because she was a pretty girl, she was given to my dad... When I was four she had had enough and they divorced and then there was that opportunity, if she wanted to raise me and support me, she had to pay, but what could she earn in Hungary! And then she came to Belgium and then she earned so much that I was a student in a convent school and I was living there also".<sup>25</sup>

The mother of this interviewee migrated through the recruitment program so she could consolidate her situation, not to become a wife or mother, but to be able to earn enough and manage to bring her daughter to Belgium. It was only possible to work in a familial context. She worked 14 years in service to be able to do so, but she lived and worked in the household of the family who made it possible to bring her daughter to Belgium by adopting her child. Although a divorced woman such as her might not have met the requirements of being a good catholic woman, she possessed the necessary social networks from her earlier participation in religious activities and these provided her with the opportunity to start again under proper surveillance.

The common feature in the migratory process of all of the domestic servants regardless of their social background was the social network surrounding the migrant. In the majority of the cases it was the most crucial factor in their decision, as well as in their settlement at arrival. It proves that "migrants did not leave their networks" (Hoerder, 1999, 80). The information about the recruitment reached them through a female friend, a local priest, neighbours, or a family member who had heard about the program, or who participated in its organization. A former neighbouring family passed on the

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<sup>24</sup> Verbeke (N.), *Het meidenprobleem in het Brusselsche*, p. 101.

<sup>25</sup> Interview carried out with E.W., Brussels, 1st of December 2005 (Translation from Hungarian to English by V.H.).

information not only about the recruitment program, but about Belgian living conditions and society. It also happened that the migrant had already visited as a child and had kept in touch with her former foster family and other Belgian acquaintances.<sup>26</sup>

## 6. THE CIRCLE OF ÁRPÁDHÁZI BLESSED MARGARET<sup>27</sup>

"Most of us were single and obtained a peculiar nickname, 'spinsters'. We didn't have hard feelings against them, they were about right. We didn't have time to marry. On our evening off we quickly washed the rest of the dishes and went straightaway to the 'Hungarian House'. Oh! To the cinema, maybe two times a year when we managed to visit one..."<sup>28</sup>

The 'Hungarian House' was established during the first years of the 1930s in Brussels. It coordinated the social life of the Hungarian migrants living in Belgium. There was a social committee led by a missionary priest as head of the committee and other members, such as the female social workers who worked in the domestic servant program. The committee received considerable support from the Hungarian government and represented the migrants in administrative and social matters with the Belgian authorities. Next to the administrative assistance, the committee also stood at the centre of the social life of the migrants. Its members organized cultural activities: carnival balls, excursions, celebrations on national festivals, exhibitions. It had a library and also provided the migrant with regular French language courses for better integration.

The domestic servants were the core of the community in the 1930s. They participated in excursions, used the library, followed the French lessons and were the chief organizers of the festivities.<sup>29</sup>

When the League of Families with Numerous Children proposed the Hungarian authorities and organizations to "import" Hungarian domestic workers to Belgian households, it also took the responsibility for the moral

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<sup>26</sup>. Interviews carried out with E.M., Brussels, 8th of July 2005 and with E.W., Brussels, 1st of December 2005. Both women were members of the Circle of Blessed Margaret.

<sup>27</sup>. In 1936, the Circle was named after Hungarian Blessed Margaret, who became a Saint after World War II. In the minutes of the meetings of the Circle she is called Blessed, but during the interviews the interviewees referred to the Circle of Saint Margaret.

<sup>28</sup>. Interview carried out with E.M., Brussels, 8th of July 2005.

<sup>29</sup>. *Belgiumi Magyar Könyv* (Hungarian Book in Belgium), Brussels, 1934, 1935, 1937 and 1939.

guidance of the migrant women and to act as substitute for the non-present family. It offered temporary accommodation for those who were in the process of changing their employers. The maids could also visit a specially set up Home during their free time where they entertained themselves under the proper supervision of a missionary priest.<sup>30</sup> Next to Brussels there were Homes for Hungarian domestic workers in Liège, Antwerp, Bruges and Gent.<sup>31</sup> On average, 30-50 girls visited these Homes on their free Sunday afternoons, although many stopped visiting the Homes after settling down in their new environment. This did not discourage the social workers and the missionary priests from participating in the organization and involving as many maids as possible in order to build up a migrant organization.<sup>32</sup> On the 26<sup>th</sup> January 1936, the social workers, the missionary priest of the Hungarian migrant community and 120 Hungarian domestic servants established the Circle of Árpádházi Blessed Margaret in Brussels, and a couple of weeks later a branch with some 40 members also opened in Antwerp. With this project, the Catholic Church showed considerable organizational influence within the Hungarian domestic servants' social life and leisure time. During the first sitting of the Circle, the program started with prayers and continued with the female president welcoming those present and listing the rules: "the patronage of the poor, visiting of the sick and the affectionate support of fellow members". The girls were asked to contribute with at least one hour handicraft per week to the charity activities of the Circle and "their attention was called gently to their possible errors and they were asked to strive to follow the right path in their laborious life". The meeting was closed with prayers and devout songs. In general, the meetings of the organization followed a strict pattern. Firstly the president welcomed the members and then the group discussed the organisation of the celebration of an upcoming church festival or Hungarian national festival. The president also often announced possible charitable activities towards their fellow migrants living in poor circumstances in Belgium. The meetings always ended with prayers and the singing of the self-written march of the Circle.

"Bless, Bless the Providence,  
Who gives us hope for a better Future,  
Light our weary Faith to high fire,  
Believing in our poor Nation's glorious revival.  
Up and forth, Labour and Faith will lead us to Triumph!

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<sup>30</sup> MOL (Hungarian National Archive) K71 5cs. A report from the Hungarian embassy in Brussels to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry.

<sup>31</sup> *Belgiumi Magyar Könyv* (Hungarian Book in Belgium), Brussels, 1934.

<sup>32</sup> Verbeke (N.), *Het meidenprobleem in het Brusselsche*, p. 101.

Join with sisterly love!  
Up singing! Up singing!"<sup>33</sup>

The Circle and its organizers' aim was not only the engagement of the migrants working in Belgian households to lead a devout, moral life, but also to offer them the possibility to establish contact with other fellow migrants. By organising meetings and social and charitable activities within the migrant community, the organization provided the opportunity to escape from the closed environment of the households, to use the mother tongue, and to maintain Hungarian identity. This last issue was very important in the program of the catholic organizers. By supporting activities where the promotion of Hungarian identity played a great role, they emphasized the temporary nature of the recruitment program. The Circle also organised several tea-afternoons and handicraft exhibitions for the employers of the servants. During these activities, Belgian employers learned about the habits, traditions and the home country of their employees. These activities underlined the foreignness of the maids in Belgian households and prevented the migrant from detaching herself from the Home country.

The servants and their supervisors constantly reflected on the morality of migrant life:

"The goal of the Circle in my opinion is: the education of the soul! Educating the young girls in a religious spirit, this is the most important thing. She (the domestic servant) wants to experience only pure pleasures; she should have a strong will for good and noble deeds. Keep her eye on the two first commandments, that she can stand firm in the draft of the big wide world, where the evil spirit is always looking around for a victim of sin. If this succeeds then she will certainly become a good wife and mother. Concerning this, lectures should be given with some good examples from life. With regards the duty of the members: They should be worthy of the fame of the Circle, dutiful good children and helpmate of their principals. Love each other Hungarians!"<sup>34</sup>

The maids were expected to be devout, kindly, serious minded, uncomplaining and relatively uninterested in the opposite sex. Those girls who frequented the meetings of the Circle were the best material for the catholic

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<sup>33</sup>. Minutes of the Meetings of the Circle of Saint Margaret, 26 January 1936. In the private collection of the Hungarian House in Brussels, the minutes were kept in Brussels between 1936 and 1989 and in Antwerp between 1936 and 1940 (Translation of the song from Hungarian to English by V.H.).

<sup>34</sup>. Anonymous writing in the private collection of the Hungarian House in Brussels. It is attached to the volumes of the Minutes of the Meetings of the Circle of Saint Margaret (Translation of the quotation from the Minutes from Hungarian to English by V.H.).

organizations to promote the recruitment program. Their life style could illustrate what these organizations tried to achieve with this project. Although catholic circles did not support the idea of young females leaving the family for economical reasons, they tried to set up a framework for an employment where the impetus to go to work outside the family were not only economical, but above all educational and beneficial for the family and the society which were rooted within family life.

## 7. THE END OF THE PROJECT

With the outbreak of World War II, the number of Hungarian domestic servants reduced by 28% (Gubin, 2001, 48). It meant that many girls decided to return home because of the war. However, most of the maids did not return. According to the minutes of the meeting of the Circle of Blessed Margaret on 17 September 1939, the members of the Circle received a lecture from the missionary priest on the serious political situation.

"The father talked about the seriousness of the situation. It was good to hear about it even if it is not relevant to us. And especially because there are girls among us who are not allowed to listen to the radio and don't know, don't hear about anything of this serious international event..."<sup>35</sup>

If it was difficult to obtain news about the international situation, they used their social networks to deal with the question of whether they should leave and return to Hungary or stay in Belgium. The letters of fellow Hungarian servants who had returned home bore information about the situation in Hungary, often listing the pros and cons of returning.<sup>36</sup> However, for the next two years nothing changed in the running of the program until Hungary finally joined the war on the side of Germany on the 26<sup>th</sup> of June 1941. Only from that date onwards did it become wise for Hungarian citizens to return back home. The recruitment program received a temporary halt.

In 1947, the director of the League's Placement Office in Brussels, who also happened to be the leading social worker for the recruitment program, initiated a new transport of one hundred girls<sup>37</sup> and the recruitment policy

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<sup>35</sup>. Translation from Hungarian to English by V.H.

<sup>36</sup>. I have found several letters of migrants who returned back to Hungary around 1939 and 1940. They are attached to the volumes of the Minutes of the Meetings of the Circle of Saint Margaret.

<sup>37</sup>. Reports of the Council of the Bond voor Kroostrijke Gezinnen, 21 March 1947. In the Archive of the Gezinsbond, Brussels. It is not catalogued.

saw a revival up until 1949.<sup>38</sup> However, from 1945 the political scene in Hungary gradually changed. With the support of the Soviet Union, the Hungarian communist party gained more and more political power, finally taking control of the country in 1949. It was in February of that year that the last of the Hungarian maids left their homeland.

And what happened with girls that remained outside the Iron curtain? Some decided to stay in Belgium and continue working as domestic servants. They kept the Circle of Blessed Margaret alive until the middle of the 1990s. Other domestic workers opted for another solution. During the early years of the 1950s, with no hope of returning home to Hungary in the foreseeable future and other than staying in Belgium, they faced the opportunity of moving on to Canada. From 1947 onwards, the government of Canada had launched a recruitment program for young women who had ended up in a displaced persons camp in Germany. After the group of possible applicants in the camps ran dry, Canada decided to look to other European countries for a potential workforce (Harzig, 2003). Some Hungarian women who could not return to Hungary decided to join the Canadian program. In many cases, those servants who had stayed in Belgium filled the places left behind by maids who had travelled to Canada. Their social network helped them not only to return home, but also to change their work place and sometimes even to change host country.<sup>39</sup>

## 8. CONCLUSION

The domestic service sector had gone through gradual change since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These changes were generated both by the employers, the middle, and upper-middle-class households, as well as by the servants themselves. The need for domestic help fluctuated, but the demand for live-in servants never dried up. During the interwar period, many migrant women arrived in Belgium for employment within Belgian households. They came because they were searched for. In the eyes of public opinion there was a crisis in that area of the job market. Local domestic servants left their jobs earlier than they had done before World War I, in order to marry earlier.

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<sup>38</sup>. Between 1945 and 1949 the Belgian recruitment program for Hungarian servants had to face a serious concurrence in other servant migrations. Hundreds of Hungarian women left Hungary to work in English and Swiss households. The circumstances and the possible relations of these migrations to each other are under current research.

<sup>39</sup>. Interviews carried out with E.M., Brussels, 8th of July 2005 and with E.W., Brussels, 1st of December 2005.

Eliane Gubin argued that they did not continue in employment as long as they had done before and left work in order to manage their own household. She also argues that this circumstance, along with the rising number of non-residential servants, gave the impression of a crisis (Gubin, 2001, 45-46). The crisis was real enough though. What escaped the view of Eliane Gubin was that foreign maids arrived in order to fill up those empty places. The non-residential servants, whose number had been increasing since the 1910s, also created a job opportunity for migrant domestic workers by not being able to fulfil the need for live-in servants within households. To answer this growing shortage of residential servants, the migrant workforce was the best target group to employ, as residential employment was, especially during the first years of settlement, for them the only way to pursue. This represented one of the most important pull factors for migrants.

The push and pull factors, the need to leave, and the offer of a job in Belgium, created a very interesting phenomenon within the development of domestic service. The Hungarian domestic servants formed one of the largest groups of foreign maids in Belgium. They actually halted the decline of residential service in Belgium, providing Belgian families with live-in domestic service for 20 years.

They were supported by their catholic patrons and benefactors. Although catholic circles were the main advocates of the traditional separation of gender roles and did not favour female employment at all, they set up a framework for the migration of young, mainly single women to work outside home and outside national borders. Catholic organizations tried to create proper employment within a proper environment, allowing a young woman to make ready for her future life as the head of her own household, as a wife and as a mother. In their eyes, the social and moral advantages of the migratory experience were equal if not superior to the economic ones.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

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Kadoc	Katholiek Documentatie- en Onderzoekscentrum voor religie, cultuur en samenleving
MOL	Magyar Országos Levéltár

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## Hongaarse bedienden in België, 1930-1949

VERA HAJTÓ

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### SAMENVATTING

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Huishoudelijk werk onderging een snelle en fundamentele verandering gedurende de eerste helft van de 20<sup>ste</sup> eeuw. Het werd steeds moeilijker om werkkrachten voor dit type van arbeid te vinden, vooral dan voor inwonende bedienden. Als gevolg van dit tekort aan werkkrachten werd de huishoudelijke dienst één van de meest aantrekkelijke betrekkingen voor buitenlandse vrouwelijke migranten.

De betekenis en gevolgen van dit gebrek aan werkkrachten vormen nog steeds een onderwerp van discussie onder academici. Hoewel de statistische data anders geïnterpreteerd kunnen worden, geven zowel de eigentijdse publieke discussie als de rekrutering van buitenlandse arbeidskrachten aan dat velen bezorgd waren over de toenmalige situatie en toekomst van de huishoudarbeid. Voor velen, vooral uit de middenklasse, ging het niet enkel om een praktisch probleem, maar stond hun volledige manier van leven op het spel.

In de periode tussen 1930 en 1949 waren er in de Belgische steden honderden buitenlandse dienstmeiden tewerkgesteld. Al sinds de late 19<sup>de</sup> eeuw was België een aantrekkelijk land voor migrerende vrouwen die werk zochten in de huishoudelijke sector. Vooral uit de buurlanden zoals Nederland, Luxemburg en Duitsland kwamen jonge vrouwen naar België om er te werken als dienstmeiden. Na de Eerste Wereldoorlog arriveerden meer en meer vrouwelijke migranten uit Centraal- en Oost-Europa om de vacatures in de Belgische huishoudens op te vullen. Onder hen was een groep Hongaarse vrouwen. Zij werden specifiek voor de huishoudelijke dienst gerekruteerd en, voor het eerst in dit segment van de Belgische arbeidsmarkt, werd een arbeidsovereenkomst opgesteld tussen de werknemer en werkgever.

Op basis van verscheidene geschreven en mondelinge bronnen, analyseert dit artikel het rekruteringsprogramma van de Hongaarse huishoudelijke dienstmeiden en het werk van de sociale organisaties die deze migratie ondersteunden. Mondelinge bronnen zijn onontbeerlijk om de individuele ervaringen en beslissingsprocessen van deze migrerende vrouwen te achterhalen en om de sociale realiteit van de jaren dertig en veertig van de vorige

eeuw te kunnen beschrijven. Dit artikel gaat in op de discussie over de crisis rond huishoudelijke diensten maar concentreert zich vooral op de sociale integratie van deze Hongaarse vrouwen. Speciale aandacht gaat naar de betekenis van de huishoudelijke crisis en de rol die de sociale organisaties die het migratie- en integratieproces promootten, gespeeld hebben in de ervaringen van de Hongaarse dienstmeiden.

De migratie van deze Hongaarse vrouwen vond plaats tijdens het interbellum en de periode onmiddellijk na de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Deze periodes werden gekenmerkt door verhitte publieke discussies rond de rol van het familieleven, het feminisme en de vrouw in de maatschappij. Meer bepaald werd in vraag gesteld of een vrouw buiten de huiselijke sfeer kon werken. Maar wat als zij besloot om te migreren en in de huishoudelijke sector te gaan werken?

### **Les domestiques hongroises en Belgique, 1930-1949**

VERA HAJTÓ

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#### RÉSUMÉ

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Durant la première moitié du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle, le service domestique subit des changements rapides et fondamentaux. Il devint de plus en plus difficile de trouver des travailleurs locaux pour travailler dans ces services, notamment comme servantes à domicile. Une des conséquences de cette pénurie fut que ce type d'emploi devint un des secteurs les plus attractifs pour les femmes immigrées.

Les causes et les conséquences de ce manque de main-d'œuvre sur la crise sociale constituent encore maintenant un sujet de discussion passionné dans le milieu académique. Bien que les chiffres semblent montrer le contraire, les discussions menées à l'époque et le recrutement de main-d'œuvre étrangère montrent une préoccupation réelle sur l'état et le devenir du service domestique. Pour beaucoup, particulièrement parmi les membres de la classe moyenne, il ne s'agissait pas uniquement d'un problème pratique, mais aussi d'une remise en question d'un mode et d'un style de vie.

Durant la période allant de 1930 à 1949, plusieurs centaines de jeunes femmes d'origine étrangère furent employées par des ménages belges appartenant à la classe moyenne, principalement dans les villes. Déjà à partir de la fin du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle, la Belgique apparaît comme un pays attractif pour les possibilités d'emploi qu'il offrait à des femmes immigrées souhaitant travailler dans le domaine ménager. Beaucoup de pays limitrophes, tels que les Pays-Bas, le Luxembourg et l'Allemagne envoyaient vers la Belgique des femmes pour y travailler comme employées de maison. Après la première guerre mondiale, un flux sans cesse grandissant de migrantes provenant d'Europe Centrale et Orientale prit naissance pour combler les carences en main-d'œuvre domestique locale. Parmi ces migrantes, on trouve un certain nombre de Hongroises. Elles furent recrutées spécialement comme main-d'œuvre domestique et – fait inédit dans ce secteur du marché du travail – un contrat de travail fut passé entre les employées et leurs employeurs.

Basé sur une grande variété de sources orales et écrites, l'article met en relief le programme de recrutement d'employées de maison mis sur pied en Hongrie et le travail d'organisations sociales destinées à faciliter l'émigration. Les sources orales procurent une aide capitale pour l'analyse des expériences personnelles et sur le processus de décision amenant ces femmes à émigrer, de même que sur les conditions de vie dans les années 1930 et 1940.

L'article évoque les discussions sur la crise de la main-d'œuvre dans le secteur des gens de maison, mais se focalise surtout sur l'intégration de ces migrantes dans le tissu social.

Une attention particulière est portée sur le manque de main-d'œuvre tel qu'il fut ressenti par ces migrantes hongroises et sur le rôle important des agences sociales, qui favorisa leur émigration et leur intégration dans la société.

L'émigration de ces femmes hongroises prit place dans le contexte de l'entre-deux-guerres et de l'immédiat après-guerre 1940-1945, caractérisé par des discussions passionnées sur la féminité, le statut de la femme, le rôle des femmes dans la société et la question de savoir s'il était ou non permis aux femmes de travailler hors du monde domestique. Mais qu'en était-il dans le cas de femmes ayant décidé d'émigrer et travaillant dans la sphère domestique?