

## DOCTORAATSONDERZOEK - DOCTORATS

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### **Milk Sauce and Paprika. Migration, Childhood and Memory of the Interwar Belgian-Hungarian Child Relief Project**

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Shortly after the First World War, between 1923 and 1927, transnational and national social institutions set up a humanitarian child relief action between Hungary and Belgium. In the framework of this project approximately twenty-two thousand Hungarian children were moved between the two countries. Some of them spent their holiday and then returned to their Hungarian families, others remained in Belgium with their foster families forever. The children's experiences of the relief project considerably differed from each other. However, they all travelled and spent time in Belgium in the framework created by the same national and transnational organisations. The relief project and its organisers (the Catholic Church and community for the most part) significantly influenced the lives of families and the lives of all of the children regardless of the children's later trajectories.

The migration of children still remains hardly explored in migration history research. Especially the question of understanding better the influence of migration on children and childhood has not yet been analyzed extensively. Admittedly, children who travelled/migrated unaccompanied did not form a large segment of the migrating population. However, the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century provided many examples of migrating children

usually in the framework of one of the many humanitarian initiatives of the period (e.g. Russian, Austrian, Spanish, Jewish or Greek child rescue projects, etc.). The Hungarian children were one of the early participants of these humanitarian efforts.

The main question of the present study is how experiences of migration influence the representation of childhood. The book explores the relationship between migration and childhood and explicitly demonstrates these two social constructions significant interconnectedness. This interconnectedness is strongly motivated by the observation that creation and negotiation of identities are central to both migration and childhood and that the realm of memory has a decisive influence on the conceptualization of the two. Up until now, the history of childhood is often treated as a marginal, excessively sentimental, and under-theorized subject. Yet, the history of childhood is anything but a trivial topic. As Steven Mintz has argued, childhood is the true missing link : connecting the personal and the public, the psychological and the sociological, the domestic and the state. However, just like childhood provides the 'missing link' between structural levels and social actors, migration history research intends to do the same when investigating structure and agency. Therefore it is most relevant to investigate childhood in migration and the influence of the migration experience on children and their families.

This research contributes to the understanding of childhood and migration in a more comprehensive way than the few previous studies on children and migration did regarding structure and agency. It focuses on several different

levels of analysis and not only the macro structures. By analyzing the different actors of the project on three different structural levels (macro-, meso-, and micro-level), this study uncovers the ever-so important inter-relatedness of structural context and the individual agency. The potential risk of focusing only on one structural level of migration, e.g. political institutions and their role in the migration, is that a very important element of the migration process, the development and interaction of various social identities, often remain undiscovered. Furthermore, in the present case, it would only lead to the partial understanding of the social construction of childhood. It is already long known from the extensive literature on migration theory that the process of migration strongly influences individual and collective social identities. In this study age, class, gender and religious identities are all under scrutiny.

Based on many different sources, such as official documentations, contemporary newspapers, public and private photograph collections, family correspondences, biographies and interviews, this work discovers the history and the political, social and cultural impacts of the Belgian-Hungarian child relief project on the two collaborating countries and on the participating families. The low numbers of publications on historical child migration, which can partly be explained by the lack of available primary sources, especially on the topic of the Hungarian children, make this research a pioneering endeavor. Migrants themselves usually do not produce a lot written documents, children even less. However, the Belgian-Hungarian child relief project has received much publicity. It was not only commented and debated in public,

but the channels of local periodicals were also used for recruitment. The families participating in the program obtained the necessary practical and ideological information from the newspapers. Other useful and very intriguing sources were the public and private photograph collections and family correspondences for obtaining information on the project and its consequences on the lives of the participants. Together with the correspondences hundreds of photographs were preserved in the private collections of the families. Although migrants are probably not the most likely subjects of photography, children, it seems, were favorites of the official and family cameras. The ideological potential of the childhood for the nation made it interesting for the official cameras, while the central position of children in the family structure made it interesting for the family cameras. Oral historical sources, such as interviews are also analyzed here in order to shed some light on the experiences of the individual participant of the Belgian-Hungarian child relief.

This study shows how public and private memories of the relief project defined the different meanings of the project for the different participants. How the different social actors, Belgian and Hungarian, like state officials, the Catholic Church and its community, the families or the children themselves understood and negotiated the opportunities that the project offered them. Every one of these participants created and imagined their own version (public and private) of childhood. Furthermore, the research uncovered that the consequences of the relief project transcended the benefit of a holiday as some of the children remained

in the care of their Belgian families for good. Remembering their childhood, under the crucial influence of the relief project, the holiday turned to become a migration experience. Even those children who after their temporary stay in Belgian families returned to their home country, tended to relate and remember about their holiday as a life-changing experience, a journey that took them across national and cultural borders.