

## **Growing up Hungarian in Cleveland: Case Studies of Language Use**

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**According to** the 2000 American Census data, the last census for which data is readily available, approximately 8% of Americans of Hungarian ancestry reported speaking Hungarian in the household. Of Ohioans, that percentage was 10.3%; for residents of Cleveland, it was 11%. The other 89-90% assimilated into American culture, one can assume.

Alan Attila Szabo researched Hungarian-American communities of the greater Cleveland area and submitted a cultural anthropology analysis as his Master's thesis at Kent State University in 2001. Drawing on information collected while selling life insurance and determining potential customers' interest in a Hungarian mail order business, he attended hundreds of Hungarian events in Northeast Ohio and assembled a database of 400 individuals and their families, who all defined themselves as being Hungarian or of Hungarian descent. He then randomly selected 100 individuals from his database and found similar results to the US Census proportions of Hungarian speakers to Hungarian ancestry. Additionally, he found that of his sample, 10% married another Hungarian-American, and those who did, 40% had at least one sibling also marry a Hungarian. 10% of the offspring of these unions married another Hungarian-American, which points to a standard assimilation process.<sup>1</sup> If the odds are that 90% of Hungarian-Americans will assimilate in one generation, what then are the factors that allow the other 10% to maintain their language and culture, many times even in the second and third generations, in spite of overwhelming odds favoring their assimilation?

Qualitative research is well accepted in the fields of sociolinguistics and ethnography to get at substantive reasons for cultural and language maintenance. Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, Fontana and Frey, and Spradley have all traced the importance and accepted methodology of interviewing and case studies to elicit insights not normally available using

quantitative methods of research. Mónika Fodor has applied these methodologies specifically to Hungarian-Americans and the narratives they construct about their cultural identity, and I drew heavily on her work in constructing my research.

In an extensive sociological and sociolinguistic study of a similar Hungarian-American community, published in a previous volume of *Hungarian Studies Review*, Katalin Pintz looked at New Brunswick, New Jersey's Hungarian community, and found several factors that impacted language and cultural maintenance. Among these were close-knit friendships among parents who valued education and their ethnicity, and taking an active part in the ethnic community. The families she studied tended to "speak Hungarian as much as they can among themselves and to their children. Many of them watch DVD's, television shows, and the news in Hungarian through cable TV or the internet. It is also an important factor for them to find a Hungarian spouse. Nevertheless, they cannot and do not want to exclude themselves from the American cultural sphere."<sup>2</sup> This type of characterization contrasts with the ethnic neighborhoods of forty or fifty years ago, both in New Brunswick and in Cleveland, in which entire city blocks had families of mainly one ethnicity. Today, ethnic communities in any given American city tend to stick together not geographically, but rather culturally, gathering on a regular basis from throughout the suburbs, perhaps weekly or more frequently, to take part in a city's ethnic activities.

Pintz also found that although some of the respondents did not like being forced to speak Hungarian as children, they nevertheless all "value this kind of parental education, for they would also like to pass on their mother tongue to their children."<sup>3</sup> Parental involvement and consistency was definitely a factor in keeping the Hungarian language alive. But perhaps even more important than the parents, or rather, due to the involvement of the parents, the community itself as a social environment reinforced and became the determining factor of ethnicity.

New Brunswick's Hungarians, she found — whether attending Hungarian church services, folk dance rehearsals, scout meetings, a Montessori kindergarten, or the weekend Hungarian school — are known for the high level of Hungarian that is spoken there. The main reason for this is the fact that "the members of the community form a close-knit unit based on friendships and family ties. They organize cultural events several times a week, ranging from scouting to Hungarian language education and dance classes. The members of the community are active in several Hungarian activities simultaneously."<sup>4</sup>

My first reaction upon reading Katalin Pintz's study was to realize the similarities between New Brunswick's Hungarian community and Cleveland's Hungarian community. Both consist of fairly close-knit groups based on friendship and family ties, both organize cultural events regularly, both include scouting and dance groups and Hungarian language education, and the experiences related in Pintz's study were common to my own experiences growing up Hungarian in Cleveland. Rather than conduct a sociological overview, as she did in New Brunswick, I decided to focus more on the specific factors that impact language use, using a case study approach.

### **Research Methodology**

Nine Hungarians living in the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio, were chosen for my case studies. Three separate group discussions were held, with three participants each. Small-group discussions were chosen to allow a degree of intimacy that comes from being around other participants from similar backgrounds, and to allow study participants to hear each other's answers, agree or disagree with each other, and spawn new thoughts based on what they heard from each other. Listening to each other answer the same questions allowed each study participant to reflect upon what was being said and decide whether that applied to them or not. The group discussions were recorded and transcribed word for word for later analysis, and all took place in the greater Cleveland area during October of 2010. As the writing and analysis of the data progressed, study participants were given rough drafts of the qualitative study results and given an opportunity to revise and add to comments given during their group discussions. Their cooperation and suggested clarifications allowed for a better contextualization of events and circumstances, as well as of a more concise description of the factors impacting Hungarian language maintenance.

Eight of the nine study participants were born in the Cleveland area, and the ninth was brought to Cleveland as a toddler, so she also spent her entire childhood in the Cleveland area. Study participants were chosen for their similar Hungarian-American backgrounds to provide a fairly typical experience of growing up Hungarian in Cleveland, yet their backgrounds and life circumstances provided a fairly broad spectrum of family immigration eras, including offspring of the DP and 1956 generation and more recent immigration. Their Hungarian language proficiencies and primary language spoken at home also varied, as did their degrees of Hungarian ancestry: the

parents of most were both Hungarian but a few had only one Hungarian parent; one had a Hungarian spouse and several had American spouses.

One of the three groups consisted of three siblings to control for family upbringing variables, and all three members of this group have their own children and the perspective of about twenty years distance from their own childhood, which allows for more introspection both about their family upbringing and also a considered viewpoint about their own decisions on imparting language and culture to their children.

The other two groups all live in the same suburban neighborhood to control for American environmental factors. They graduated from or currently attend the same suburban public high school, located about a half-hour's drive from Cleveland's downtown in a middle-class area. I chose some teenagers still in the process of forming their own cultural identities because of the possible insights they could contribute, being in the midst of their own transformations; the mixture of teenaged and adult participants offered both fresh, recent insights as well as considered, mature reflection in their revelations. The experiences of all nine study participants, although unique in their own way, are fairly typical of Hungarian-Americans who are part of Cleveland's Hungarian communities. In selecting my research subjects in this manner I took the advice of Rubin and Rubin who state that "observing life from separate yet overlapping angles makes the researcher more hesitant to leap to conclusions and encourages more nuanced analysis."<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of the factors impacting second-language maintenance and cultural identity formation in an ethnic community, specifically those factors influencing growing up Hungarian in Cleveland. Before the interviewing started, the participants or their legal guardians signed a statement of informant consent to give them a chance to understand the research study goals and to clarify and safeguard their legal rights. The participants took part willingly, and it was easy to establish a rapport with them. Our rapport and the participants' openness was reinforced by our earlier relationships; some of them I grew up with, others I have known since their childhood, and some were former students of mine. The recorded group discussions ranged from 40 to 90 minutes, and the primary language was English, although Hungarian vocabulary was also used sporadically by the participants, depending on the concepts discussed. Two of the nine participants chose to remain anonymous and were given pseudonyms (marked with an asterisk \*) for the purposes of the publication of this study's results.

### **The Study Participants**

The youngest study participant was Gabe (Gábor) Kovács, a sixteen-year-old eleventh-grader. His father was born in Hungary and emigrated to the United States when he was twelve or thirteen and thus spent his formative years in Cleveland. Gabe's father works in the electrical and computer field, and has owned several businesses. His mother was born in a suburb of Cleveland and has never been to Hungary. She works in the healthcare industry as a physical therapist. Both parents were actively involved in Cleveland's Hungarian scouting movement. As a young child, Gabe's parents enrolled him, along with his younger siblings, in the scout troop on Friday evenings and in the Hungarian school on Monday evenings. The family attends a local Hungarian church on holidays like Christmas and Easter, and on major events such as baptisms and confirmations, but on average Sundays attends the suburban American parish church near their house. Gabe also is a member of the Hungarian Scout Folk Ensemble, the scout dance group which meets on Tuesday evenings. Gabe's language skills have remained pretty consistent throughout his childhood, understanding and speaking fluently with his reading and writing skills somewhat weaker nevertheless competent.

Matt (Máté) Kobus attended the same neighborhood catholic school as Gabe, and now is in the eleventh grade at the same suburban public high school as Gabe. Matt's mother was born in the Cleveland area, the child of a father who came to the United States after 1956 and a mother who arrived in 1964. She also attended Hungarian school and was involved in Hungarian scouting as she grew up in Cleveland. Matt's biological father is American, a nurse anesthesiologist, and he was not too keen on Matt's mother speaking Hungarian to him as a young child, so she did not force the issue. Later, Matt's parents divorced and his mother remarried. Matt's stepfather is an engineer and although he doesn't speak or understand any Hungarian, he does tolerate Matt's language use to some extent. Matt's language use has improved drastically as he grew older; at first he only understood and could produce only a few words. Then around the 3rd grade his school friend Gabe kept telling him about how cool Hungarian scouting was, but to join one needed a better command of the Hungarian language, so he improved to be able to join the scouting movement. According to his mother, she never forced him to use Hungarian; his improvement was of his own accord. Lately he visited Hungary with his grandmother, and now he switches to Hungarian when he speaks to

his grandmother on the phone. Matt is also a member of the Hungarian Scout Folk Ensemble, the scout dance group of Cleveland.

Megan Ramsey, the third participant in the group discussion, is Gabe's first cousin; his father and her mother are siblings. Megan is studying to be a dental hygienist at a local community college, and graduated from Gabe and Matt's high school in 2008. Her father, a carpet and tile installer, was an American of Scotch-Irish and French-Lebanese descent and spoke no Hungarian in the household. Her mother was born in Hungary but finished her university studies after emigrating to Cleveland. She is an engineer and lived for a long time with Megan and her own mother, Megan's Hungarian grandmother. Megan did not attend Hungarian school but did attend Hungarian scouting as she grew up, and was also a member of the scout dance group during high school. She has been to Hungary twice: once when she was four years old and once when she was twelve. Megan's Hungarian language use has remained fairly constant as she grew up, understanding and speaking fluently, and reading and writing at a slightly weaker level, but still competent.

The second group also consisted of three members who attended the same suburban high school. Jennifer Hegyi is the youngest member, currently in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. She never attended Hungarian school and was only involved in the scouting movement for one year, but did have a private Hungarian language tutor for about a year when she was twelve or thirteen. She visited Hungary with her family multiple times as she grew up. Her parents were both born in Hungary and emigrated to Cleveland as adults in 1995; her father is in the roofing business and her mother is a nanny, and both speak Hungarian in the household. Jennifer understands and speaks Hungarian, but in Hungarian conversations with the researcher had a tendency to respond only in English. Her reading and writing skills are weak, according to her own account, and she could not pronounce the name of the Hungarian town that she was born in.

Samantha Dévai\* attended the same high school as Jennifer, graduating in 2007. She earned a biology degree in college and is now in her first year of medical school. She was involved in the Hungarian scouting movement from age five until the end of high school at age eighteen. She was also a member of the scout dance group during her high school years; she only attended Hungarian school for one year, however, in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade at age thirteen. Her parents both grew up in Hungary and emigrated to the United States in 1982 but still speak Hungarian in the household. Her mother works in child daycare and her father in maintenance. She has been to Hungary three or four times for ten days each, and took part in a month-long tour of Hungary organized by the scouts when she was a teenager.

Samantha's Hungarian proficiency has remained somewhat constant during her childhood, remaining fluent in speaking, reading, and writing, but she has noticed a regression since she moved away for her college studies.

Samantha's cousin is Hanna Völgyi\*; their mothers are sisters. Hanna's parents were also born and raised in Hungary and emigrated to the United States in the early 1970's. Her mother is a bookkeeper and her father works in maintenance. She graduated in 2002 from the suburban high school of her cousin, attending college and earning a special education degree. She now works in a middle school as a teacher. Hanna never attended Hungarian school and started Hungarian scouting around the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, continuing until the end of high school. She also was a member of the scout dance group all through high school. Her Hungarian proficiency has remained stable, with solid fluency in understanding, speaking, reading, and writing.

The third group, consisting of three siblings, held the longest group discussion, probably because of their advanced age and maturity as compared to the other six study participants, and because of their inherent familiarity and rapport with each other, having grown up in the same household. Their parents emigrated to the United States after 1956, their mother as a thirteen year old girl with her parents, and their father spent three and a half years in Austria before arriving in Cleveland. Their father worked mostly in a factory. The family attended a Hungarian Catholic church on major holidays and family events, but usually attended the local Catholic church because of the children attending parochial schools. Grandparents on the father's side would occasionally come to visit from Hungary for several months at a time. All three siblings took part in numerous Hungarian community activities as they were growing up in the Cleveland area.

Ann (Anci) Graber, the oldest of the siblings, grew up in the suburb of Westlake and attended Magnificat High School, a suburban Catholic school for girls. She started her involvement in the scouting movement as a young child and joined the scout dance group during high school. Upon growing up, she also assumed responsibility as costume caretaker for the dance group, and currently is the treasurer for the Hungarian girl scout troop. She married Steve Graber, also the child of 1956 immigrants. He had a similar upbringing as her, attending Hungarian school, Hungarian churches, and taking major leadership roles in scouting and the dance group. Steve's brothers and sister, although they were also born in the United States, speak, read and write fluent Hungarian; his sister's children also do, and are involved in Cleveland's Hungarian community. Steve's brother Rick Graber founded Cleveland's Hungarian dance troupe Csárdás. Steve and Ann have three children, all of whom also speak Hungarian and also attended Hungarian school, scouting, and were or

are members of the scout dance group. Their oldest daughter is twenty-two years old and a college student, their second daughter is twenty-one years old and is also in college, and their son is sixteen years old and is in high school. Ann works as a computer teacher at a local Catholic elementary school. Ann's Hungarian proficiency is excellent with the exception of her spelling; she attributes this to her never attending Hungarian school.

Karl (Karcsi) Patay attended St. Ignatius High School and owns his own construction and landscaping business. He was involved in Hungarian scouting from a young age, attended Hungarian school and was a member of the scout dance group. His Hungarian language skills, although fluent, were somewhat weak in reading and writing. In recent years his oral language skills have significantly increased due to his working daily with recent Hungarian immigrants. His wife Denise, an American with no Hungarian background, attempted to learn Hungarian early in their marriage, but today almost no Hungarian is spoken in the household. Their children are both boys, aged thirteen and nine, and apart from some rudimentary words, neither speaks Hungarian. Karl is very proud of his Hungarian heritage and visits Hungary every three to five years.

Susan (Zsuzs) Linder is the youngest of the siblings. Also attending Magnificat High School, Susan was involved in scouting from an early age, attended Hungarian school only later, and also joined the scout dance group during high school. For three years she was the scoutmaster of the Hungarian girl scout troop, a position of influential responsibility in Cleveland's Hungarian community. Her husband, Dave Linder, is an American with no Hungarian background. At home Dave speaks English to the children and Susan speaks Hungarian, with the common language being English. Their three children, twin boys aged twelve and a daughter aged nine, understand and speak, read and write Hungarian, and attend the Hungarian school and scouts. Susan's Hungarian proficiency is excellent with near-native fluency.

## **Study Results**

The nine study participants in their three group discussions yielded over 24,000 words of data. According to the traditions of qualitative ethnographic research, their answers were coded into similar categories. Rubin and Rubin define coding as a "process of grouping interviewee's responses into categories that bring together the similar ideas, concepts, or themes one has discovered."<sup>6</sup>

Three major themes emerged from their responses. The first theme was the impact of parenting on language maintenance, both the role of their own parents as well as their own subsequent actions as parents. The second theme, repeated quite often and quite emphatically and emotionally, was the influence of their friends and peers through organized events in the Hungarian community, mostly through the scouting movement. The third major theme was the value of speaking a second language and the respondents' ties to their Hungarian culture as a sense of identity. Additional secondary topics that emerged from the discussions were reasons that people did not maintain their ethnic language as well as the role of American spouses in supporting or discouraging language maintenance.

### **The Importance of Parenting**

Many of the interviewees strongly identified one of the most important factors impacting their language competence as being their parents, even though some parents were of different generations, i.e. some of their parents were born in the United States, others had immigrated after 1956, and others much more recently. Parents had different reasons for speaking Hungarian to their children, but seven of the nine interviewees, both at the beginning and ends of the interview, came back to their own parents as being the single biggest factor impacting their language use.

One of the reasons given for parental use of language was the idea of broken English, i.e. the parents had immigrated to the United States and did not want their children speaking English incorrectly. "I remember my mom saying that she didn't want me to hear her broken English, so we spoke Hungarian at home," stated Jennifer Hegyi at the beginning of the interview. She returned to the same thought at the end of the interview as well, "my mom still speaks broken English so I still speak Hungarian to her." Hanna Völgyi echoed this sentiment when she said that "[my] parents being more comfortable probably with Hungarian, especially when I was little was probably the main determining factor in me speaking Hungarian." Megan Ramsey's mother was a little more utilitarian in her sentiments, as Megan related, "my mom always wanted to teach her daughter Hungarian, because it's always good to know a second language. That's what she always told me, just for being in the business world or going traveling anywhere."

Susan Linder, speaking of the Patay parents, reinforced the idea that parental involvement was paramount, not from a broken English perspective,

but rather comparing her generation to a previous cohort, speaking of the 90% of Hungarian-Americans who assimilate: “I’d say our parents first and foremost because there are plenty of people maybe ten years earlier who didn’t speak Hungarian to their kids because then they were really trying to fit into the melting pot more than that concept. So the fact that [my parents] spoke Hungarian to us and that brought us to cserkészet [scouts] and everything they did was... I would say that has to be number one as parents.” Her sister and brother concurred. Karl mentioned at the beginning of the interview that “growing up, that’s all we were allowed to speak at home.” Not only was their father’s English worse, said Susan, but all three siblings emphasized that no punishment or threats were ever used about their use of language. Indeed, the reason all three agreed they spoke Hungarian was respect. Karl mentioned that “I think [my father] was just very proud of where he came from and it was important for them, for us to speak Hungarian at home. It wasn’t a very strict something like ‘That’s all you’re going to speak at home,’ but it was just expected of us.” It was a respect towards their father, they agreed.

### **Friends and Community**

Although most interviewees talked about their parents, one disagreed, feeling strongly that in the matter of learning the Hungarian language peers were the most important, even more important than parents. Indeed, in terms of the amount of time during the interviews spent talking about parents or about peers, every single interviewee devoted at least three to four times as many sentences to reminiscing about their friendships and peers, as opposed to parents, as they were growing up. Peer impact on Hungarian language use seems, from their own words, the stronger overarching theme which emerges from their transcribed thoughts.

Most emphasized the incredibly strong bonds of friendship formed with peers due mostly to involvement in Hungarian scouting, but also in other Hungarian community activities. This bond of friendship, especially after puberty, is what drew the interviewees together, and community bonds are what caused most of them to decide to impart Hungarian to their own children.

Six of the nine respondents stressed the closer bonds that had developed between them and their Hungarian versus their American friends. Gabe Kovács explained it this way: “my best friends are probably the Hungarian ones, because I’ve been with them longer... my entire life.” He had been with these people his entire life, he said, “because our parents know each

other, and we would go hang out with each other when we were like, three, and I never really had that with that many people that are American.” When pressed to explain the reasons for a majority of her close friends being Hungarian, Megan Ramsey echoed Gabe’s sentiment, saying that “I feel like the Hungarian community respected me more because I spoke Hungarian and I was raised that way and they were raised the same way I was, pretty much.” In another instance, she alluded to the role of the Hungarian community in Cleveland: “I always really enjoy going to the Hungarian balls that we had, and I think I gained a lot of friendship by going to that, and definitely the camps, all the Hungarian camps. I definitely gained a lot of friendship there, too, and I never really had that at my high school, like going out on camping trips, doing huge projects together to gain closer friends, or traveling.”

Karl Patay, agreeing with his two siblings Ann and Susan, also highlighted the difference between parents and peers on language use: “it wasn’t the Hungarian that brought us together; it was our parents bringing us here, meeting friends and the times we had together, the bonds formed, the memories, and it was your life. I mean, school, your American friends were completely secondary. Everything you did was with Hungarian friends.” This commonality was stressed again by Megan Ramsey: “when you meet someone and you want to be able to have things in common with. I felt like I didn’t really have a lot of things in common with other students at high school. Maybe I never really gave it a chance, but because I was really really good friends with all the Hungarians.” Ann Graber at another point in the interview stressed that “it wasn’t our nationality sometimes, but the friends we had,” to which both of her siblings immediately replied, “it was a way of life.”

When asked to elaborate, Susan Linder explained that “the people that I hung out with in cserkészzet were the people I went to school with and I had all my social events with them, too. And then through cserkészzet we had locsolás [Easter folk tradition] and tea [dances] and bál [debutante balls] and all that stuff, so the social events were tied in.” Susan’s best friends, who were Hungarians, also attended her high school. Karl Patay, whose best friends did not attend the same high school he did, nevertheless agreed: “with me it was a way of life. I mean, we hung around, all our friends were Hungarian, typically. We socialized with them. It was just everything we did had something to do with cserkészzet, regös, or...”

When asked what the single most important factor was impacting Hungarian language use, Matt Kobus succinctly explained his theory of motivation, “I would probably say your peers, because in some ways those are the people you look up to most or are with the most and if you see that they’re doing a certain thing, then a lot of times you want to do the same thing.” Karl

Patay reiterated this theme independently, saying “you did the same things together, you know when you have the same interests and you get along with people, it’s just natural to want to be with them.”

Ann Graber saw this same phenomenon not only in her own teenage years, but in the lives of her own children and their friends. When speaking of Hungarian scouting, she said, “My girls have life-long friends. Pisti grew up with all the boys, too, so he had Joey, Gabi, Keve, Bende [referring to some of her son’s friends]. He’s really close with these kids, and that’s make it or break it.” She goes on to conclude that “it’s the language that pushes them together and the nationality, because they have that in common, thank goodness, but it’s a lot of socialization.” Some of Ann’s observations also transcended her Cleveland Hungarian experience, crossing into the realm of ethnic identity among other ethnic groups in the United States. “My best friend in high school was German and she was just as involved in the German, in, uh, Deutsche Zentrale as I was in cserkészzet and MHBK [a Hungarian veterans organization]. She was the bálkirálynő [queen of the debutante ball] with the Germans when I was at MHBK.” This common trait points to a shared experience with other ethnic communities, albeit one not shared with the average American high school friends alluded to by the other respondents.

### **Hungarian Scouting and a Way of Life**

Most of the respondents expressed the significant impact that being involved in Hungarian scouting from an early age had on their language use. Megan Ramsey, for example, said, “I started cserkészzet when I was four years old, and that’s what really helped me keep up with the culture, the heritage, learning about it, speaking Hungarian.” In her interview she mentioned attaining ranks in the scouting activities and how that motivated her to maintain her language; indeed, the Hungarian scouting movement demands basic levels of language proficiency and basic knowledge of Hungarian history, geography, and literature to attain each successive rank, and this motivates teenagers to learn, because they want to be with their friends to reach the next level. Ann Graber explained it thus: “And you’ll thrive, you’ll push yourself, you know, ‘If so-and-so is going to segédtszti [a rank in scouting] next year, I gotta do magyar iskola, I gotta get my segédtszti material down. I want to go with him.’ So it’s achieving different ranks and increasing your verbiage, your knowledge, your literature, your history, everything, so that you can do it so you can keep up with your friends.”

Friendship formed a deeper commitment and did more for their language maintenance even than attending Hungarian School, the Patays all agreed. Karl explained the commitment, “it was a way of life. I mean, every Friday and Saturday at seven, and you look forward to it. And I think you hit the nail on the head [referring to his sister’s earlier observation]. You did everything else so that you can go to tábor [camp]. And you studied because you wanted to have... all your friends were going and you wanted to be there. And it was a great time, so then you did whatever you had to, and learning whatever it was, and read the book regarding the different camps, so you could be there with your friends. And it was a great life.” Ann explained further: “Even Magyar iskola. I’ll be honest, I hated going, but it was a social thing, too. Your friends were there.”

The effect of scouting on language use commitment and its role in deepening friendships was perhaps most clearly explained by a sports analogy given by Ann:

To go to camp brought us so much closer together because it’s... it’s like playing the game of soccer: you cannot win a soccer game if you play on your own. You have to play as a team. And going to camp, you could not survive a week-long camp if you did not work together. And somehow that camaraderie that’s driving... I mean, yeah, there were tears, you know things sucked or whatever, and you leave the camp and get home and you’d say, ‘Man, that was the best time ever!’ And you could hardly wait to see the friends again. That’s something that a lot of people don’t have, something like a scouting or an ethnicity like that, they don’t ever really get to experience that, I don’t think, because day in, day out you don’t do that with schools.

Indeed, the deep commitment to friends and community caused both Ann and Susan to consciously choose to stay in Cleveland and not go away to college. Susan vividly remembers getting into the Ohio State University for physical therapy school, and deliberately choosing to stay because of her friends and because of scouting. There was no way anyone could talk her out of it, remembered her older sister Ann. Her brother Karl remembered that her parents did not encourage Susan to stay in Cleveland, because she did not need encouragement. “It didn’t need encouragement, because that’s what we wanted,” said Ann.

Samantha Dévai, Hanna Völgyi, and all three Patay siblings spent numerous years not only in the scouting movement, but in the Hungarian folk dance group organized by the scouts, with membership restricted to those Hungarian-American teenagers who worked with younger scouts on a regular basis and also must be able to read, write, and speak fluent Hungarian. The

Hungarian Scout Folk Ensemble, known locally as the Regös Csoport, also counts among its current members both Matt Kobus and Gabe Kovács. Now, as twenty years ago, the autumn harvest festival season runs throughout the fall, sometimes with multiple performance at Hungarian churches in the Cleveland area. Ann Graber characterized typical involvement in the dance group: “We did a szereplés [performance] every weekend, if not two or three... We would literally go to two, three on a weekend. And that’s what we did September through May and that was our weekend activity. We loved it. It was what pulled us in... we didn’t go away to college because we wanted to continue to be a part of what we were in.” Although the Regös dance group does not usually have multiple performances each weekend, only in the fall, Ann’s memory shows the use of a narrative construction typical of Hungarian-American discourse, as shown by Mónika Fodor’s work,<sup>7</sup> drawing on very real facts (the overall scouting movement in Cleveland does have a packed schedule, often with multiple events on weekends year-round). This packed schedule leads to intense emotional ties and deep friendships.

The friendships are based on shared difficult circumstances, for it is far from easy to maintain the Hungarian or any ethnic language in the United States, as shown by the 90% of the Hungarian population who assimilate. Susan ascribes the friendship commitments to a deep understanding: “You understand each other. You understand where everyone’s coming from.” Her sister Ann characterizes these friendships as “amazing. We’ve got such a base, such a core already that we could not see somebody for ten years, and you see them and you pick up where you left off, because you built so much on it.” Susan relates a recent incident connecting with an old friend at the jamboree, a scout camp held every five years: “You still have that common connection. Remember Róni? [Verónika Zidron] She was up at Jubi and I haven’t seen her since Körút [a European tour organized by Hungarian scouts] and I ran up to her, I went up to her at mass and I saw her and gave her a hug and then after zászlólevonás [camp ending ceremony], you know, we connected, but I hadn’t seen her in so long that, again, you just reconnect so quickly because of that commonality.”

Karl Patay, who has not been involved in Hungarian scouting for the last twenty years, nevertheless feels such an emotional bond that on occasion of our interview, held at a Friday evening scout meeting in Cleveland, it actually evoked a visceral reaction upon seeing Hungarian scouts of a newer generation:

I’ve been so far away from it for so long, it’s — when I first came in, I went into that other building and I saw them all line up and I haven’t seen it in

twenty years, and it — it was surreal. And it was so neat, I almost wished I was a part of it again, because it was such a part of my life back then, that it gave me the shivers to see and hear all that, yet. And I had no idea that there were still so many kids involved. I had no idea... it's so emotional to me. I mean, it was such a main part of my life... it's something I feel like I can step right back into tomorrow and I would just... The memories that it brings back, every camp that we went to and the times we had, the camaraderie... you can't take that out of me. As much as I've been away from it for twenty years, for 24 years it was everything to me... I mean, it was a tremendous memory for me, just walking in there and just, it brought tears to my eyes just thinking, 'Wow, it's still here.' So walking in here and seeing all this and, you know... I'm reciting everything they're saying, because I know it. And it's neat to see that.

Ann similarly alludes to the same emotional bond felt even years later when she talks about her daughter's friendship with Samantha Dévai, who both attend different colleges: "Deanna will not speak to Samantha for six months and then the next thing we know, Samantha's on the phone, 'I saw something on Facebook, are you okay?' Yeah, and then they'll talk for an hour. 'Anyuka, I miss her. She's my best friend.' And that's the way it is." The bonds are so strong, indeed, that Ann's social circle, probably also due to her husband being a Hungarian born in Cleveland who is also very actively involved in scouting, is mainly Hungarian. Much as in New Brunswick, NJ, as Katalin Pintz found, the Cleveland Hungarian community is also close-knit because of their shared experiences and commitment. Ann recounts, "and even nowadays, our adult friends, we hang out with only Hungarian people. As adults. Married couples. Only Hungarian people. My American friends that I met as a kid starting going to school, 'What are you doing New Year's? Want to get together?' 'Oh, we're with our Hungarian friends.' 'What are you doing this time?' 'Getting together with our Hungarian friends...'" Susan agrees, stating that the families she hangs out with stem from her scouting best friends, including a friend who grew up in New Brunswick in the parallel close-knit Hungarian community and later moved to the Cleveland area.

The Patay siblings also mention others who for various reasons left or drifted away from Cleveland's Hungarian community, that these people especially as parents often return years later and re-engage with the community. Karl surmises, "And you can probably go through cserkészzet and see who is in there now and kind of drifting, and then when they became parents, maybe somehow for whatever reason, um, you know, maybe married someone Hungarian or something, it kind of drew them back in. They left for a time. I think Balássy Pali was gone for a while, and after he had kids, and now he's a major part of it, probably for the last 10-15 years." His sister mentions Péter

Bogárdy as a similar example, and Karl continues, “I mean, you’ll get that. Feri, Jálícs Feri. You know, they were, they left. They did their college thing and then, you know, whatever the reason, whatever drew them back, you know, I think once they come back, I think they’re lifers... I think you kind of realize that maybe what you’ve been missing and then you don’t want to lose it again.” The examples they mention are all people who experienced Hungarian scouting as children, and now have their own children enrolled in the program.

Indeed, not only does the Hungarian scouting program organize activities that promote a deep bond of friendship visible even twenty years later, but it has an effect on language use by what it demands from its leaders, many of whom are teenagers working with younger scouts. Matt Kobus relates how scouting impacts his own language use, saying “whenever I’m at scouts or activities I try and speak it because there’s little kids there and I want them to speak better and I want to be a role model for them, I guess.” By Matt’s own account, his own Hungarian language skills are at about half of where his native English skills are, but what being involved in scouting does for him is it causes him to be cognizant of others and the community’s language usage, which in turn leads to a conscious choice to use Hungarian, even if it is harder to speak for second and third generation Hungarian-Americans.

In another thought-provoking example, being involved in scouting led to success in her career, recalled Susan Linder. “I remember it was June, when I was interviewing for this job and they tried to set up an interview when I was going to kiscserkész tábor. I said, ‘Sorry, I’m going to be cooking for 45 kids, you know, at scout camp and going whitewater rafting the day after with my family, so let’s do it the next week.’ And they emailed me back, ‘You’re taking 45 kids to scout camp? And whitewater rafting? You’re hired!’”

### **The Value of Speaking a Second Language**

All of the respondents emphasized the value of speaking a second language, in this case Hungarian. Gabe Kovács had the simplest, most common-sense insight, appropriately followed by a laugh, when he said that “we all speak it, so why not speak it?” The parents of Jennifer Hegyi felt that Hungarian was so important that they had a private Hungarian tutor for their daughter when she was about twelve or thirteen years old. Hanna Völgyi, reflecting on the Hungarian language use in her childhood, stated that “it was something that

made me stand out against my peers and I was always very proud of it.” Matt Kobus linked the pride of being Hungarian to peer influence when talking about the gradual shift as he got older: “the scouts and making friends there [caused the change]. Knowing people there and realizing that other people take pride in being Hungarian, so I should, too, I guess.”

The value of speaking Hungarian is not a sentiment limited to proud Hungarians, either. Knowing another language has practical benefits, as noted by several of the American spouses mentioned in the interviews. Susan Linder related how the subject of Hungarian language use with eventual children came up with her future husband Dave: “when we were dating, it came up, and it was a non-factor. It was the more the better... Dave always said that it’s a gift you can give to your children... it’s so easy to give it, why would you not? Why would you deny them that language?” Megan Ramsey also related how her father, who had originally been opposed to his daughter learning another language, changed his mind:

he actually changed his mind when I was like four years old because he has a niece, my cousin Bailey who lives in Maryland, she was living in Belgium at the time because her parents were CIA and FBI agents, so they were in Belgium at the time and she was learning French. So then my dad realized that, you know, ‘Maria should teach Megan some Hungarian.’ Because of his niece. I guess he realized, because he was a new father... he realized that it’s best to know another language, because he wasn’t raised that way. He was raised like typical United States citizen [monolingual].

When asked whether they plan on speaking Hungarian to their own children, the respondents were all affirmative. Matt Kobus replied that “I think it would be a shame if the whole Hungarian thing ends with me in my family.” Megan Ramsey, reflecting on her own childhood, said “Most definitely, because I think it’s just such a great thing to know, just knowing another language in general. So yeah, I would definitely put them through Magyar iskola and I hope they would like it a lot better than I did,” laughing as she finished. Gabe Kovács alluded to academic research, all the more noteworthy since he is sixteen years old: “I heard something, some sort of study once, that if you learn, if you’re bilingual at a young age, that it’s easier to learn, or something like that, I heard once. So I think it would be a benefit to them, and like it’s just a cool quality to have.” Indeed, decades of research in bilingualism has found that speaking two languages does, in fact, help when studying a third or fourth language.

Samantha Dévai spoke of her American friends' attitude toward her own language use: "I think especially when we started taking language classes in high school, and [her friends] realized that it was, like, such a hard think to get just the basic concepts down, I think that's when they're like, 'Oh my gosh, they have a whole other language already.'" Jennifer Hegyi concurred, adding, "they always say, 'Oh, I wish I knew a whole other language.'" Hanna Völgy reinforced the attitude described among American school friends, surmising:

I think they just are maybe envious, or they think it's really neat that we know an entire different language, an entire different culture aside from just being raised with the American ideals and the American language. I think that they can't even wrap their head around that we can communicate in another language and that we've known it since we were, you know, practically born.

Most of the respondents also emphasized how much of an impact visiting Hungary had not only on their language use, but also on their own sense of identity. Gabe Kovács linked his Cleveland Hungarian experiences, especially in the scouting program, when he said "after I went to Hungary, I think I really realized that it's not just some sort of activity on every Friday night, it's actually who I am, I guess." Samantha Dévai agreed in an independent interview, explaining that for her, visiting Hungary "made it more real, because living here it just seems so isolated, it's just a small community in Cleveland, so being there and that actually being the predominant language made it seem like, ok, there's a lot of people that speak this and they're from there and it's not just us in the scouting community of greater Cleveland." Hanna Völgyi's pride was brought out by her own visit to Hungary, "just seeing where my family came from, seeing the traditions, kind of, live and in action." She also explained that visiting Hungary positively impacted her language skills: "after returning, I mean, noticeably, it became even more, you know, spoken more at home, much more fluid and I was able to incorporate new words into my language base, so it definitely helped, even just being there for a few weeks. It showed huge gains in my language when I speak it, that's for sure."

Megan Ramsey even switched her Facebook page to Hungarian, alluding to the differences between the Hungarian spoken in Cleveland and the Hungarian spoken in Hungary:

Somebody told me the other day, when he went to Magyarország when he was about 18 years old, he told me that the way that he speaks Hungarian over

there in Magyarország is really old-fashioned and he didn't understand the language between the friends and peers and the younger crowd, because it was really fast and it kind of, everything went with the flow and there was a lot of slang involved that we're not really taught over here, because our parents all came in the '50's, '60s, '70's, during that era. So I think that the way we were raised is a little bit more old-fashioned, I think, and the way, the reason why I changed my Facebook to Hungarian and that sometimes I do text in Hungarian, too, is because I kind of want to learn a little bit how real Hungarians, like the modern-day Hungarians speak, because one day I would like to go there and not feel like a fool, you know? And be able to communicate on like the same level as other Hungarians.

Réka Pigniczky, in her documentary film *Inkubátor*, examined the Hungarian-American communities of California, New Brunswick, Cleveland, and Philadelphia, and numerous interviewees in the film expressed this same disconnect between being Hungarian in the United States and being Hungarian in Hungary. In her narration, Réka speaks of an almost artificial incubator that her parent's generation set up for their children, emphasizing only the positive parts of Hungarian culture.<sup>8</sup>

The Patay siblings reminisced about visiting Hungary in the 1980's, going to a dance in Füred, and feeling the same dismay the narrator in *Inkubátor* felt. Karl Patay tells of his sister Ann's entrance to the dance: "She's there, in her *hímzett díszmagyar* [handmade traditional dress], that she worked on for a long time, right, and many tears (laughs) and, but it shocked — I remember, this was my first impression — it shocked me to see the Americanized version of the Hungarian girls there. Nobody had anything on like that. They had westernized, just ball dresses on... Like here we are, the Americans, with all the Hungarians, and they had nothing on that was Hungarian." Ann continues: "We knew more of the folk customs than they did. We feel bad when we discuss, you know, this and this and this, uh, *locsolás* and, uh... they're like, 'Huh?'" Susan Linder mentioned a mutual friend, Klári, who said the same thing. Ann Graber surmises that "we're more Hungarian than they are," which her sister Susan clarifies: "or at least that we try to preserve the culture much better than they do, but they don't have to otherwise, they live there." Preserving the culture because of a perceived need to, as opposed to in Hungary, where there less of a need to, is a theme heard not only in Hungarian-American circles, but also often among Hungarians in Romania, Slovakia, the Ukraine, or in Serbia as well.

Ann recounts that here in the United States, we grasp for anything that's Hungarian, probably because "we wanted to preserve it so much." Her sister Susan explains:

for preserving it, because we see that each generation is going to get weaker. It's just, I think, inevitably it will, so you try to ingrain anything that you can and grasp on to anything that you can. Even as I just look around in my house, and see the Holloház or the Herendi and stuff like that, and see that my kids appreciate that, so you hope that that's one little thing that they will take with them, you know, when they get to their own house. So it's – or your *hímezett terület*... stuff like that that it's a part of us.

### **The Importance of Strictness**

Parenting, including the language skills and cultural values transmitted to their own children, again came into the spotlight several times during the study. Ann Graber realized that her own ethnicity was strengthened when she grew up and had her family:

Meaning my own kids. As soon as I started having my own children, my ethnicity was strengthened, I mean my language, because I wanted my kids to have the same thing.” She spoke of her struggles to keep her son in the scouting program: “there came that point in his life, I want to say between age 9 and 12, where he was like, ‘I don’t want—’ It was a fight to go every Friday, an absolute fight, and it was, ‘You’re going until you go to ÓV [the scout leadership training camp at age 14] and then it’s up to you.’ Then along came Magyar iskola for ÓV and he did that... He still had good friends. He went through the ÓV course for two years, went to ÓV tábor, and afterwards he hugged me and he said, ‘Thank you for making me do it. This was awesome, I’m so glad I’m a part of it.’ And he really, really enjoys it. There’s that point where you’ve got to reach...

Not only is consistent parenting important, she stresses, but her insights also show that the transmission of culture succeeds when parents create the conditions for friends to influence their peers in a positive way towards Hungarian language and culture. Her brother, referring to his own childhood, agrees, “as much as I fought it back then, especially in my younger years, is how much I appreciate it now.”

Grandparents being strict is a theme voiced by Ákos Fóty in the documentary film *Inkubátor*. He recalls Sunday afternoons growing up Hungarian in California, where his grandparents made him read Hungarian newspaper articles and summarize them, and how much he hated it. But there was no escaping it, especially since the reward for finishing was a trip to

McDonald's.<sup>9</sup> Ann Graber recalled a similar incident: "Nagypapa would make us read in Hungarian, and we would go hide and say, 'Zsuzsi will go first' (laughs). Mostly I would go hide. I hated reading with them." Yet later in life, as seen in the paragraph above, it is these same values that she transmits to her own children. The strictness was not limited to grandparents, however.

Sometimes the strictness of the scout leaders brought forth pride and accomplishment, as evidenced by the situation related by Karl Patay:

We were *róverek* [older scouts], so I was the, um, *őrsvezető* [patrol leader] for Kanyó Zoli, Csorba Béla, Sanyi, and I don't know who else was in there, but I mean, Miki, and you know we went on a two-day *portya* [hike] and Levente tried to push us and he gave us something like 25 miles or something the first day and we were pissed. And I'm thinking, 'How the heck is he going to think that we're going to finish this in one day?' We start early in the morning, 2 o'clock, and Levente came by at 11:30 with the van and at that point, we were determined. He was going to pick us up and finally take us to our destination where we were supposed to spend the night next to this creek. And we had compasses and you know how it was. We said no and we wouldn't take the ride. You know what, you're going to test us, so we refused it and we just kept walking.

Demanding a high standard evokes a proud reaction and camaraderie from the teenaged boys, and this camaraderie is what tied them together. Karl continues, "but you know what? I'll never forget it, because it was [not] wussy."

### **Linguistic Insights**

The Patay siblings also brought to the surface some linguistic insights regarding their Hungarian language usage. Speaking of the pragmatics of whether a conversation is mixed with English or Hungarian, Karl relates that "with Mom it's mixed, depending on how she answers the phone or how she starts the conversation. She'll start in English, too," as opposed to his father, who always started the conversations in Hungarian. This phenomenon of guiding or directing the language of conversation is well-known among Hungarian-American parents whose children's easier language is English. Continues Karl, "So, if she started in Hungarian, you know, 'Hogy vagy?' then, you know, I'd be speaking Hungarian to her... And it flows... For example, coming here today, when Feri was here. When you start a conver-

sation in Hungarian, most of it's spoken in Hungarian... how something is started, I guess, who starts the conversation." His sister Ann concurs: "You don't want to lose it. The less you practice it, the harder it is to go back. Pisti [her husband] and I will speak in Hungarian amongst each other more than I do with my own kids."

They speak of the natural phenomenon experienced by many ethnic language parents trying to maintain their language while living in the United States, which Karl characterized as "once we got into high school age, we would speak English amongst ourselves." Ann relates of how the shift from Hungarian to English came about as she saw it in her own children:

They spoke solely Hungarian in the house up until kis Pisti started first grade. Kindergarten was still part-time; it was two full days and a half day. And the girls only spoke Hungarian together. There's six and four years between Pisti and the two girls, and as Pisti started coming home, he was... all of the sudden he was cool, that he could speak English. The kids spoke Hungarian as their first language. Pisti didn't start preschool till he was four and a half, and when Deanna started when she was three and a half, she spoke Hungarian only and I would have to translate for her. So she understood English, but she didn't speak... As Pisti started going to school, so first grade, second grade, the language all of the sudden switched between the three kids. That was, it was very noticeable. All of the sudden, the three kids, who spoke Hungarian at home to each other, started speaking English, 'cause now Pisti understood English.

This natural switching is what the scouting movement and the other community activities seem to mitigate, inasmuch as the natural tendency of the children is to choose English, the easier language to communicate amongst themselves. Parents enrolling their children in organized Hungarian activities such as scouting gives their children, especially the teenagers, a structured outlet that channels the conversations to Hungarian by way of working with younger children. This allows the language to be maintained despite assimilation pressures, often late into the second and third generations, as one can see from the respondents and their children. Karl recalls his shift in high school where "I started getting more American friends, and in turn, talking with them and doing more things with them, I lost my Hungarian a lot."

This view is counterbalanced by the example of the friendship of Matt Kobus and Gabe Kovács, who relate the effect of their close friendship on their own language use. Says Matt, "Gabe's like one of my best friends. He's always been there for me, like I see when he speaks fluent Hungarian, so I

look up to him for that.“ The effect on Hungarian language use is mutual, continues Gabe, as he lists the top people in his life who impacted his language development: “I think that the top five people would be my grandma... my dad; and my two other grandparents, because it just comes easier for them; and probably, um, probably Matt, actually, because, since when he joined cserkészzet, he didn't know that much Hungarian, so I sort of pushed myself to speak it more with him so he would learn it.” So peer friendships can have a negative or positive role in impacting ethnic language maintenance.

### **Reasons for Assimilation**

In trying to ascertain what factors impacted their Hungarian language use growing up, the conversations among the respondents revealed some concerns and negative factors that illuminate why 90% of Hungarian-Americans do not in fact speak Hungarian in their households. Chief among these was the pressure faced by children to assimilate

Both Samantha Dévai and the Patay siblings mentioned cousins who were not living in cities with large Hungarian communities and where there was no Hungarian scouting. Says Susan Linder, “Well, the fact that [our parents] happened to land in Cleveland, you know? Because if they would’ve landed in, I don’t know, Kansas, you wouldn’t have the same culture surrounding you that would support that.” Samantha Dévai recounts a parallel situation: “And then my other cousin that’s still here in the States, um, in another part of Ohio, he didn’t participate in scouts very much, so I think his Hungarian language ability declined much more rapidly than ours.” To his credit, his cousin Hanna does say that “he did recently just go to Hungary, and now he’s come back and pretty much that’s all he speaks, so I think it made quite the difference for him, so he might be inching his way up to where we’re at,” much like the fact that Karl Patay, because he works with Hungarian laborers in his construction business, speaks better Hungarian, knowing more slang and having better pronunciation, than he ever did as a teenager. But having friends who speak Hungarian, whether in the scouts or in other organized Hungarian community activities, does seem to make a difference. Jennifer Hegyi, the only one of the respondents who did not spend many years growing up with the scouts, admits that she does not really know that many Hungarians that are her age, except for a few that don’t live in Ohio. In addition, the reason she no longer has a private Hungarian tutor is that she “got really busy in school so I couldn’t do any of it.”

Megan Ramsey also spoke of an American school culture that was not really supportive of or understanding of bilingualism. She characterized some of her peers in school as being very sheltered or narrow-minded. “They don’t really know much about culture and history and the old world. Like, they don’t really care that much, I kind of feel.” One in particular was surprised that Megan would go abroad. Megan describes the incident: “I just told my friend the other day at school that I’m going to Europe, and she’s like, ‘What?! Where are you going? You’re going there alone?’ I’m like, ‘Yeah.’ ‘It’s so dangerous, don’t go.’ I’m like, ‘No, it’s going to be fine, there’s, I’m going to go to a school there, a study abroad program, everything’s going to be fine. There’s going to be professors, classes... it’s going to be all right.’ And she’s like, ‘Oh, you’re a daredevil.’” Ann Graber remembers being chastised at her daughter’s preschool: “I got in a lot of trouble from Deanna’s preschool teacher, how could I do this to my child [speaking only Hungarian at a young age]? And I looked at her and I go, ‘Don’t worry, she’ll learn English.’ You know, I was not intimidated at all, because we had been through it, you know. And she knew her numbers, she knew her letters, she was fine.”

Another reason English becomes the predominant language in the household is simply easier communication. Ann Graber explains: “Because you’re at work all day, you come home, you do homework and everything. We’ll discuss an activity and you want a response from your kids. Their first language, unfortunately, even though they spoke Hungarian as a first language, is English. If you want to get something out of them, you have to just say it in English. It’s more important to have that communication going... it’s easier for them, communications-wise.” Karl Patay had the same situation brought on by his long working hours. He remembers, “I was working 10-12 hours a day, sometimes going at one point two jobs, and I was never home. You know, when I’d come home at 9 o’clock or 8 o’clock at night... the last thing I’m going to try to do for the half hour or twenty minutes I see my kids is to try to teach them Hungarian. I wanted to just communicate with them. I wanted to see them, I wanted to hold them, I wanted to hug them, see how their day went, the goods and the bads, and that’s a big difference between why my kids don’t speak Hungarian and her kids do.”

### **The Role of American Spouses**

Karl also related the support shown by his wife, Denise, who does not speak Hungarian. “She had all intentions of trying to learn Hungarian. She learned

the colors, the numbers, and that, but you know what, life takes over.” Difficulties in speaking Hungarian to his children he ascribed to his long working hours and some other private personal issues, never to his American spouse, but he did touch upon the difficulties experienced by an American spouse who marries into a Hungarian family. “She’s pretty easy going, but she has her things that bother her, too. And, you know, after the honeymoon was over, you know, she voiced to me that it did trouble her when we went to my parents’ house and she didn’t understand what people were saying. And it wasn’t until Susan got married and Dave came along that she started feeling more comfortable.” Susan confirmed, “Dave said he felt kind of like an outsider,” and Karl continued, “Yeah, you feel like an outsider and it’s like, the last thing they want to do after they’ve been through that is to go home and to speak it at home, you know, for me, anyway, the times I was there.”

Navigating the tightrope of emotions and being attentive to wives of husbands is a problem often voiced by Hungarian-Americans with American spouses. In a particularly nuanced insight, Ann put herself in her sister-in-law’s shoes and turned her own familiarity with and preference for Hungarian to Denise’s situation with English: “for me, to speak to an infant in English would’ve been foreign. There’s no way you could expect [Denise’s] nieces to speak to her little baby in Hungarian, a foreign language for her. I mean, you have to say those words of endearment in your own language and for us, it was Hungarian. I couldn’t imagine speaking to... even to a baby now, I speak Hungarian, because that’s what comes natural to a baby.” Susan agreed, stating, “So then you’re speaking a language that the spouse does not understand. So in my situation, Dave was not just understanding, but was agreeable to not understand his children’s first words. And that bothered him. I remember being in the car with him once, and we were going and the boys were babbling about something, and it was insignificant, it was nothing, and he said, ‘What are they saying?’ And I said, ‘It’s really, it’s nothing, it’s just...’ But to him it was everything because he didn’t understand it. And that bothered him. Not to the point where he would say ‘Don’t ever do this.’” Matt Kobus related a similar sentiment: “Well, my step-dad kind of gets angry if my mom is always speaking Hungarian to me, and he feels kind of like he’s left out of it. And sometimes my mom’s friends will tell my step-dad ‘You should learn Hungarian’ and that really pisses him off.” Susan distilled these sentiments into the crux: “that’s always a difficult part, leaving your spouse out of a conversation.”

All of the American spouses mentioned in the interviews were seen by the respondents as being supportive of Hungarian in the home, but Susan did

point to several frustrations of a mixed-language household experienced by her husband Dave:

So if I'm having a heated discussion with my kids, and we're disagreeing on something, then they're... if Dave's home, he'll be like, 'What are you telling them, because I don't understand.' He gets frustrated with that situation, where he wants to back me up in what I've just told them, whether that's to get ready for church and then I left to go get ready myself, he's like, 'What did you tell them? Because I can't reinforce what you just told them because I didn't understand that.' These breakdowns still occur, and then you have to kind of take a time-out and say, 'I just asked them to get ready for church. They know what they have to do and if you can reinforce that, that'd be great.

In fact, Dave's sister-in-law Ann relates how supportive he is linguistically. "Dave would say things like, 'Hozd here the piros labda.' And he would. Whatever he could say in Hungarian, he would really make an effort." It is not easy being the American spouse of a Hungarian-American parent speaking Hungarian to their children, and these situations reflect the difficulties experienced in everyday situations.

### **American or Hungarian?**

Perhaps the most telling question was the last question of the interview, in which I asked each respondent whether they considered themselves American or Hungarian and why? Their answers were easily divided into age groups: below 25 years old and over 25. The younger respondents mostly said they were American, although proud of their Hungarian heritage. Because almost all of them and some of their parents were born in the United States, that is not surprising. Matt Kobus and Megan Ramsey were unequivocal in their answers. Says Matt, "I think I feel more American, like without a question. Like, you know, I feel proud to be Hungarian, there's just like a stronger pull towards the American patriotism." Megan continued in the same vein: "Um, I would have to say that I am more of an American, just because, just like Máté said, he's more patriotic towards America, and I'm more patriotic toward America. I was raised as a Hungarian, I guess, but only with food and the culture and the folk dancing and, you know, having Hungarian friends, so I do consider myself more Hungarian than any other type of nationality I have in my blood, but if I have to, uh, if anybody asks me, I'm an American. No matter what. Because this is my home, this is where I was born." Gabe Kovács alluded to his parents'

role in forming his identity: “I consider myself, I don't know, half and half? That's what my answer usually is when I get asked that question. Because I am an American citizen. I was born here, raised here, but really I was sort of raised like a Hungarian, I guess, because my parents tried to do that and I think they succeeded.”

Hanna, Samantha, and Jennifer were also unequivocal in their answers. Said Hanna Völgyi, “although I'm very proud of my Hungarian heritage, I still probably consider myself American, just for the sheer fact that I was born here and I did my schooling here and will most likely finish... be living here the rest of my life, so I would probably say I'm American.” Her cousin Samantha Dévai agreed, “I feel sort of the same way.” Jennifer Hegyi, who was born in Hungary but came to the United States as a toddler, continued: “I think that I'm a little of both, but if I had to pick one, I feel like I'm more American, just because of how I was raised here and it's not the same as if I was in Hungary.”

The three Patay siblings, being older, offered different views on the same question. Susan could not separate the two parts of her identity. She explains:

I can't say if I'm American-Hungarian or Hungarian-American. But it's both. And I... because I have such a reverence for the country that gave me and my parents freedom and that they really ingrained in us that, yes, our culture is 100% paired in real life and it's what we are, but the fact that this country gave us the freedom to, you know, have your own religion, and ... maintain your culture and do what you want that way. You can't... I can't separate the two. I can't say one or the other. You're not assimilated but you can keep the two separate, appreciating both, really. It's not one or the other.

Karl got emotional as he explained that whenever he visits Hungary, he says, “Megyek haza” [I go home], just like his parents did, even though he was not born in Hungary, it is not a home to him, yet such a strong tie still remains. He feels the emotional bond that his parents had with their native country, yet consciously disassociates himself from negative aspects of Hungarian culture, offering an urban vs. rural dichotomy, while at the same time acknowledging that his identity has changed through the years.

If you asked me when, up until I was 20-24 I would say I was more Hungarian. At 44, I'm more American because of my disassociation with that life, not intentionally, but because again, of life. And not only that, but I've been back enough times to see that there's a lot of what Hung — what I see in Hungary

today that I don't want to be associated with. It's, you know, not the villages, but the big cities have become very westernized. You walk into Budapest today and, I'll never forget, three years ago when I was there, I thought I was walking through the Bronx. Graffiti everywhere. I don't want to be associated at all with the Hungary, with the big cities of today. What I want to be associated with is the life that my parents lived there and the life that's still being lived in the villages where they're still keeping rabbits and chickens and pigs in their backyards.

Ann Graber, on the other hand, explained that her Hungarian identity is a particular type of Hungarian-American identity, localizing it to her experience growing up as a scout in Cleveland. "I will say... Hungarian-American, but the Hungarian-American... I mean, I'm here, this Hungarian, OK? The *cserkész* Hungarian, the *regös* Hungarian, the *magyar iskola* Hungarian, the Cleveland Hungarian, the *in exteris*, or whatever is outside of Hungary. That's Hungarian-American." Her ties to her Hungarian roots have become stronger through time, as she acknowledges the effort that maintaining a Hungarian identity for herself and for her children entails. She continues, "The older I become, the more it's still very important to me, even more so. I do get tired of what I'm doing, I have to admit, because I've been involved for so long, I do get tired of it but that necessity is so strong. And now it's like you see it in your kids and that's why it's still so strong."

## **Conclusions**

Mónika Fodor found that "qualitative interviews about culture inquire about shared understandings, taken-for-granted roles of behavior, standards of value and mutual expectations." Furthermore, she writes that "a fundamental goal is to find out what people have learned through experience and how they are able to pass it on to the next generation."<sup>10</sup> What are the main factors, then, that impact Hungarian language and culture maintenance among these nine Cleveland Hungarians, and by extension among Cleveland's Hungarian community in general in light of their responses?

Very important in developing their Hungarian identities was the role of consistent parenting. Parents who spoke Hungarian in the household, who took their children to Hungarian community events such as the Hungarian school, scouting, and the folk dance group, made a significant cultural impact on their children, as evidenced by their children's recollections even twenty

years later. The Hungarian scouting movement and folk dance group, by placing strict demands on its participants, effected a deep camaraderie and strong bonds of friendship among the children and especially the teenagers, who are prone to listen to their peers instead of their parents. When peer friendships in American high school are stronger than among Hungarian friends, language use suffers. When peer friendships among the Hungarian teens is strong, their Hungarian language use improves. Thus having a child actively involved in Cleveland's Hungarian community events leads to a higher fluency and a stronger sense of cultural identity, as does visiting Hungary.

When only 11% of Hungarians in Cleveland report speaking Hungarian regularly in the household odds are that 89% of those with Hungarian ancestry will eventually assimilate. These nine case studies, as examples of Cleveland Hungarians who maintain their language and culture, show how to beat those odds. Even late into the second and third generation, it is still very possible to maintain an ethnic language and culture and pass it on to the next generation. It all depends on strong parenting and peer friendships put into place and enabled by a tight-knit community.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Attila Szabo, "Hungarian Immigrants in Northeastern Ohio: Ethno-Cultural Contact and Assimilation," (master's thesis completed and accepted at Kent State University, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Katalin Pintz, "Hungarian Heritage Maintenance in the U.S.A.: New Brunswick, N.J. as a Magyar Ethnic Island," *Hungarian Studies Review*, 38, 1-2 (2011): 83-120.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing. The Art of Hearing Data* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995), 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

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<sup>7</sup> Mónika Fodor, “My Slice of Americana: Hungarian-Americans Construct Their Ethno-Cultural Identity in Narratives” (PhD dissertation, University of Pécs, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Réka Pigniczky, *Inkubátor* (Budapest: 56Films, 2009), DVD.

<sup>9</sup> Ákos Fóty, interviewed in *Inkubátor*.

<sup>10</sup> Fodor, “My Slice of Americana.”