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Constraints on “Free Choice”: The Role of Marriage in a Hungarian Romungro Community

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ABSTRACT

Marriage has been studied by anthropologists usually in so-called “traditional” Roma communities. These communities are said to have “successfully” avoided assimilation and the process of proletarianization. According to classical anthropological studies, marriage plays an important role in maintaining the organization of these communities and their “cultural system” (Gay y Blasco 1999; Okely 1996; Sutherland 1976; Tesár 2012; Williams 2000). Based on long-term ethnographical fieldwork from 2000 to 2013, my paper will discuss the meanings that marriage takes in a Hungarian Romungro community,¹ which is highly affected by processes of assimilation and proletarianization. I will point out that although the concept and practice of marriage here are different from those of non-proletarianized communities—for example, the notion of “arranged marriage” does not exist among Romungros—marriage seems to be the most significant institution in the everyday life of the community. The institution of marriage can be interpreted through intersectionality, along with the kinship system and gender relationships, but it should not be separated from ethnic identity, everyday practices of ethnic distinctions, and class position either. Drawing on two case studies, I will show how the institution of marriage relates to the extended family, the *Gypsy/Hungarian* distinction, and the class positions within this community, and how the process of proletarianization affects the role and concepts of marriage.

KEYWORDS

Marriage, kinship, ethnic distinction, social classes, social mobility.

1) Romungro are a Hungarian-speaking Roma group in Hungary. They are the largest Roma group in Hungary, i.e., about 500,000 persons or 70 percent of the Hungarian Roma population.

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Introduction

“You cannot command the heart” goes the most popular phrase about marriages among the Romungros. In these communities, the concept of marriage is strongly related to the notion of “freedom of choice” and “free love.” However, when studying everyday marriage practices, we can see that these “free” emotions also depend on social relations. It is a basic assumption in sociology that a free-choice marriage or a marriage for love is also controlled by structural

constraints. Our relationships and choices of partners are strongly determined by social relations, which in turn are organized by class or ethnic inequalities. As Max Haller (1981) stresses, marriage is still one of the main institutions that help preserve and perpetuate class positions, playing an important role in maintaining hierarchical ethnic relationships. At the same time marriage can be one of the main mobility strategies to help the individual gain a better position in the system of social inequalities. Consequently, a love-based match cannot be interpreted outside of structural factors. Moreover, as Illouz (2012) emphasizes, emotions are also shaped by social relations

and institutions. It was no different in my research site, among Romungro communities living in Hungarian villages. To reveal the constraints on, and the pathways of, the practice of marriage in this community, first we need to account for the wider structural determinations that influence the lives of people from these communities.

In my research experience, in the Romungro communities, one's chances in life are determined by the class position in conjunction with ethnicity. In these rural communities, if we "get to know" that someone is *Cigány* (Gypsy),² this will tell us where this person lives (one of the Roma settlements in the village); what kind of job he/she has (seasonal work, unskilled work, public work scheme³); the person's level of education (mostly elementary education); economic status (poor); and, last but not least, where this person chooses a partner. In short, the attribute of being *Cigány* affects almost every area of this person's life, and it subsumes every aspect of their social position.

Furthermore, the social position of *Cigány* communities is shaped by wider economic and political processes, particularly the expansion and contraction of stable wage labor. While in times of economic growth Roma have a chance to secure jobs on the lowest level of the formal wage labor ladder, in times of "crisis" they are excluded from it, and they can only make a living working in the informal/semi-formal economy. Because of such cyclical changes, it seems that these communities are constantly in the process of proletarianization, as well as being caught in a similarly never-ending process of assimilation. Being able to stay in the system of formal wage labor is not simply the most evident form of social mobility for them, but it also gives them a chance to shake off the stigmatizing meanings of being *Cigány*, since the ethnic distinction could dissolve in the worker status. This permanent transition determines aspirations related to

both class position and ethnic distinction in these Romungro communities. In these aspirations, the desired social mobility is entangled with the pressure to assimilate and leave behind the label of *Cigány*, or at least conceal their descent.

The entanglement of class position and ethnicity influences the possibilities of "free" marital choices. The category of *Cigány* comes with such a low status position, lack of resources and stigmatization that marriage can be a means to either get away from, or gain resources within, the community. In this article I present these different possibilities through the stories of two sisters. In the first case, marriage is a tool for social mobility and for complying with the pressure for assimilation, while in the second case marriage helps to gain resources within the *Cigány* community. Before introducing the two cases, I present how the social status described above is related to the *Cigány/Hungarian* distinction, and how it affects the relations within *Cigány* communities and the role of marriage.

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Halfway towards proletarianization and assimilation

Since the Second World War the proletarianization of the *Cigány* population seems to have been both continuous and permanent. This situation is assumed to be transitional and is conceptualized differently by different social science traditions. Based on the above-described situation of these populations, in Marxist terminology we can consider them to be a "reserve army of labor" or a "relative surplus population" (Quijano 2000; Rajaram 2018; Sanyal 2007; Wallerstein 2000). At the same time we can also refer to them as "the precariat," since the lack of stable, permanent jobs and income, and consequent lack of security and predictability determines their status

2)Throughout the paper, I use the term *Cigány* instead of *Roma*, on the one hand because it is used in my field, on the other hand, because it expresses their social position as experienced by these communities. Similarly, I use the term *Hungarian* as it is used in my field to refer to non-Roma people; so, in this sense, *Hungarian* doesn't mean Hungarian citizen, but non-Roma.

3)The Public Work Scheme is a welfare framework in which unemployed people are expected to work eight hours a day in order to receive their benefits.

and strategies (Han 2018; Millar 2017, 2014; Standing 2011). In addition to these, the concept of semi-proletariat household suggested by Dunaway (2019) is also useful. According to her description, these households gain their income partially from formal wage labor and partially from other sources, and the combination of these determines the relations within and among households (Dunaway 2019). Regardless of what concept we choose, two facts strongly connected to each other follow from the above: the first is the central role of ethnicity in maintaining class inequalities, and the second is the increased significance of kinship in the social organization of these *Cigány* communities. Both are important factors that shape the role of marriage and the strategies related to it.

In the rural communities where I conducted my field research, ethnicity, more specifically the category of *Cigány*, supports the maintenance of class division and draws the line between people with more or less predictable and stable employment and income and those who are temporarily or permanently excluded from that (Petrovici et al 2018; Rajaram 2017; Szombati 2018; Grill 2018; Kovai 2017). In these rural settlements, the former takes the form of the *Hungarian* majority and the latter that of the *Cigány* position. Moreover, in most cases, independent of their actual descent, those who are in the more disadvantaged position are considered to be *Cigány*. As a result of the articulations of class and ethnic positions, for the *Hungarian* majority, the *Cigány* have become an embodiment of their own existential fears. In times of economic hardships, these fears get stronger, as earning a livelihood regarded as legitimate is harder for the middle-class, too. In these times people outside the realm of formal wage labor are deemed as "surplus population;" they are simply not welcome and getting rid of them is considered beneficial for the villages and towns nearby. In less harder times this racist claim is scaled back to expectations of assimilation. The

wish that the *Cigány* people should not exist forces people living in the *Cigány* position to be ashamed of their *Cigány* identity and to leave it behind or make it invisible for *Hungarians*.

The pressure of assimilation on *Cigány* people makes the role of kinship important in the Romungro communities, since kinship is constituted as the only field where being a *Cigány* appears to be an acceptable identity. In addition, similarly to other disadvantaged, stigmatized social groups, deflecting the stigma and becoming protected from it leads to fragmentation (Wacquant 2009; van de Port 1998; Fanon 1985). From the individual's point of view, there will always be other *Cigány* who fit to the negative image of the majority about them and are perceived to embody that image. At the same time, the individual's we-group provides him/her with the safety of the "decent *Cigány*" community that follows the hegemonic norms of the majority. In the *Cigány* communities, where extended kinship and the household are the manifestations of the safe we-group, fragmentation happens along these lines.

During my fieldwork, I found three main extended, partly overlapping kinship networks: the Balogh, the Rostas, and the Farkas families. From the perspective of the protagonists of my case study, the two sisters, Kisjutka and Betti, this safe space takes the form of the village Gömbalja, on the one hand, and of the extended kinship network of the Balogh family to which they are related through their mother, on the other hand. However, this safety provided by kinship and locality creates danger zones and points to other *Cigány* who are said to embody danger. From the Baloghs' point of view, the Rostas embody danger, as well as the people who disown their *Cigány* identity in their attempt to fit the hegemonic norms of the majority and adapt to a fake-Hungarian pose, as illustrated by the Farkas family. Having grown up with the mental map described above, for Kisjutka and Betti, as for any teenager, their marriage choices



entailed extraordinarily high stakes, since their future relationships could take them away from the safety of kinship and maybe also from the village of Gömbalja. Marriage always reconfigures the kin networks and with them the terrain and limits of a safe *Cigány* identity.

The high value that these communities place on kinship is not simply a consequence of stigmatization, it also stems from their disadvantageous social position. These networks mean resources, social capital, and a way of organizing that can help maintain existential safety. Obviously, this feature is not unique to the *Cigány* communities that I researched: a number of studies have documented the relationship between a vulnerable structural position and reliance on kinship (Kelly 1998; Stack 1974; Du Bois 1996; Dominguez and Watkins 2003; Baumann 1995).

This importance that these structurally vulnerable communities place on kinship, however, entails the weakness of other types of social relations, which is balanced by the stability of kin networks and roles. The structure of kin is often perceived as given: according to Edwards and Strathern, it is considered to be unrelated to the political and technical manipulation of the world, and it appears to be natural and unquestionable (2000: 147–69). Considering kinship to be natural is a huge resource, even if it is not naturally given, and even if groups living under the ideology of kinship are constantly negotiating and reconsidering the limits of “the natural” (Edwards and Strathern 2000; Carsten 2004; Tesár 2012; Gay y Blasco 1999). But what do these natural and unquestionable relations protect such groups from? In the system of formal social institutions such as the formal job market, education, bureaucracy, or healthcare, *Cigány* occupy a disadvantageous position, as they are often subject to the selection and exclusion mechanisms of these institutions. It seems that being *Cigány* means being unprotected, on the periphery of reluctant or dismissive institutions. At the same time,

from the peripheral perspective of *Cigány* communities, relations with the institutions of the majority, as well as their requirements or advantages, seem haphazard—temporary and unreliable—as opposed to the “naturally given” and permanent nature of kinship.

The easiest way to access the resources of kin networks is through marriage. On the one hand, the locality and possibilities of individuals are determined by their parents’ marriages, and, on the other hand, individuals constantly reconfigure these networks through their own marriages. Marriages are not simply opening up or closing down pathways to access the resources of kinship, they can indeed affect the class-based *Cigány/Hungarian* distinction. As we have seen, the role of kinship networks is extremely important from the perspective of livelihood and identity, but marriage is the main factor in this environment, so nuclear families remain the main economic units, despite their openness. Marriage decides which networks are relevant for the individual, what main strategies to make a living are available to her/him, her/his status in local relationships, and in general in what sense she/he can be *Cigány*. Marriage fundamentally defines the individual’s course of action, which is not independent from kinship and the class-based *Cigány/Hungarian* distinction. In the following section, through the stories of Kisjutka and Betti, I show that free marital choices are controlled by both social constraints and the possibilities that marriages can open up. However, these are all highly dependent on the position of the parents.

Parents: the “decent Cigány”

Jutka and Tibi, the girls’ parents, managed to gain a stable and relatively advantageous position in their community, by the early 2000s. They did so by cleverly applying assimilation strategies, in which the



involvement of kinship networks played a major role, as well as accepting the village as an integrative social field. Tibi and his wife were among the first *Cigány* families to move out of the *Cigány* settlement and into the village. Tibi was a descendant of the Vásárhelyis, a well-established family of Gömbalja that the majority *Hungarians* respected as "our *Cigány*," in opposition to the new-comers who had only moved to the area one generation before. Tibi's family moving into the village was also considered a well-earned status change, a legitimate milestone on their social mobility pathway, granted only to a few *Cigány*. At the same time the Vásárhelyis did not have a central role in the *Cigány* kinship network, while the kin connections of Tibi's wife Jutka, were more substantial. Jutka had five siblings and many cousins living in the village as members of the large Balogh family. The advantageous relationships with *Hungarians* were provided by Tibi's network, while the important role in the *Cigány* community was guaranteed by Jutka's network. Regarded as "decent *Cigány*" only in Gömbölja, they could gain advantages only through their relationships in the village,⁴ which meant relative safety in spite of the disadvantages of their ethnicity and class position. Therefore, Jutka and Tibi wanted to cut off the kinship relations outside Gömbalja, since these could endanger their position.

Jutka and Tibi's everyday strategies were aimed at safeguarding their "decent *Cigány*" image that was supposed to provide their children with a safe background and a chance of becoming *Hungarian*. Providing this "security" was a fulltime job, since they had to stay *Cigány* while constantly managing the meaning of this attribute. On the one hand, they were keen on distancing their behavior from the negative stereotypes connected to the category of *Cigány*, and on the other hand, they had to pay attention not to be related to people who embodied the degrading meaning of *Cigány*, i.e., "backward," "filthy," "displaying a shameful

behavior in the eyes of the *Hungarians*." Not only did they and their children have to stay away from those people, but also from their kinship, despite the latter's providing security to them. Therefore Jutka and Tibi acted as inner supervisors within the community, checking constantly if the behavior of their relatives met the hegemonic norms of the *Hungarians*. But they also had to pay attention not to step out of the realm of their *Cigány* identity, since a large part of their resources came from kin relationships.

Jutka and Tibi's daughters, however, were not entirely aware of these taboos. Their parents guaranteed them the position of decent *Cigány* through the totality of the local context and through kinship, which spared them from most of the dangers associated with their class position. The girls could move around the village freely from one relative to another, and they did not wish to go anywhere else, so their parents did not have to hold them back. Kisjutka and Betti went along the path opened by their parents; nevertheless, they got to different places through their marriages.



Marriage and social mobility: Kisjutka's case

Heart and structure

As we could see above, marriage is the relation with the strongest impact on the protection provided by locality (the village) and kinship: it can substantially weaken or strengthen it. Marriage does not simply determine the types of essential personal connections; it is also the most important source of bonding for individuals and of alliances that enable them to keep or gain advantageous positions. Although in rural *Cigány* communities like the one I am describing here marriage has a strong influence on the position of the individual

4) For example, Tibi got a job from local Hungarians.

or the group, as is the case of the Balogh family, marriage-related ideologies are not concerned with kinship norms, but quite the opposite, they claim the primacy of overwhelming emotions without any social regulations and rationality. “You can’t command the heart,” as the proverb goes; and it is used even if the relationship breaks other important norms, for example, those related to heterosexuality or motherhood. While the recognition of the freedom of emotions undoubtedly gives individuals some room for maneuver, more often than not the heart makes its “autonomous” decisions according to certain social meanings. Although the heart rarely leads to unknown paths, in most cases it still brings a change in the network of kinship and generates new relations within it. These new relations are often foreign for the parents’ generation, so in many cases, these are quite vehemently opposed to the love-based relationships of their children. Marriage also provides an individual network, since the individual becomes related to the parents and siblings of her/his spouse and will be connected to the community where her/his spouse is from. These new relationships are hers or his alone, and an individual’s parents and siblings can only benefit from these relationships via the individual.

The acknowledgment and praise of emotions not only leave room for individual choices, but also generate a collective imaginary about the chances of transcending social distinctions. If “you cannot command the heart,” then it is possible to have emotions that are not constrained by social distance, for example, a *Hungarian* boy can fall in love with a *Cigány* girl. For many, even today, this daydream about the power of love means the only real chance to transcend the *Cigány/Hungarian* distinction and escape poverty. Among teenagers today, just as it was back when Kisjutka was a teenager, to date a *Hungarian* girl or boy is a huge increase in prestige. As Frantz Fanon (1986)

notes, romantic relationships are a way out of the stigmatized social context and position, namely here being *Cigány*. And indeed, many teenager fantasies in the *Cigány* community are about fair-skinned *Hungarian* girls or boys. Rottenberg (2003) takes this analysis a step further: to desire the “white,” the privileged “race”—here a *Hungarian* privileged girl or boy—comes from the undesired and unacceptable nature of being *Cigány*. Desiring the privileged *Hungarian* girl/boy is the only possibility to identify with this position in an oppressive regime that makes being *Cigány* unacceptable (Rottenberg 2003: 435–451). In the early 2000s, the teenagers in the settlement were enthusiastically reading youth magazines populated by fair-skinned *Hungarian* young people in fashionable clothing. The girls could see the real-life versions of the magazine posters when they strolled through the village and looked at the non-*Cigány* teenagers. *Virág Tomi, Fülöp Laci*, many names of *Hungarian* pretty boys can still be seen carved inside a heart onto the walls of houses. Back in the day, Kisjutka could have very well been one of the authors of these carvings.

Before fulfillment

When I met Kisjutka, she lived together with her *Hungarian* boyfriend in a town near Gömbalja. There had been many preconditions for their relationship. Kisjutka had grown up almost entirely in the village and had attended school in a “normal” class, i.e., where most students were *Hungarian*. Her place of residence, her fair skin and her parents’ relatively favorable economic and social status had made it possible that, under specific circumstances, her being *Cigány* could become irrelevant. Although I didn’t know Kisjutka back then, and I can only rely on her stories, it seems that, even if only for some life-changing moments, the assimilation pact was made real. Within

the safe environment of state institutions, the *Cigány/Hungarian* distinction could dissolve into the universal categories of workers or students. After finishing primary school in the village, Kisjutka went to a vocational school in town, where she trained to become a seamstress. At the vocational school, she had similar experiences as in primary school. She had good memories of her teenage years. Gömbalja still had a disco, and local youth would go out in their village much more than today, when they prefer to go out to the bigger town nearby. The village, just like the school and later the workplace, was a field where the *Cigány/Hungarian* distinction dissipated into other differences in social position and into the shared experiences of being students, co-workers, or teenagers.

Because of her parents' efforts and the fairness of her skin, Kisjutka accessed many situations where her descent became irrelevant for whole chains of interactions. The sentimental girls' novel story of assimilation came true for her, but a number of preconditions and experiences were necessary to enable this free choice of her heart. After finishing vocational school, her profession of choice proved to be a dead-end career, as it did for many others. She could work as a seamstress only for a short period of time, and after the textile factory was closed, she had to say goodbye to her craft. However her career was determined not by her formal training but by her experiences. She managed to find work in a factory nearby as a cleaner. The workplace community was similar to the school community, and work almost dissolved the *Cigány/Hungarian* distinction. It was in this environment that she met her future husband Zsoci.

Zsoci lived in a town near Gömbalja. The youngest child of a religious family with seven children, he worked as a welder at the car factory where Kisjutka got a job. Their relationship was made possible by common experiences too, which could overwrite the *Cigány/Hungarian* distinction. Since Zsoci's family had so many children, their

resources were far from abundant, and the experience of poverty was very familiar to him too. In the schools he had attended and at his lower status jobs, he got acquainted with *Cigány*, and therefore the descent of Kisjutka and her experiences related to that were also not foreign to him. He would say:

And what if someone is *Cigány*? It doesn't mean anything. I had this and that in school, we didn't care about that. There are only normal people and the ones who are not normal. Like my mother-in-law's family, they don't deal with people who are really below the level, only with the normal ones. It's the same, who is normal, you can get along with, and who is not, you can't. There are *Hungarians* who are more brutish than the worst *Cigány*, and there they are, they're *Hungarian*.

What Zsoci meant was the fulfilment of the promise of assimilation. He really believed that if a person behaved "properly," that person could actually leave the *Cigány* stigma behind and share in a common social position with him. Zsoci repaid that with the greatest possible gift: his love. As for Kisjutka, as someone in a relatively privileged position in the social order aiming for assimilation, she could easily fulfill his expectations.

Complications of a mixed marriage

The young couple had to meet other expectations too, not just those of one another. Behind Kisjutka, there were her parents, siblings, and through them an extended kinship network, a whole community, who were informed about the big news: "Kisjutka has a *Hungarian* husband!" This information is always shared almost in a whisper, and with undeniable praise. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, in these communities, there was no bigger achievement than being in a long-term relationship with a *Hungarian*

boy or girl. It was a matter of huge pride and an accomplishment that was shared by the whole family and the wider kinship network. At the same time the mixed-marriage also raised fears that the success would push that person too far away from the community. Kisjutka handled the privilege very smartly and prevented it from becoming a scandal. Indeed, this wide-shared but usually impossible dream coming true for her had the potential to make her disown her family and being *Cigány*.

Although Zsoci and Kisjutka's relationship counted as unique, it wasn't a strange exception either, since it was made possible by already gained experiences and a shared social position. In the life of Kisjutka, this relationship fitted into the continuum of events, and keeping the relationship with her home and her people wasn't too difficult. Kisjutka lived together with Zsoci in the town nearby. She visited home often and went to the settlement to see her grandmother, which meant keeping in touch with the wider kin. On these occasions, instinctively or half-consciously, she would always pay attention not to display any difference that could ignite jealousy. When her *Cigány* relatives would gather at her grandmother's or uncle's houses, she sat on the ground, showing that she did not disown her ancestry. Kisjutka, like her parents, was happy to participate in the conversations and discourses of the kin and other members of the *Cigány* community. Although she did not articulate her opinions as vehemently as her parents, the ideal of "decent *Cigány*" was valuable for her too, although with a smaller stake.

Kisjutka's marital choice didn't change her social relations and the course of events radically—rather it was the next leg of a journey that had started long before. As she followed the assimilation path through her marriage, she could hold on to the financially safe position of a lower middle-class wage laborer that dissolved the exclusive *Cigány*/*Hungarian* distinction too. At the same

time this position meant a challenge for the practices of ethnic identity and solidarity of the kin network. Although Kisjutka had gained a financially safer position than that of her parents, her siblings, and her extended family, as a housewife or a low paid wage laborer, she did not have control over the financial means of this safety. The position of Kisjutka, in spite of the obvious social mobility, did not appear as something much different from that of her parents: it only presented different risks and required different strategies.

When Kisjutka was in the community, she always had to perform the proof of her identity, be it by sitting on the ground for an afternoon or making frequent visits to her relatives. However, the most important proof was the familiarity with "ugly" (meaning *Cigány*-like) speech. If she didn't reply with a joke to a greeting such as: "*Dikh*, Kisjutka, you came to Gömbalja to lie because nobody believes you in M. [the town where she lived] anymore," or if she was offended by the jokes about the different colors of male genitals, she would be instantly labeled "squeamish," "arrogant," or said to be behaving like a *Hungarian*. While for a *Hungarian* these are given attributes, since *Hungarians* are thought not to understand jokes anyway, for a *Cigány* this behavior can only be faked, so it cannot be a genuine gesture, and the person who does that disowns being *Cigány* and "acts as if she/he were *Hungarian*." Kisjutka could understandably act like that, since as we have seen, she had fulfilled the dream of many generations: a marriage like hers was not only a chance for social mobility but also a chance to transcend ethnic differences and a way to become *Hungarian*. But not to react to the banter with humor would have had a much bigger impact, and it would have meant Kisjutka disowned her *Cigány* descent that tied her ethnicity to her class position. Kisjutka never wanted to "become *Hungarian*" in this sense. She got the jokes and was always amused by them, and she didn't have any problem with the banter.



Her "quasi-Hungarian" position wasn't constructed by disowning her *Cigány* descent; she didn't need that since she benefitted the most from the ideal of being a "decent *Cigány*," protected by her extended family and her village.

The mixed marriage required Kisjutka to stay on the narrow path that allowed her to feel that her belonging to the *Cigány* category was irrelevant in some situations, without however disowning her descent. Kisjutka tried to keep her distance from the degrading meanings of being *Cigány*. The most significant way for her to achieve that her peculiar way of controlling childbearing. Similarly to her female peers, for Kisjutka work wasn't a strong alternative compared to childbearing. Her profession was not very marketable, and her chances to get a job were slim. In spite of this, she always claimed vocally that God forbid she should bear a child, signaling the distance from the shameful *Cigány* attributes. Kisjutka's being childless was another proof of her being quasi-Hungarian according to the aspirations of her parents. Kisjutka had to keep her *Cigány* and quasi-Hungarian positions at the same time. The performances to prove her *Cigány* identity were only compulsory among her relatives, since most of her relatives were *Cigány*. In environments further away from the kin networks, *Cigány* attributes were deemed obsolete, irrelevant, non-existent, something that she had left behind due to her social mobility.

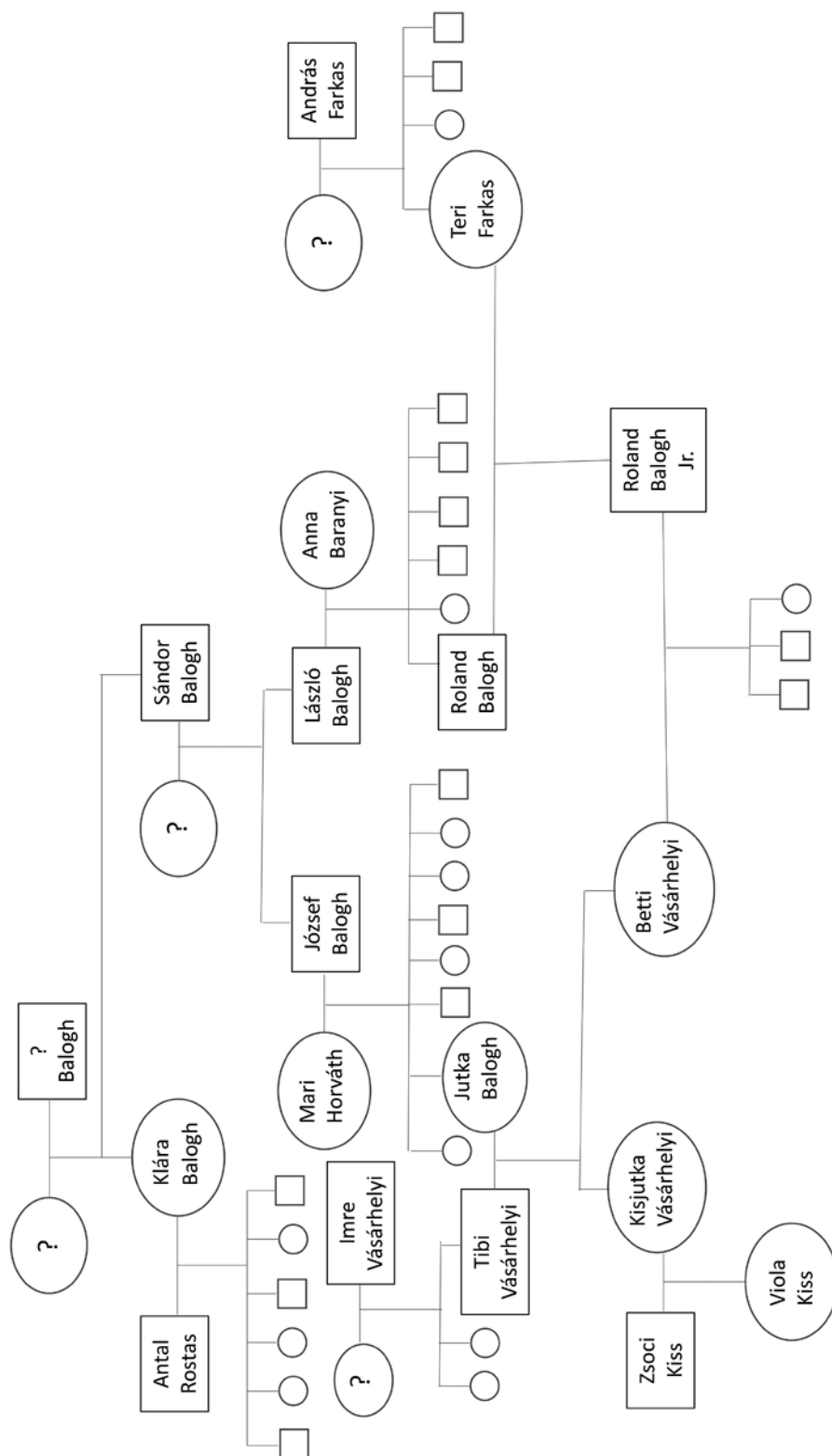
One could think that Kisjutka's belief in the promise of assimilation was fulfilled due to the expansion of formal wage labor, that class mobility abolished ethnic distinctions. At the same time, it is important to note that her mobility was realized through marriage and not with the help of school education or the job market. However these aspects are not independent since Kisjutka could make use of the relatively advantageous position of her parents on the market of marriages. This marital form of mobility is not to be underestimated, rather it calls attention to

the fact that other avenues of social mobility are even harder to use.

Zsoci and Kisjutka had a daughter, Viola. Viola spent a lot of time with her grandparents, and on some occasions she visited her "nannies," "uncles," and "siblings." "So, here you are a peasant [pejorative *Cigány* term for Hungarians] girl!" Kisjutka's aunt, Vali, would greet the little girl with a friendly tease. "And you are *Cigány*, aunty Vali," the girl would reply jokingly. "And what are you, aren't you *Cigány*?" the aunt would go on. "I'm not!" Viola would say. "Only you are *Cigány*, only you, I'm *Hungarian*!" and everybody would laugh at the *Hungarian* girl's banter in *Cigány* style. While Kisjutka's marriage stands for the fulfilment of a wish for social mobility and acceptance, which brings the unattainable *Hungarian* position closer, Viola, the little girl, has a less predictable future. Not only because she is young and her story has only begun, but because the social relations have changed since she was born. By the late 2000s, the promise of assimilation, which had been made impossible by the political regime change of 1989, was widely considered to have been broken. It could no longer sustain the life strategies of hundreds of thousands of people. After the economic crisis of 2008 the public discourse about the *Cigány* minority took a pervasive racist turn, threatening Viola's position: her *Cigány* descent could become more relevant for her than for Kisjutka. At the same time, Viola's *Hungarian* position is not just a "realistic" performance of a strong collective imagination, but a real social position equipped with resources and chances, and it could even overcome the ethnic distinction tied to the class position. The possibilities for Viola to be *Cigány* or *Hungarian* are not known yet, and her story will be written maybe by herself. I would rather continue with the story of her oldest aunt, Betti.



Filiation and affinity among the Balogh, Farkas, and Vásárhelyi families discussed in the article.





Safety of kinship and locality: Betti's case

A questionable relationship

If it were to sum up the marriage-related ideologies in these *Cigány* communities in one word, then it should be *exogamy*: marriage between blood relatives is undesirable. Many of them believe it is a sin, and the children of the sinners will be punished with various illnesses. However it is quite common that, in respected marriages, the spouses turn out to have common ancestry, and are often quite close relatives. Everybody knows about these marriages, but, except for a first time when the relationship is routinely subject to judgment in the community, the "sinful" nature of the match is rarely discussed. So what lies behind this contradiction? Why are they still quite common in spite of being discouraged? In the story of Betti we can find answers to these questions. The answer essentially lies in the relations between *Cigány* ethnicity, class position, locality and kinship, which fundamentally determine the practices of love-based matches.

Kinship and home

To understand the ambivalent role of blood relatives in marriages, we have to observe the meanings of this concept. The phrase "blood relative" is rarely used, instead the word "race" is preferred to designate these relations. The use of this word points to the unquestionable connection between persons, while also being related to the expression of *Cigány* identity. The expressions "disowning her/his race" and "she/he takes a stance to protect her/his race" refer to both the *Cigány* community and blood relatives. However, in most situations, being affiliated to the *Cigány* community means a secure connection combined with having relatives in the

community. Outside the family, serious dangers lurk. This is an ambivalent bonding that can be found in many situations where the safety of being *Cigány* was only secured after some sort of family relations between the persons involved were discovered. Finding common ancestry and relatives is always the first step when "strangers" meet. Kinship networks are extended around the neighborhood and even the region to many villages and towns. A young person can move along these networks and find new acquaintances and her/his future partner. If we imagine the possible pathways for a teenager in Gömbalja as a network, the center of that is Gömbalja. From there the young person can get to other *Cigány* settlements in the surrounding villages and towns through her or his parents or already married siblings.

Tibi and Jutka's daughters, on the other hand, don't go anywhere since their mother and father are from Gömbalja, their aunts and uncles as well, so almost all of their first cousins live in the village and being second cousins is not a strong enough bond to dissolve the strangeness of the place. Although kin relations easily cut through geographical and social distances, the locality also shapes the meaning of being *Cigány* in a way similar to kinship. Just like being in a kin network, living in a particular place also has an attribute attached to it. So leaving the village means that the person becomes a different kind of *Cigány*, and can become "thieving," "arrogant," or "backward."

The village and the kinship networks together provided a place where Betti could grow up safely. In the early 2000s, when Betti grew into a teenager, this connection with the family and the village was at its strongest. The Balogh family was strong, on both sides of the family the grandparents were alive and held together the children and siblings to form a core. At large celebrations the family gathered and paid close attention to setting the boundaries of kinship. While her parents' generation invested a lot of



energy in protecting the Balogh family from the new relations made by marriage and keeping their siblings for the “family.” Betti’s generation took these relations that marriages created as natural. Betti had no problem to go to the *Cigány* settlement on Dankó Street where her cousins born out of a marriage between the Farkas and the Balogh families lived. For her parents, this always caused unease, since the Balogh family considered the Farkas family to be “arrogant” and “looking down on others.” In spite of these negative opinions there were more marriages between the two families, and for Betti’s generation the two kinship networks became strongly connected. Hers was a privileged generation anyway. At the time of their birth, there was a small-scale baby boom in Gömbalja as the generation that had grown up there became parents. So the teenagers of the mid-2000s could enjoy the benefits of being established residents of Gömbalja and the support of their large families, and in addition they could have a lively social life with their cousins.

Betti had an easy and joyful life in the safe space created by kinship and locality. Her parents proclaimed her a kind of *Cigány* beauty queen, her femininity and her *Cigány* identity, or her way of being a *Cigány* woman, setting an example for others. Betti’s queen status was guaranteed by her fair skin and the gentle way in which she fit to her parents’ position. Betti accepted quietly and humbly the aspirations of her parents, she tried to be acceptable in all social situations because of her position in the community. She attended school with the *Hungarians* instead of the segregated class (or, to use the hypocritical Hungarian official terminology, the class that needed extra support) together with three-four other *Cigány* classmates. Her school results were not exceptionally good, but this did not affect her legitimacy among her *Hungarian* classmates. Betti seemed to easily learn the attributes of the assimilated *Cigány* that supposedly were no different from *Hungarians*. But, as opposed to her parents

and older sister, she took a different role in keeping the position of the “decent *Cigány*.” Instead of judging her relatives who were less apt for this role, she rather helped these family members with her knowledge. When, for example, one of her cousins finished kindergarten, she corrected the “mistakes” of her dress for the banquet careful not to offend the family. She “weeded out” every element of her dress that could get her younger relative the shameful label of being an “embarrassing *Cigány*.” She perfectly knew the dress code and the norms of the school from her own success in becoming assimilated.

In her case school could be a field where certain positions overwrote the *Cigány*/*Hungarian* distinction. Distinctions between teachers and students and grownups and children took precedence during the time spent in school. Similarly to her older sister, Betti claimed that her being *Cigány* was relatively irrelevant at school, although it was obvious that after school Betti had no connection with her non-*Cigány* classmates. It was quite unconceivable that they might do something together or visit each other during the summer vacation. When I asked Betti and her cousin in a similar position, I got obscure replies. “Because they are not like that,” said Betti. “What do you mean, you said they are good guys,” I asked her. “Well,” her more vocal cousin intervened, “you can’t be yourself with them, not like when we are with Imrus (he is our cousin), there you can say anything, you can do anything, we are a gang.” “The girls at school are kind of squeamish, although they are alright!” said Betti trying to explain her problem.

It seems clear that being among *Hungarians* came with a pressure to correct and censor themselves. This is illustrated by the following incident where Betti’s being *Cigány* was suddenly revealed in an inadequate context and the kind of humor it produced. For months, Betti’s parents repeated a story about her secondary-school interview to everybody’s amusement,



including Betti's. The selection committee noticed that Betti was anxious given the circumstances and tried to lighten up the mood: "Well, Betti, do you like to go to the disco?" they asked. The question took Betti by surprise, she forgot about her pose, and replied instantly: "*Dikh, he!* I'm not even allowed to go!" revealing her *Cigány* descent by using the *Cigány* interjection *dikh, he*. The parents thought the story was funny, while taking for granted that Betti had failed to be admitted to secondary school because she had accidentally revealed her *Cigány* descent.

Constantly concealing the differences stemming from her being *Cigány* and from her lower class position is obviously a hard task for a young teenager like Betti. And this might account for Betti's missing her own primary school banquet, despite claiming to be in good relations with her classmates. As it appeared, the party her parents threw for graduating was more emotionally important to her. It took months to organize the party, since this is the family's main occasion to display their connections. The child's finishing school and her achievements in school and personality are usually less important than who gets to be invited and who does not. If someone is invited to two families, because there is a similar significant event happening in her/his spouse's family, then everybody discusses the dilemma of which event this person will choose to attend. Betti never got involved in these discussions, but her parents used all their money for this party, so they didn't have anything left to cover the costs of the school banquet. Being poor is one of the main experiences and attributes of being *Cigány*, the most marked "sign" of the "embarrassing" *Cigány* status. But Betti was not very sad about not attending the school banquet, since she had much more important relationships, which replaced the relationships with classmates, in the form of the "gang," i.e., the group of local *Cigány* teenagers of her age.

The tight embrace of the kinship

Everything seems to have been just right for happy teenage years at that time in Gömbalja, but one thing was vexing the youths though: "If you look at it, everybody's a relative of mine here. One way or another they're all my brothers," complained the girls. The boys approached the question with the irony of proverbs: "She's not a sister below the waist," said one of them. "In the morning she's my sister, in the evening I do her," said another one. Of course, they would use "brother" and "sister" even for very distant relatives, as long as they had common ancestry, such as a great-great-grandmother. The only way out of this closed network of relatives was meeting outsider boys and girls. Partly for this reason, many came to Gömbalja to visit their relatives or friends and found their match this way, while others found someone when they visited other villages or towns nearby. Although marriage among blood relatives was avoided and considered shameful, in practice it was less problematic than marriage to a stranger outside the kin network.

Having a relationship with a stranger, as we saw above, is very risky since she/he is related to another kin network and familiar with the relations of another village or town. This person can turn out to be *Cigány* in a different way and therefore take her/his partner out of the safe space of being *Cigány* as constructed by the family and arising from the position in the local order. Of course those who were less privileged in the local order than Betti were more open to being in relationships where their partners came from unknown backgrounds. Betti and other youths like her, whose parents were already tying family and locality closely together through their marriages, had much more to lose by being in a relationship with a stranger. "Oh," Betti would say every now and then, "I'd never leave Gömbalja, but for what, like another village?! What for?! I'd rather move to Tardos [a larger town



nearby], if I had to move,” she daydreamed. But Tardos seemed to be more of a girl’s fantasy about mobility than a real possibility. Staying *at home* meant that Betti could only meet cousins whose role as a “sibling” was overcome by the gender roles in the gang, especially when the boy and the girl grew up in different settlements so the neighborly relations didn’t strengthen the family relationships. The gang was held together by the family relations, the common social position, and the chosen subculture, which meant following the African-American rap music and style connected to urban poverty. These factors created a strong sense of belonging, encouraging the youths to experience sexuality and being *Cigány* with each other’s help. Through the *gettós* [ghetto dweller] or *rapper* style, the young men could find a way to mainstream fashion and at the same time they could do without the constant self-censorship related to being *Cigány*. This was manly and appealing for the girls and Betti. As a result, the “sibling” and family relations and the sexual desire were entangled, and one could override the other.

Of course it would seem natural to suppose that secondary school could provide a solution to overcoming these entangled relations, with its networks not organized by kinship. I followed curiously the secondary school trajectory of the youths, and among them Betti’s, and how their relationships were shaped. As almost everyone in this community, she continued her studies in one of the vocational schools in the nearby town. These were very large institutions, with often several thousand students, different from the school in Gömbalja. “There is no studying here, only nonsense [acting like cattle],” as Betti summed up the situation. In addition, because they had to study for five incredibly long years to obtain a degree of very questionable use, the dropout rate was high. Most of the students, Betti included, left the school after one or two years. At that time she was tied to Gömbalja by more

than sisterhood: she had been dating her second cousin Roland for a year.

Betti and Roland’s relationship seemed to be stable in spite of the secrecy. It was strengthened by a number of factors that could overcome the prohibition of love relationships between “siblings.” As I showed, Betti had a quite advantageous position among the local relations. She lived outside the “Gypsy settlement,” which meant high prestige; her parents were at the top of the hierarchy of families and settlements; they were important and respected figures for keeping the values. Betti’s femininity and the way she dressed were an example for others. Roland belonged to the Balogh family on his father’s side, which made him Betti’s second cousin. However he was a member of the even more prestigious Farkas family on his mother’s side. Since he had grown up in the *Cigány* settlement on Dankó Street, which counted as the Farkas’s turf, he was connected to his relatives on his mother’s side more closely than to those on his father’s side.

At least in everyday life, all of the above strengthened the construct that Betti and Roland were “strangers” to each other. Even if there was common knowledge that they were “brother and sister.” Their parents emphasized first the “elementary” differences between the Farkas and Balogh families and then the distinction between the two sides of the Balogh family. Therefore, Betti and Roland met as *quasi*-strangers and could see each other as potential partners. Roland and Betti, as leading figures in the gang, were ‘eminent’ practitioners of being an acceptable “*cigány csaj*” [girl] and “*csávó*” [guy]. The parents were proud of how their daughters and sons were experiencing their adolescence and sexuality in a way that was free of the shame of being *Cigány*. The parents never considered the gang dangerous, since it kept their children away from a lot of things that would make any parent of a teenager anxious. Those fears were related to the children’s autonomy, mostly with loitering.

In other words, the children would step outside the safe spaces protected by kinship and locality and face the dangers of meeting "Cigány strangers" and *Hungarians*.

The school was seen to be such a place. The parents were helpless about their children's failures in school. On the one hand, they had no experience at all about these environments, on the other, their fears were stronger than the aspiration to support their children to learn a profession. Here is Jutka "reassuring" herself with loitering-related horror scenarios:

Well, if Betti doesn't want to go to school, what can I do? Should I beat her? Their father has never laid a finger on any of them. Well, if she doesn't want to! She should rather stay here at home with us instead of saying she goes to school and then loiter in Tardos, with who knows what kind of junkies! Don't you think, Vali [Jutka's younger sister]? Hé! Csutak Gyuszi's daughter, Mercike, she's seen around the station all the time, with potheads and whores from Tardos, and her mother thinks she's at school!

The gang built on family relations kept their children in the village, and this couldn't be any other way since its creation, strength and significance derived from the relations built around the home. Once they stepped out of that space, the youths seemed to lose their grip, and couldn't hold on to the environment of secondary school that was completely foreign for them. Therefore the only course of action they could follow was determined again by kinship networks. The "embrace" of the family closely connected to the locality guaranteed for the parents the safety and protection of their children from the vulnerable social position of being *Cigány*. At the same time, as a consequence of the closed network, their sons and daughters saw themselves taking another offensive and stigmatizing meaning of *Cigány* upon themselves, the marriage between relatives. Still this seemed less risky than endangering

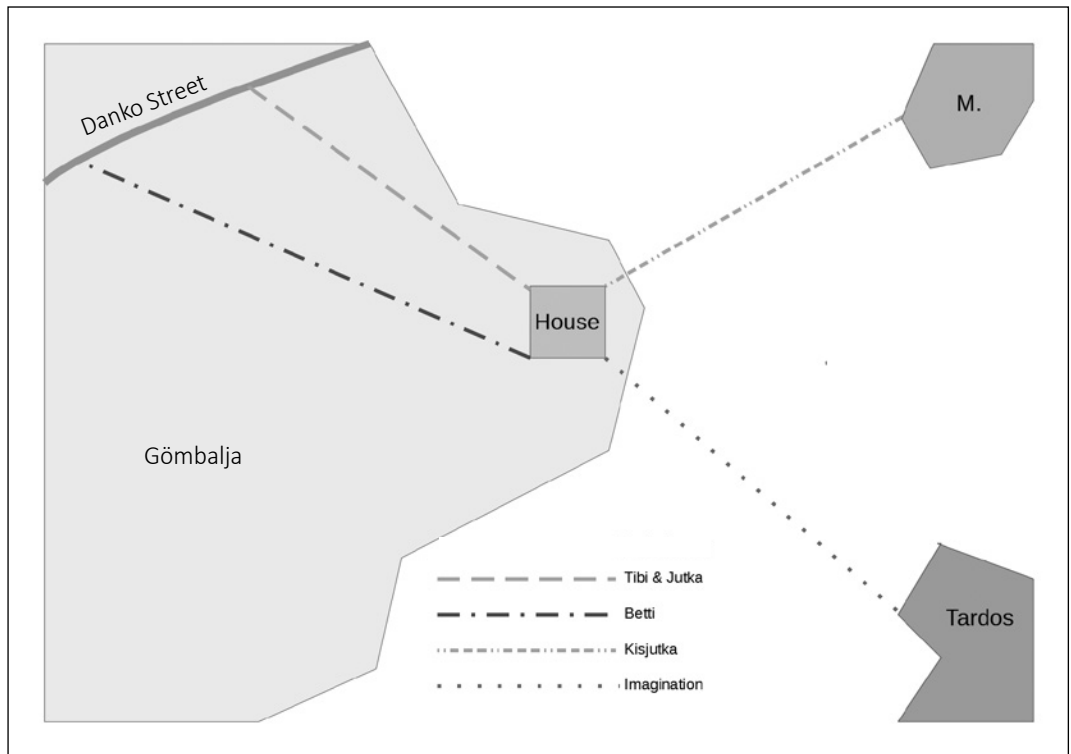
the safety guaranteed by family and locality by marrying "strangers."

An average relationship in an average place

Betti and Roland had to keep their relationship secret from their parents for years, to the extent possible in such a context. When it finally "got out," meaning the parents could no longer pretend that they didn't know about it, they tried to interpret the situation as positively as possible. First, it seemed more important to them to establish why Betti and Roland were strangers to each other. "I didn't raise my daughter to become a dweller of Dankó Street," Tibi would say indignantly, thus expressing all his parental fear that his child, especially a daughter, was going to live among "stranger *Cigány*." In this sense, Betti was no exception, Roland and his family counted as strangers. Second, because of Betti's relationship, the conversation turned often to couples who were related. Tibi cited well-respected couples, who successfully doubled the strength of the kin and the locality through their marriages and thus could escape the disadvantageous class position that comes with being *Cigány*.

A few months after their relationship was revealed, with the help of the careful interpretation work done by their parents, Betti and Roland were a legitimate couple standing on the cusp of adulthood without a profession or a permanent job, like so many others. In their case, this period between childhood and adulthood turned out a little longer than for others. Like her older sister, Betti was also reluctant to bear children. "I don't have the nerves for that yet," she would say. But she didn't go back to school either, since going back could have threatened her finally legitimized relationship. Since the school is not controlled by kinship and locality relations, jealousy is inevitable, therefore teenagers in steady relationships usually quit school. In the following years, Betti and Roland lived in the home of





A schematic representation of the protagonists' trajectories between the main locations mentioned in the article.

their parents, and when they wanted more autonomy, they moved to one of the last adobe houses on Dankó Street.

After a few years, lacking any prospects, Betti and Roland had a little daughter. But in the meantime, many things happened: the girls' grandparents saw the core of the Balogh family "die," as the kinship network became fragmented into smaller but growing nuclear families. The only institution where all of Gömbalja's social strata were represented, albeit according to a hierarchy, the local school was also gone. When the local school became a "*Cigány* school," it was a devastating blow for the village as an integrating social environment, and also a necessary condition for the advantageous position of Betti and her family.

At the same time, protecting the power of locality and kinship through marriage ensured that resources were not wasted and there was even an accumulation of social capital. Betti and Roland had three children whose kinship network reached

the housing estate of the town nearby where Kisjutka, Zsöci, and Viola lived as members of the local majority lower middleclass. This shows that kinship networks can indeed transcend class and ethnic limits through marriages. Although these family relations are important for Betti's family—for example, they could make it possible for one of her children to go to a more prestigious primary school—their relations associated with locality and *Cigány* descent seemed to be more important for them. Betti did learn a profession in the end, with the help of a local *Cigány* association founded by one of her aunts. This didn't however help her find a job, but the activity of the association is part of her everyday life, in the form of programs mostly for children, traveling, as well as adult education and common celebrations. Roland could get unskilled work in the construction business due to one of his uncles, which provided a minimal income even during the 2008 economic crisis. Betti and Roland's children have been

raised in Gömbalja, where there are hardly any strangers since marriages slowly tied together the fragmented kinship networks. We don't know how they will create safety among the threats of class-based ethnic distinctions, but probably marriage will play a significant role in that for them too.



Conclusions

In this article, I showed how free-choice marriages in Roma communities affected by proletarianization and assimilation are determined by structural factors. In addition, "the free choice of the heart" is shaped by social relations, with love-based matches giving the individuals some room for maneuver among structural constraints. In these rural Romungro communities, the practice of marriage is significantly influenced by hierarchical class-based ethnic distinctions. Ethnicity, here the category of *Cigány*, reinforces the boundaries between the population with stable jobs and incomes, the *Hungarian* majority position, and those who are permanently or partially excluded from that, the position of *Cigány*. Consequently the wish for social mobility is connected to the desire to leave the position of *Cigány* or the pressure for assimilation. The entanglement of ethnicity and class position influences the possibilities of "free" choice in marriage, since being *Cigány* means a low status, stigma and resource deprivation, which are to be either left behind through marriage or compensated with resources obtained via different marriage strategies.

Marriage practices modify the individual's social position and with it the configuration of her kinship networks. Because of the *Cigány* ethnicity and the disadvantageous class position, as well as scarce access to the resources provided by society's formal institutions (the job market, system of education, etc.), kinship

networks and the role of locality are highly valued in these communities. Relatives (the extended family) and the locality (village, *Cigány* settlement, or neighborhood) provide protection against the dangers of the stigmatizing meanings of *Cigány* and against the vulnerabilities of their class position. The most obvious way to access these resources is through marriage. At the same time, marriages are also eroding the limits of the safe and acceptable meanings of being *Cigány*, creating new pathways. So marriages are not just personal, *individual* matters, since they affect the position of others in the kinship network. These networks can span over the hierarchical class-based *Cigány/Hungarian* divides. Transcending the *Cigány/Hungarian* distinction also means social mobility at the individual level, and this is most often reached through mixed marriages. At the same time, the mixed marriage is only the most extreme example of how marriage is in fact the most obvious method for someone to change their social position. The free choice of the heart is thus very much controlled by these factors above.

In my paper, drawing on the cases of two sisters, I showed how free love-based marriage and social constraints work together. In the first case, marriage contributes to the social mobility tied to the pressure for assimilation. In the second case, marriage contributes to the exploitation of resources related to the *Cigány* identity while reinforcing the protection of kin and locality. In both cases, new directions have opened up in the network of kin and in the workings of the *Cigány/Hungarian* distinction. The consequences of these changes are not clear yet, since they are also dependent on broader social and economic processes still in the making.





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