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The Gypsy condition in Kiskunhalas: work, consumption, and indebtedness after socialism

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ABSTRACT

The article outlines the recent history of the Gypsy minority in the town of Kiskunhalas, Bács-Kiskun county, with an emphasis on its changing economic situation. Gypsy households benefited from secure employment until the late 1980s. Some of them were able to profit from the embourgeoisement opportunities available to all citizens in the socialist mixed economy. Under postsocialist conditions, however, most Gypsies face uncertainty and hardship in everyday life. Theoretically, the article engages with the work of Michael Stewart, who has argued that the demise of socialism and the replacement of central planning and compulsory wage-labour by the freedoms of market society brought opportunities for Gypsies to prosper economically, as well as to reassert a cultural identity which had been stymied for decades. I argue that this libertarian perspective overlooks the very real disadvantages that most members of the minority experienced after 1990, and which they have continued to experience in different forms under Fidesz-led governments since 2010. Like the poorest segments of the ethnic Hungarian population, Gypsies are exposed to neoliberal capitalism in its distinctive postsocialist populist form. The article concludes with an exploration of everyday financialization: indebtedness entrenches class differences and has negative consequences for persons, households and communities.

KEYWORDS

Consumption; financialization; Gypsies; housing; inequality; work

Introduction

For several decades, my research in Hungary concentrated on the village of Tázlár. I followed its fortunes during the last two decades of socialism and the first two decades of postsocialism (Hann 1980, 2015). The few Gypsy families who live in this village keep themselves to themselves and have never been considered a problem.[1] This remains true in the 2020s: Gypsy families do not participate in what remains of local workfare opportunities in Tázlár because they have no trouble supporting themselves in the market economy that exists outside these schemes.

The situation is different in the nearby market town of Kiskunhalas, which I have been visiting regularly since 2013. Here, Gypsies are thought to make up over ten per cent of

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the population.[2] Halas (the name is commonly abbreviated) had over 30,000 inhabitants when socialism collapsed, but three decades later the number of permanent residents is probably below 25,000. The propensity to migrate, both to other destinations within Hungary and abroad, is greater among ethnic Hungarians. Although mainly inhabiting peripheral zones of the town, the minority is visible in central public spaces of the town, whether participating in workfare activities or simply hanging around. It is generally acknowledged that its situation deteriorated significantly in the 1990s and 2010s, but there is no consensus either among Gypsies themselves or in the majority community as to whether it has improved since Viktor Orbán returned to power in 2010. That is one of the questions to be explored in what follows.

The Gypsies of Halas are not representative of the Gypsy population nationally. Compared with large areas of northern and north-eastern Hungary, the county of Bács-Kiskun, located on the flat interfluve between the country's major rivers, the Danube and the Tisza, is home to relatively small numbers of the country's largest nationality (*nemzetiség*). The Gypsy community in Halas is the county's second largest, exceeded only by that of the county town, Kecskemét. Bács-Kiskun has adapted better to post-socialist conditions than many other counties, a success epitomized by the gigantic Mercedes-Benz factory which opened in Kecskemét in 2010, where many Gypsies have taken assembly line jobs that pay rather well by local standards. However, much of the industry established under socialism has disintegrated, and most of Bács-Kiskun county remains heavily dependent on agriculture. Unemployment and depopulation have been major problems, especially in districts remote from the county town and the main arteries of communication. Kiskunhalas is the last market town before the border crossing to Serbia at Subotica. There is no motorway in the vicinity but the town lies adjacent to the railway line between Budapest and Belgrade, which is currently undergoing a major upgrade in the frame of China's Belt and Road programme.

Theoretically, I engage with recent approaches by economic anthropologists to debt and financialization, and also with Michael Stewart, the leading ethnographer of Hungarian Gypsies in English language anthropology. Stewart carried out his major field research in Gyöngyös, a small town in northern Hungary, in 1984–85. He has argued influentially that Gypsies were victims of socialist policies of assimilation intended to transform them into a docile proletariat (Stewart 1997). The ideological requirement to work made Gypsy creativity impossible, eliminated freedoms and destroyed their culture. Following the demise of socialism and the "change of system" (*rendszerváltás)*, when other social scientists diagnosed an "underclass," or envisaged Gypsies as trapped in a permanent "culture of poverty," Stewart preferred to emphasize resources inside the culture that might equip them to adapt successfully to the new market-dominated conditions. In a recent article, he equates postsocialist market society with the "commercial society" of Adam Smith and argues that ethnic Hungarian society errs when it indulges in a general moral critique of usury (Stewart 2021).[3] Drawing on the ethnographic research of Durst (2016) in a northern village, Stewart notes that some forms of high-interest moneylending enjoy moral approval, though others do not. In conditions of severe poverty, freedom of contract enables the astute to prosper as entrepreneurs, provided they respect hierarchical norms of caring for the welfare of their co-ethnics. Rather than recognize class conflict and exploitation, Gypsies themselves distinguish between those who are "clever" enough to profit from new opportunities, and those

who are not and do not. Even for borrowers, the postsocialist condition is said to be "empowering" (Stewart 2021, 99) because it enables Gypsies to turn the negative stereotypes of the dominant group into resources for their own benefit. Stewart concludes that the Smithian vision of market capitalism is more pertinent to the case of the Gypsies than the critiques offered by Karl Marx and Karl Polanyi. I shall return in concluding to these larger arguments and also to recent anthropological work emphasizing the social creativity of householding. My argument is that these approaches downplay the destructive consequences of capitalist financialization in the everyday life of a marginalized community.

History before 1990

There exists a voluminous literature on the history of Kiskunhalas, but its Gypsies are almost invisible in these published works. The terrain of genealogy, language and self-identification that has developed over centuries among the Gypsies of the Carpathian Basin is complex. In the middle of the eighteenth century, when the Austrian Empress Maria Theresia decided to put an end to nomadism, twenty-four Oláh (Valachian) Gypsy families who spoke the Gurvár dialect of Romani established themselves in a settlement on the western swampy outskirts of Halas (Szabó 2009, 415). The terms Oláh and Gurvár are rarely used in the contemporary town. Gypsies themselves use family names in the same way as the Hungarian majority (e.g. the Kolompár family is particularly large; *kolompár* is the Hungarian for tinsmith; because this surname identifies the family as Gypsy, some have abandoned it and legally adopted an unambiguously *magyar* surname). Formerly known as Cserepes, later as Harangos, the settlement where the great majority of Halas Gypsies lived is referred to by local Hungarians generally as "the Gypsy settlement" (*cigánytelep*). Prior to socialism, some lived in tents and spent the greater part of the year moving around the villages of the region selling their services as tinkers, trough-makers (*teknővájók*) and above all as manufacturers of adobe (*vályog*) bricks. They had their own leader (*vajda*) and a Gypsy judge (*cigánybíró*) who together helped to minimize the community's contacts with the state. Gypsies had commercial relations with tradesmen in the town and participated at markets (of which the town had several). But they had no access to education or health services and almost all were illiterate (Mácsai n.d.).

The socialist authorities began their campaign to change this state of affairs in the late 1950s. Of fundamental importance in adjusting to the new social order was the opening of a one-room school in 1960, with a tiny doctor's surgery in the annex. The building was constructed with bricks produced by the Gypsies themselves and their labour (classified as socialist *társadalmi munka*, literally social work) was crucial in every phase. The municipal authorities provided technical and financial contributions.[4] This building gave community members access to electricity and piped water for the first time. Of the 97 children aged between 6 and 14 who were identified as eligible for enrolment in 1960, only 60 were admitted. The rest had to be turned away for a variety of reasons: medical, psychological, and in the case of some teenaged girls, early marriage. The new pupils, most of whom spoke only Romani in their homes, were subject to strict discipline in the classroom (in addition to having to endure the doctor's vaccinations next door). Absenteeism had to be excused by a parent and failure to do so led to the imposition

of heavy fines. To enable younger children to attend in the winter months, donations of warm clothes were made when they received their sweets on 5th December (the eve of Saint Nicholas's Day, known under socialism as Father Winter Day; the socialist curriculum did not permit any form of religious instruction).

Their teachers were generally unqualified and, though highly motivated, struggled to meet the challenge. Many Gypsy pupils continued to spend most of the year between Spring and late October on the move with their brick-making parents, and their grades were inevitably poor. Some completed only one or two grades; only the most able continued their studies at the nearby Hungarian general school. By the mid-1970s, in a further concerted effort to enrol all potentially eligible Gypsy children, the number of pupils approached 300. Additional classrooms were built and it became theoretically possible to complete all 8 grades in the Gypsy school. However, the proportion of pupils who actually did so remained small. Simultaneous efforts were made to spread at least rudimentary literacy among the adult population of the settlement.

In 1961 the Gypsy settlement was visited and photographed by the pioneering ethnographer Kamill Erdős. It was also documented visually in this era by a local photographer, Jenő Ternyák (see Ternyák 2018). Their images of young men posing with unlit cigarettes in their mouths as they mixed the *vályog* for bricks and of women who smoked pipes and sometimes went about naked from the waist up are a mainstay of museum exhibitions of Gypsy culture to the present.[5] The municipality carried out a survey in 1965 which reported a total of 523 persons living in 69 houses on the settlement, together with four hovels (*putri)*. Many "houses" were primitive constructions consisting of a single room, inhabited by up to 18 persons.

Incentivizing Gypsies to move away from their main settlement, held by the authorities to be a hindrance (*visszahúzó erő*) to their progress, was the second front on which the socialist authorities fought to resolve the Gypsy problem. The 1965 survey identified 165 persons who, in the recent past, through their own efforts, had acquired new homes in the town. This was more like a spontaneous process of embourgeoisement than enforced proletarianization. The Gypsies who left the settlement were likely to change their names and send their children to regular Hungarian schools (Alabán 2019, 268–269). The number of households registered at Harangos fell gradually from 155 in 1964 to 114 in 1977 (Mácsai n.d.). The last Gypsy houses on the settlement were bulldozed in 1986.

Thirdly, stable employment was considered a precondition for the social integration (*társadalmi beilleszkedés*) of the Gypsies. In 1965, out of 104 able-bodied men of working age, only 18 had a formal *munkaviszony* (literally "work relation"), including 8 who commuted by train to Budapest. Many of the rest worked seasonally on state farms. The authorities implemented their policies of integration into the labour force until the final disintegration of socialism. In the 1960s, the most conspicuous economic activity and source of cash was still the production of adobe bricks. A few craftsmen had a reputation that extended outside the town. Some Gypsies patronized Hungarian smithies to obtain the special tool they needed for the hollowing out of troughs. In the 1960s, teenaged boys did not attend school on market days because they worked for Hungarian peasants, their earnings contributing significantly to household income (Mácsai n.d.). However, with the expansion of industrial jobs from the mid-1960s, traditional craft specialities disappeared and most households were drawn into socialist wage-labour. For women, this was

generally the first time they had undertaken any work outside the household. Gypsies were considered unreliable and many changed jobs frequently. Despite these drawbacks, hiring Gypsies and paying them the lowest possible wages was attractive to the new socialist enterprises because their presence brought down the average wage, thereby enabling managers to offer higher wages to others and hold on to scarce skilled labour. Gypsies were supposed to work alongside Hungarians but this norm was often broken.[6] The law against "social parasitism" underpinning this system (which the socialists had adapted from pre-socialist legislation) was not abandoned until 1989.[7]

In Bács-Kiskun county, changes in Gypsy life worlds through the expansion of wage labour were on the whole less radical than those described by Stewart (1997) for the town of Gyöngyös. Due to regional ecology, large numbers of Hungarian villagers (peasants – the word *parasztok* was still in common use during these decades) were able to continue farming with a high degree of autonomy from socialist institutions (Hann 1980). This context was conducive to lively commerce in horses and other animals, and also to the re-emergence of seasonal day-labouring. Some Halas Gypsies excelled in the role of *kupec* (dealer or middleman).[8] Entrepreneurial Gypsies took on a range of tasks for Hungarian *parasztok* and for urban family businesses in the expanding "second economy" of the 1980s, e.g. mobilizing large working parties of kin at peak periods for the harvesting of grapes, or in private housebuilding. Prosperous Gypsies were themselves able to purchase houses in prestigious neighbourhoods, or to construct new ones on plots made available by the municipality. By the 1980s, the aggressively assimilationist policies of the earlier socialist decades had given way to a gentler emphasis on the integration of the Gypsy minority. However, when more than one Gypsy child was present in a classroom, no matter how intelligent those children might be, it proved impossible for even the most sympathetic teachers to prevent segregation and overcome the handicaps of their home environment (Soósné 2005).

The combination of rapid industrialization with resilient peasant farming and household comprised what I term the socialist mixed economy. While income differentials in the new factories and socialist farms were small, the second economy promoted differentiation, most visibly in the quality of housing. The Halas Gypsies were never a community of equals: depending on skills and the labour resources available in the household, even in the era preceding socialist industrialization some acquired new goods before others (e.g. a radio or a bicycle). Prior to socialism, houses built of adobe bricks were considered superior to tents (even if they had to be renewed every year). In the socialist decades, regular bricks purchased for cash were the prestige material. Housing policy was a key instrument of integration. Purchases or construction outside the settlement were generally financed through loans from the socialist enterprise and/or the cooperative savings bank (more on this below). The new properties were known as "Cs," where Cs stood for "reduced value" (*csökkentett értékű*). They were rudimentary in comparison with the new houses being constructed by Hungarians in these years. Social scientists criticized this difference, and the fact that these new homes were typically concentrated in a few streets in the proximity of old settlements. Some of the first Halas Gypsies who took possession of Cs houses in the late 1960s did not feel comfortable living among Hungarians, so they sold them and returned promptly to their old ones on the settlement (Mácsai n.d.). At this point another big effort was made to get Gypsies to relocate, including a large credit for this purpose from the employer. To preclude a return,

the old *putri* was torn down once its inhabitants had vacated. The houses were greatly superior in terms of cleanliness and sanitation to those of the old settlement (for the equivalent schemes in Gyöngyös, see Stewart 1997, 267–268, n.12). Maintaining them, however, was significantly more expensive, even with generously subsidized electricity. The upshot was that by the end of the socialist era most Halas Gypsies lived in their own modern houses, and not in socialist apartment blocks.

Improvements were gradual and the number of Gypsy pupils completing general school rose only slowly. In 1972 the Hungarian doctor allocated to the settlement complained that the burden of providing antenatal care was excessive for a general practitioner. He pleaded for more support from the central hospital. Birth rates remained high and infant mortality, which had been around 50% in the early 1950s before falling over the next decade to 16%, thereafter rose again to reach 20% in 1970.[9]

Overall, Gypsies in socialist Halas experienced a racialized combination of proletarian assimilation and primitive embourgeoisement facilitated by the socialist mixed economy. The career of László Rostás (born 1953) was exemplary from the regime's point of view. Raised on the settlement, he was one of two first-year pupils graded "outstanding" when the new school opened in 1960–61. He became a skilled locksmith and welder at a large metalwork factory (*Fémmunkás Vállalat*) on the other side of the town, and later moved with his young family into the city centre. After promotion to foreman in the factory's hierarchy, he joined the Communist Party and gave up manual labour for a job with the municipal authorities as a family welfare officer, specializing in the minority community. In 1991, László Rostás graduated with a degree in social work from Eötvös Loránd University (Hungary's most prestigious). After the collapse of socialism, he served as Deputy Mayor and head of the town's Gypsy Self-government from 1995. He also played an influential role on the national stage and remained a loyal member of the Hungarian Socialist Party (successor to the Communist Party) until his death in 2017.

Economy and society, 1990–2010

The rapid disintegration of the new industrial enterprises and the state farm after 1990 had an exceptionally severe impact on the Gypsy population of Halas, most of whom were unskilled (Hann 2019). In Halas, the trends were clearly visible well before socialism's collapse, as they were as in the rest of the country (Kertesi 1995). Gypsies were always the first to be made redundant when the labour force had to be trimmed. Some enterprises survived in rump form following privatization, but Gypsies were seldom included in the core group of workers rehired by the new manager-owners. The simultaneous collapse of small-scale farming reduced the opportunities for casual work in that sector. The town's lively marketplaces had begun to contract in the 1980s (along with the number of working horses, which eroded that particular Gypsy speciality). In the *Kiskunhalas Almanach*, a work of more than 800 pages published in 2002, the minority is almost invisible. Editor Aurél Szakál summarized laconically. "The majority of Gypsies have no qualifications and are unemployed. They live from casual labour and social assistance. Inflation, the declining standard of living and unemployment make their situation more and more difficult" (Szakál 2002, 23).

For some, however, in particular those who had already profited from market-oriented reforms after 1968 and toleration of informal economic activities in the socialist mixed

economy, capitalism brought new opportunities to make money. A few Gypsy men were able to make a successful transition from the buying and selling of horses to dealing in second hand cars, with the Romanian Dacia a particular speciality (Nyilas 1997, 36–37). There was also informal "banking activity" (*banki tevékenység*: see Soósné 2005, 12). In 1997, one individual freely admitted to his interviewer that usury was contributing significantly to the prosperity of his family (Nyilas 1997, 37). Loans were extended only to fellow Gypsies. Though handicapped by their lack of education, after 1990 some Gypsies registered firms and used them to supply unskilled labour to the new owners of the privatized socialist farms. Payment was made to the Gypsy entrepreneur, who in turn determined the sums passed on to the workers, and whether or not they were formally registered as employees. Much of this work was seasonal and there was considerable continuity with late socialist patterns. The major difference was that many households no longer had even one member in receipt of a regular wage throughout the year. Many struggled to make ends meet. Their existential uncertainty created potential for exploitation and extreme dependency (to be discussed further below).

The 1990s also brought changes in the realm of consumption. Foreign supermarket chains opened large stores offering a wider range of goods than anything Halas residents had seen before in their small town. Familiar goods were now more differentiated: televisions and fridges were larger, while kitchens and bathrooms were marketed to emulate Western standards (Fehérváry 2013, 235–238). As markets opened up, eight global car manufacturers opened dealerships in the town. Socialist urban cooperatives gave way to private businesses in every domain, from legal services to hairdressing. With public budgets under severe pressure, basic outgoings for households increased (notably energy and water bills, but also supplementary expenses associated with schooling and health). A survey carried out among Halas Gypsies in 1992 found that they were lagging behind Hungarian households in every respect. The lead analyst was particularly struck by the fact that, although more than three quarters of Gypsy households had a television, which they valued for access to news as well as entertainment, the proportion owning a fridge was only 39% (Nyilas 1997, 8).

Widening inequalities were confirmed in 2005 in a larger statistical survey based on a sample of 122 households across the town (*Szociális térkép* 2005). Monthly income per capita ranged from just 3000 Forints in the poorest household to 133,000 Forints in the wealthiest (the number of households exceeding 80,000 Forints was very small) (*Szociális térkép* 2005, 61). Some 12% of households received supplementary welfare payments from the municipality (48% reported income from pensions, 40% regular family allowance). After several years of stagnation at the turn of the century, unemployment again rose sharply to reach 1381 persons by January 2005 (2005, 83). Respondents were asked to provide subjective estimates of their material situation. Over half declared that they had difficulty in making ends meet and 40% felt that their living conditions were deteriorating (*Szociális térkép* 2005, 75–77). Ethnicity is not mentioned in the 100 pages of this report, but the suburb in which Gypsies are known to be concentrated emerges as the most disadvantaged, together with the town's rural hinterland (cf. Virág 2024 on the reproduction of marginality in the case of a former mining town).

Inequalities were clearly demonstrated in the quality of housing, which following the privatization of the socialist-era estates was overwhelmingly in private ownership (*Szociális térkép,* 2005, 22–47). Those who could afford to do so built luxurious new

villas in the suburbs (especially the *kertváros*, literally garden town). But Gypsies unable to keep up repayments on their loans had their relatively new Cs houses appropriated and sold off at auction. Accommodation vacated by the departing Soviet army was converted in 1993 and used to house those whose need was greatest, most of whom were Gypsy. Conditions were appalling. For example, the combination of inadequate refuse disposal and hordes of stray dogs resulted in a scabies epidemic that affected large numbers of Gypsy children (Nyilas 1997, 23). When the property of the Vörös Szikra collective farm was inventoried and privatized, numerous Gypsy families found themselves evicted at short notice by the new owner of the buildings which had been their home (Nyilas 1997, 16). Whereas many Hungarians profited from some form of property restitution (often in the form of "compensation" vouchers, which could be sold for cash), Gypsies could not expect to draw any benefits from measures to reinstate a bourgeois social order. The Hungarian entrepreneurs who now dominated the economic landscape had no incentive to hire Gypsies, even for dirty jobs requiring no skill. I have frequently heard employers deny that this reluctance had anything to do with prejudice; it was a rational commercial decision, they emphasized, since Gypsies did not understand work discipline and could not be relied up to turn up punctually.

A secondary labour market functioned fitfully for much of the 1990s, shaped by whatever funds were made available from the county capital and/or Budapest. The municipal authorities organized non-profit companies to hire workers for a wide range of tasks in the public sector. Some of these workfare schemes included vocational training but permanent jobs in the primary labour market remained scarce and inaccessible to all but a few Gypsies. The principal source of income was therefore the state in the form of a range of benefits, including unemployment benefit. Like ethnic Hungarians made redundant, some Gypsies were able to qualify for an early pension or to register some form of handicap and even to draw a supplementary care allowance (*ápolási díj*). Child benefit became the principal source of income for many households. Hungarians frequently alleged that Gypsy birth rates began to rise again for this reason. With most women once again effectively confined to their households, there may have been some truth in this ugly stereotype.

Long-term unemployment meant that parents had no reason to get up early in the morning, which meant that their children were often late for school, or failed to attend regularly, or gave up altogether. From 1992 the municipality offered scholarships to enable the best pupils to complete general school and proceed to vocational training, but the positive discrimination extended to Gypsies in this domain was never enough. The problems identified by Soósné in the 1980s persisted. The failure to draw Gypsy children into the kindergarten network accentuated the inadequacies of their home environment by the time they enrolled at general school.[10] Among teenagers, the abuse of drugs and alcohol increased (facilitated by the illicit production of wine and spirits, for which Bács-Kiskun county was notorious).[11] Despite these signs of anomie, family relations continued to provide a bottom line of support within the minority: no one went hungry. According to László Nyilas (who knew the community very well), those who prospered and moved into Hungarian neighbourhoods did not abandon their kin, who tended to follow them into the same part of town. These clusters had very unequal endowments. Some neighbourhoods were preferred to others and the extent to which kin provided safety nets for

Figure 1. Commemoration plaque to mark the opening of the new community centre in 2017 (constructed on the site of the first Gypsy school).

each other was variable. Kin solidarity did not suffice to save some homeless Gypsy family from relocation to the squalid conditions of the ex-Soviet barracks and a comparable ghetto at the opposite end of town. But when the authorities opened a hostel for the homeless in the early 1990s, not one single Gypsy took up this possibility (Nyilas 1997, 38).

The postsocialist decades also witnessed some positive developments for the minority, notably enhanced political and cultural recognition. A community centre (*Közösségi Ház*) was constructed in 1994–5 to house the new Self-government (Figure 1). Following the death of its inaugural president László Rostás in 2017, this hub, built on the site of the first Gypsy school was renamed after him.[12] Even before the creation of the Self-government, Gypsy issues were taken up energetically by a new interest group that took shape spontaneously in 1990. This was followed by the launching of an Association for Gypsy Culture and Sport. The municipality supported such initiatives as generously as it could, but the Association was riven by divisions, e.g. between those who wished to devote the limited resources to the Folk dance Group and those who wanted more support for sport and recreational activities (Nyilas 1997, 29–30).

There was no mistaking the negative impact of economic deprivation on inter-ethnic relations. The festive weekend to celebrate the new wine (*Szüreti Napok*, organized annually since the 1970s during the first weekend of September) was repeatedly disrupted by drunken Gypsies, some of whom became boisterous and violent. Eventually the

mayor (a liberal who had founded the local branch of the Alliance of Free Democrats before abandoning that party and twice being re-elected as an independent) decided to establish a separate festival to prevent the Gypsies from spoiling the Hungarians' celebrations in the town centre. The Gypsy festival, justified with the rhetoric of multiculturalism, was located on the periphery, close to the location of the former settlement. This segregation has now persisted for two decades (Hann 2020). The minority festival is open to all and attracts Gypsies from across the county and even further afield. Some local Hungarians like to attend because, in addition to performances by artists representing Gypsy culture, a free meal is provided to all.

Economy and society since 2010

Significant changes for the Gypsy minority took place after Viktor Orbán returned to power in 2010 and renewed the ideological emphasis on work as the basis of his programme for National Cooperation. Welfare benefits were slashed. Instead, Gypsies (along with the poorest segments of the majority community) were drawn into public works schemes on an unprecedented scale. The general profile resembled that of the 1990s: the work involved menial tasks such as cleaning streets and maintaining parks and flower beds. Wages were paid monthly at a level well below that of the minimal wage. Yet these jobs were valued because they entitled you to health services and even counted towards your pension (Hann 2018). The scheme was praised by Csaba Szűcs, a butcher by vocational training who, though married to a Hungarian, succeeded László Rostás as president of the Gypsy Self-government. Whereas Rostás had cooperated closely with liberal and socialist mayors, the ruling party with which Szűcs worked as a non-elected deputy mayor was a party of the right rather than the left. When I interviewed him in September 2018, he told me that left and right had become irrelevant. What counted was the fact that Gypsy parents now had to get out of bed promptly in the morning, to report at the depot where they collected their work tools. This was a positive development after two decades spent floundering in indolence (though they themselves were not to blame for their condition).[13]

In a context in which the budgets available at local level were severely squeezed, Csaba Szűcs was credited with the coordination of numerous successful grant applications (*pályázat*) for EU funds (Figures 2 and 3). The keyword was *felzárkóztatás*, which might be translated as "levelling up." This differed little from the slogans of the 1990s, and indeed from the socialist era. Gypsies had to be given the same chances as members of the majority community. Funding was available to support basic improvements to buildings, including schemes to improve private housing (*lakhatási körülmények*) as well schools and the Gypsy community centre. Thanks to the lobbying of Szűcs, there was also a course to train budding entrepreneurs how to prepare business plans, and a two-year programme called "Roma girls" which involved "mentors" cooperating with parents and teachers to ensure that teenaged girls between 14 and 16 continued to attend school regularly (Szőri 2018). Some initiatives originating in Halas, such as the participation of social services employees in summer vacation courses to help failing Gypsy pupils to pass the previous year's examination and thus avoid being held back for a year, were later taken up by ministerial officials in Budapest and extended across the country. According to Szűcs, educational results

Figure 2. A successful grant application submitted by the municipality in the framework of the Széchenyi 2020 programme to improve the quality of housing in the "segregated suburb".

improved significantly at every level in the 2010s, including the numbers of Gypsies proceeding to higher education. He was committed to the principle of having at least one Gypsy on the teaching staff wherever Gypsy pupils were enrolled. More controversially, he intervened regularly to recommend that children be taken into state care, sometimes from birth, when it was clear to him and social services that conditions in the family did not meet a minimal civil standard. For this stance he had had to endure criticism in his own community, but the abuse had not shaken his determination; some parents had thanked him for his role in enabling their children to obtain qualifications and build a brighter future (interview, September 2018).

By the time of the Covid pandemic in 2020, the labour market throughout the country was improving and workfare schemes were being cut back, in Halas as elsewhere. In a speech in 2021, deputy mayor Szűcs claimed that between 2014 and 2021 the proportion of Gypsies of working age in regular employment had risen from 30% to 90% (some of those classified as being "in work" earned only miniscule sums as members of the Gypsy Social Network or street officer).[14] Even after stepping down as president of the Self-government, Szűcs continued to serve as deputy mayor. He was a man of considerable influence, respected by Gypsies and Hungarians alike. Szűcs was active in the public sphere (e.g. organizing the annual festival noted above) while continuing to employ about fifty men (almost all Gypsy) in his private waste-recycling business, which had emerged from municipal privatization initiatives in the 1990s.

Csaba Szűcs is by no means the only successful Gypsy entrepreneur in contemporary Halas. A few others, including men who had not completed general school and begun their working lives as manual labourers in the socialist period, now head businesses that undertook gruelling labour-intensive work throughout the region. These individuals

Figure 3. A successful small grant application submitted by the regional Baptist Church to provide basic social services to promote the employment of Gypsy women.

might be cited in support of Michael Stewart's vision of a new commercial society. Their workers (all male, including some Hungarians) earn up to three times what can be earned in the public works schemes. They are paid weekly, in cash. These are regular jobs for which the employer pays a national insurance contribution. They ensure access to state health care. Bonuses are paid in December, but there is generally no work and therefore no employment contract and no health entitlements in the rest of the winter.[15]

These entrepreneurial Gypsies who have replaced socialist enterprises as the most significant employers of Gypsy labour are respected by Hungarians as well as within their own community. In addition to the activities of the Self-government, they are co-opted into municipal welfare committees and serve as street level bureaucrats in their neighbourhoods.[16] But the admiration is sometimes qualified. Some Gypsies allege that Csaba Szűcs, for all the awards he has received in Budapest and the intellectual distinction of a university degree in social work, has been ineffectual as a political representative and a harsh employer.[17] One local man who self-identified as Gypsy condemned Gypsy entrepreneurs in general, along with educated Gypsy mediators involved in allocating community development funds originating in Brussels. For this critic, members of the

minority elite were "*bőrkereskedők*" (literally "skin traders") whose comfortable lifestyles were enabled by the enduring hardships suffered by their co-ethnics. While most Hungarians praise the work ethic of the Gypsies they encounter in concrete settings, they typically add that positive impressions often turn out to be short-lived. Many of those who complete school and obtain a vocational qualification nonetheless end up reverting to patterns of behaviour stigmatized as traditional Gypsy ("*visszacigányosodnak*").

In the 2020s, numerous indicators remain unfavourable. With education now mainly in the hands of the churches, Gypsy children may be turned away if they cannot recite the basic Christian prayers.[18] They are disproportionately represented in the "special needs" school.[19] A Hungarian acquaintance who taught at this school explained that some of his Gypsy pupils should have been attending regular general school. When he asked one excellent pupil why his parents had not enrolled him at a regular school, the answer was that every member of the boy's family had attended this institution and they knew no other. Many excellent pupils have little or no opportunity to pursue further education, or even to find suitable placements if they undertake vocational training. Instead, they find themselves compelled to perform physical labour and act as breadwinners for their families when still in their teens. There is general agreement that substance abuse has greatly increased in recent years; according to some estimates, between one quarter and one third of teenaged youth has some form of dependency. They have a penchant to criminality to finance their habit and are incapable of systematic work. Meanwhile, transfer income from the state has continued to contract and the municipal government no longer has the resources that were available before 2010 to make discretionary payments to those whose needs are greatest.

The western supermarkets have stayed but of the eight foreign car dealerships in Halas in the 1990s, only two survive in the 2020s. Few citizens expect the upgrade of the Budapest-Belgrade railway to bring many jobs to the town (apart from the recruitment of highly qualified staff for a new logistics centre). No one is homeless and no one freezes in Winter because firewood is still delivered to those considered deserving. Dependence on soup kitchens rises during the cold months, as does the number of children taken into state care. Although now dispersed across the town, Gypsy children still gather in their community centre (on the site of the first Gypsy school) on 5th December, the eve of Saint Nicholas's Day, to receive sweets and small presents. Donations of toys but also clothing and food coupons, are organized by social workers (affiliated to various branches of the local state, including the *Gyermekjóléti Szolgálat* and the *Családsegítő és Krízisellátó Szolgálat*) and faith-based charities (notably the Roman Catholic *Karitász*) in collaboration with Gypsy community leaders, who together try to ensure that goods are distributed fairly and without duplication to all families in need.

Money and indebtedness

So far I have outlined the recent history of Gypsies in Kiskunhalas using the most obvious periodization, drawing attention to both continuities and transformations. In this final section I review the changes that have taken place over the last half century with regard to household finances. Coping with indebtedness opens up a field in which the social consequences of the *rendszerváltás* have been conspicuous. Gypsies have been affected more than most, for the economic reasons outlined above. However, it should not be

supposed that credits and debts were unknown under socialism. In that era, locally organized savings cooperatives routinely extended credit to citizens for major purchases including housebuilding, as well as smaller items such as a television. Interest was low and the institution could obtain repayment via deductions from the borrower's monthly wages. Although some larger towns had pawnshops, Halas did not. Usury was forbidden because it flew in the face of the socialists' ideological prohibition. The practice was not prevalent, but if no one in your family could lend you money when it was urgently needed, for example to pay exceptional medical expenses, or just your electricity bill, it was generally possible, even in smaller settlements such as Tázlár, to borrow money with interest from a private moneylender. Those involved in trading horses and other commercial activities clearly knew how to use money. But the socialist financial environment was so limited that even these persons had few opportunities to invest. At this time, most members of both minority and majority communities received their wages monthly in cash; debts to public utilities could also be deducted if necessary. Welfare payments were made in cash at the post office (or even brought to the home by the postman).

In the villages of Northern Hungary, according to Durst (2016), Gypsies were often the principal customers of the savings cooperatives during and after socialism. This seems not to have been the case in Halas. The nearby savings cooperative in the smaller town of Soltvadkert, 12 kms to the north, served a "golden triangle" of communities which had become phenomenally wealthy after 1990, thanks in part to the production of plastic but also to a range of illicit practices. This institution was rocked by scandal in 2012, when its directors were found to be making large uncovered loans to finance risky offshore deals from Panama to the Philippines. When problems arose and small-scale investors sought to take out their money, a run on the bank ensued. The nominally cooperative bank was promptly closed down by the regulator, all investors were reimbursed, and several leaders subjected to court trials (Brückner 2019). A similar though less dramatic collapse took place in Halas. Cooperatives have now disappeared from Hungary's financial landscape, swallowed up by larger commercial banks.

By 2005, indebtedness to the municipality and public utilities had become a major problem in Halas (*Szociális térkép* 2005, 79–81). Rent arrears increased rapidly in *szociális* housing, where Gypsies were over-represented. This survey found (unsurprisingly) that high levels of indebtedness (also to the water company) correlated with poor quality accommodation. Small credits to meet medical expenses or to purchase consumer durables gave rise to spirals of debt.[20] To this day, officials estimate that approximately one third of Gypsy households in Halas do not have bank accounts. For many of those that do, the account is created simply as a precondition for a specific credit and remains otherwise unused.

A key institutional actor nowadays is *Provident*, a private company that offers loans to those considered unbankable by mainstream financial institutions. *Provident* advertises its financial services aggressively (e.g. on state television) but claims at the same time to be a responsible lender, providing highly personalized services to those who can prove they have collateral. Cash is brought to the borrower's door, or it may be handed over elsewhere, if the borrower wishes to keep the credit a secret, which is often the case (for further discussion of the *Provident* business model, see Durst 2019, 70–71). *Provident* does not offer loans to Gypsies who work with only daily registration, though those with

seasonal contracts are generally eligible. Supplementary welfare benefits are not deemed acceptable collateral.

With *Provident* charging interest at around 36% (plus additional fees), some Gypsies prefer other options. The pawnshop is one: the three shops established this century in the centre of Halas will accept a wide range of items, from heirlooms to a mobile phone. It is also common to receive a loan from one's employer. This is deducted from wages over a mutually agreed time period and is usually free of interest. One entrepreneur scoffed at the idea that informal loans might be widespread, with or without interest: trust had evaporated in recent years, he asserted, and money was so scarce that no one was willing to offer loans any longer, not even within the kin group.[21]

Housing remains highly sensitive terrain. As noted, some Gypsies began acquiring the properties left behind by out-migrating Hungarians in the socialist period and this trend has continued. They are nowadays dispersed throughout the town, a process which has facilitated assimilation. However, segregation persists. Two long streets on the city boundary occupied primarily by Gypsies are known as the *szegregátum*, a ghetto which "white people" are discouraged from entering. Even houses with just a few small rooms have become much more expensive to maintain as a result of the recent energy crisis. Families who plunge into a spiral of debt will eventually be subject to legal process and the intervention of a bailiff (*végrehajtó*). The initial appropriation of televisions and motor vehicles can soon escalate to the loss of the house itself, which is then put up for auction. The municipal social services and the Gypsy Self-government are drawn into these cases (cf. Virág 2024, who highlights the way in which housing outcomes are shaped by officials' distinguishing between the deserving and the undeserving). Legal issues can delay an eviction for years.[22] Nevertheless, a local lawyer (Hungarian) is thought to have acquired up to thirty Gypsy houses at auctions. In some cases, he is able to extract rent from the occupants, while in others he appears content to leave them empty in the expectation that they will later be appropriated by the state and full compensation paid to him as the legal owner (this applies particularly to an area near the railway where the new logistics centre is scheduled to be built).

The Hungarian lawyer, and the middle classes in general, including those Gypsies who have joined this class, manage their businesses and households according to the norms of global financialized capitalism, juggling investments and assets to optimize planning for present and future well-being (Zaloom and James 2023). Theorizing this phase of capitalism, social scientists have generally emphasized how neoliberalism casts the individual as an entrepreneurial subject who maximizes her market value in a world in which public goods have declined and almost nothing is immune to the logic of commoditization. The pattern is ubiquitous and may take particularly striking forms in the postsocialist world (Makovicky 2014). However, pushing against the literature on the "financialization of everyday life," Zaloom and James insist on giving more agency to the strategies and aspirations of the households they study ethnographically. From this perspective, "financial individuation" is not the norm at all. Rather, households reproduce themselves in everyday life via "financial patchworking." "Under the conditions of financialization, householders fulfil obligations to their loved ones and to themselves as they save, invest, use debt from a variety of sources, and strategically deploy it all, timed to their many obligations to support and repay" (Zaloom and James 2023, 405).

This putatively universal model of householding may be appropriate to the case of the Hungarian lawyer who is buying up the houses of indebted Gypsies to add to his portfolio, but it may not work as well for middle-class Gypsies in Halas if they extend support beyond their immediate "loved ones" to the impoverished who live alongside them. More research is needed to determine whether prosperous Gypsies do in fact acknowledge a responsibility to *share* their wealth, and if so, what kind of dependencies ensue (cf. Ferguson 2021). Is usury nowadays considered a legitimate pathway to prosperity and securing the future of one's own family? For the great majority of Halas Gypsies, such questions are academic: their lives are a struggle for survival in the present. Inevitably this is a collective matter. The *Provident* loan is extended to an individual, but repayment inevitably involves "patchworking" and the remaking of complex social connections (for an example, see Durst 2019, 59–62). But this sociality is born of desperation and seems very different from the spreadsheet calculations of those who are prosperous and financially literate. More important in the case of most Gypsy households is to recognize that financialization has significantly increased the elements of compulsion in inter-household relations. While retaining the distinction between morally legitimate (*korrekt*) and illegitimate (in the Gypsies' vocabulary *dögös)* informal lending, Judit Durst concludes in her later article that the great majority of poor Gypsy households' debts were unambiguously "bad," leading in extreme cases to "debt slavery" (*adósrabszolgaság*) in which the debt can only be paid off through exploitative forms of labour (2019: 81).

Conclusions

Social scientists have classified Gypsies among the prime casualties of the transition to a market economy after 1990, but there has been disagreement as to how to explain and evaluate these processes. Contrary to those who view Gypsies as an underclass, Stewart (2003) stresses opportunities to enhance freedom in accordance with core elements of a culture. While the data from Kiskunhalas provide some support for this thesis as far as collective political and cultural organization are concerned, in everyday life most Gypsies have paid a high price for their postsocialist Self-government. If Stewart's indictment of socialism as aiming at the assimilation of Gypsies against their will into an industrial proletariat were correct, you would expect to find at least some Gypsies critical of that era and the damage it did to their "culture." I have not heard such criticism in Halas. Even the individual "winners" of the transition, i.e. the successful entrepreneurial Gypsies, bemoan what has been lost, i.e. the solid accomplishments of the socialist mixed economy in which their people, however unevenly, experienced progress (*felemelkedtek*).

Stewart (2021) privileges the emic perspective in the course of criticizing general theories such as Marxism. However, Durst (2016, 2019), who provided the data used by Stewart, does not draw the same optimistic conclusions concerning the onset of a new Smithian commercial society. Rather, she interprets paternalistic moneylending as the resumption of an older form of hierarchy vis-à-vis Hungarians. It is accepted, at least in its *korrekt* form, by those who find themselves in a desperate situation. To approach survival-oriented inter-household dependencies using the same framework as that used to analyse the "financial patchworking" of the aspirational middle classes is to overlook structural inequalities of class, which are accentuated in the case of Gypsies by the ethno-racial divide. The Gypsies studied by Durst in Borsod county hold on to vestiges of

egalitarianism, yet "due to their extreme poverty, the pool of goods they are able to share has been shrinking" (Durst 2016, 57). They are then forced to turn to informal lenders in their own community. Stewart infers from the deference shown to a "clever" individual who cares for his community by providing money and/or employment that Gypsies (and workers in general) do not perceive exploitation in wage-labour (Marx) or critique the free market (Polanyi). However, Durst seems to me to suggest that poor Gypsies may in fact have shrewd perceptions of the dependencies in which they are enmeshed. Lenders acknowledged as *korrekt* may in reality differ little from the *dögös*. Of course, the victims express their critical insights not with the vocabulary of the social scientist or with reference to the socialist ideology of yesteryear but in their own idiom, e.g. with reference to conscience and supernatural retribution (2019: 79–80).

The emic perspective of the Halas Gypsies in recent years is overwhelmingly to look back on the socialist mixed economy as a golden age, when they had secure employment, rising living standards, opportunities for embourgeoisement, and low levels of indebtedness. Their structural subordination to the Hungarian majority was significantly attenuated in those decades. In the postsocialist Smithian commercial society, the gaps have widened again in: both between Gypsies and Hungarians and within each community. Anthropology needs to operate at both emic and etic levels. Since 1990, and in somewhat new forms after 2010, diagnoses of exploitation and class conflict, unfolding even *within* the racialized minority, may have considerable validity, whether or not these are consistently recognized by the actors.

Notes

1. Throughout this article I use the word Gypsy to translate the Hungarian *cigány*, which is the term used by members of both majority and minority communities in Kiskunhalas. The terms Rom, Roma and Romani are recognized but seldom used.
2. A figure of 4000 is commonly quoted in newspaper articles. It was confirmed by the Gypsy deputy mayor Csaba Szűcs (interview, September 2018). Despite the town's overall decline, the size of the Gypsy minority has remained stable and perhaps even increased. The ethnic boundary is fuzzy, due in part to intermarriage with Hungarians. Some individuals identify as Hungarian in some contexts and Gypsy in others. A simple declaration that one has Gypsy ancestry suffices to be registered as a member of the minority for the purposes of the Self-government machinery (see below), which may confer certain economic advantages and open up political opportunities. Approximately half of the population self-identifying as Gypsy in Halas is light skinned and can easily pass as Hungarian in physical appearance (Gypsy identity in everyday social interaction is also indexed by speech patterns and clothing). The contemporary community in Halas comprises families belonging to different Gypsy sub-groups, some of whom have been resettled from overcrowded communities in the north and east of the country (including young persons in state care); at least in recent decades, these differences in origin have been no obstacle to intermarriage.
3. Stewart introduces the concept of usury with reference to scavenging on a rubbish tip (2021: 91). This usage, according to which usury covers any income-generating activity that falls outside the domain of productive labour, is broader than anything I have encountered in Halas or elsewhere in Hungary. In Halas, *uzsora* refers more narrowly to the lending of money for interest.
4. The data noted in this and the following paragraph are drawn from documents prepared by János Mácsai in the late 1970s, when he was deputy head of the municipal council (Mácsai n.d.). The town's request to build a "Gypsy school" was initially turned down by the higher authorities

because to educate children separately on a racial (*faji*) basis contradicted socialist ideology. However, teachers and parents at the town's existing general schools did not wish to teach Gypsy children in their classes. The application had to be repackaged to place the new school formally under the aegis of an existing general school; in practice the new Gypsy school was highly autonomous and did not admit Hungarian pupils.

5. Some of the images taken in Halas by Kamill Erdős along with notes of his visit featured in a temporary exhibition devoted to his work at the Ethnographic Museum (*Néprajzi Múzeum*) in Budapest in 2023 (*Istennel talállak, testvérem! – Cigány történetek* was curated by Vera Schleiher *et al;* co-sponsored by the Erkel Ferenc Múzeum (Gyula)).
6. Brigades consisting only of Gypsies were not uncommon at the state farm (some Hungarians spoke of "Brazil brigades" on the basis of skin colour and colourful clothing).
7. Although few prosecutions were brought, the law targeting the *közveszélyes munkakerülő* (popularly abbreviated to KMK, literally "a person who is a danger to the public because (s)he avoids work") could be invoked more or less arbitrarily to alert Gypsies to the expectation that all adults of working age should have an employment relationship. In Kiskunhalas, this law helped to ensure that most households had at least one member employed at one of the new socialist factories or the state farm.
8. For most Hungarians, the term *kupec* is highly pejorative. It is used to decry those who do not make their living through honest hard work. In Gyöngyös, making a profit at the expense of Hungarians in the trading of horses is fundamental to the identity of Gypsy men (Stewart 1997). This activity was important in Halas too, but it does not seem to have had the same ideological significance.
9. It is not clear if the letter written by Dr Károly Vladár dated 10th March 1972 was ever delivered to the local authorities. I am grateful to his daughter Éva for sharing it.
10. Mrs Erzsébet Soós was a general school teacher who made enormous efforts to improve the educational achievements of her Gypsy pupils. She carried out a detailed analysis of the school performance of twelve Gypsy pupils who entered first grade with her in 1998. Only four of those pupils completed eight grades within the standard eight years (Soósné 2005, 48).
11. Issues with drug consumption by young persons in Kiskunhalas date back to the 1990s. They were investigated by Horváth (2001), who (without making explicit reference to ethnicity) found a strong association between drug experimentation and "bad living conditions" (2001, 23).
12. Nyilas (1997, 30–31) describes the lively election campaign to select the leaders of the new Self-government in 1994. With no register to determine eligibility, over 5000 votes were cast (i.e. Gypsy voters were outnumbered by ethnic Hungarians).
13. Many Hungarians in Halas viewed Szűcs's appointment by the mayor and the allocation of public works to his private firm as a reward for delivering Gypsy votes to support Fidesz-backed lists. One of the mechanisms involves voting for Fidesz as a quid pro quo for charitable support in the form of basic foodstuffs and vouchers. Other organizations also provide food aid to the most needy, especially at Christmas. A member of the local bourgeoisie told of his surprise on handing over a parcel on behalf of the local Rotary Club: instead of being thanked by the recipient, he was asked for which candidate he should cast his vote at the next election.
14. These figures were given in a speech to mark the establishment of a Gypsy nationality "student circle" (*diákkör*) in Kiskunhalas in November 2021. See Pozsgai (2021).
15. Poor Gypsy men and women can be hired on a daily basis at any time of the year. Such labourers are eligible for health care only on the days for which they are registered. Despite the obvious hazards, some Gypsies still prefer irregular agricultural work because of the higher incomes it offers (you can take home as much in a week as you would in a month with a full-time position in a nursery school or performing clerical work for the municipality).

16. Some received modest remuneration for acting as *utcabizalmi* (literally "trusted person of the street") until this position was eliminated in 2020. One key task of the *utcabizalmi* was to ensure that everyone went to the urns on polling day (and voted for the candidate suggested).
17. For example, in September 2023 criticism in social media of the Self-government's failure to defend a Gypsy family facing eviction from its home led to an official rebuttal by its president.
18. This does not mean that they are less religious than the Hungarian majority. Most Halas Gypsies declare themselves to be Roman Catholics. Both Calvinists (*reformátusok*) and Baptists (*baptisták*) have proselytized in recent years, often in association with welfare provision, but with little enduring success. Few Gypsies attend church regularly, but baptisms and funerals are important (weddings less so, at least in recent years). Szabó (2009) provides a description of traditional death rituals.
19. The special needs school was obliged to move to unsuitable rooms in the former headquarters of the Communist Party (*pártház*) when it became necessary to hand over its dedicated building to the Calvinist Church in 1991.
20. The survey undertaken in 1992 (Nyilas 1997) did not include questions about credit. It is likely that the televisions and washing machines owned by most Gypsy households at this time were rather basic models manufactured in the socialist era. When western goods became easily available, Gypsies and Hungarians alike sought to acquire them. They often did so through generous hire purchase arrangements extended by capitalist enterprises looking in those years to establish a permanent foothold in the new market.

    The later survey on which I draw in this section (*Szociális térkép* 2005) found that 15 households reported a substantial excess of expenditure over income but this was not explored further. Loans were found to be insignificant among the over-60s and only a minor factor in the budgets of the over-50s; but they played a significant role as "investments" for all younger cohorts. 23% of the households surveyed estimated that they were able to put away a part of their monthly income as savings; the propensity to save was higher where the head of the household had completed high school or college (*Szociális térkép* 2005, 73–75).
21. I did not hear any indication that legislation brought in by the Fidesz-led government to curtail usury in 2012 had led to changes in informal practices. However, my information concerning informal lending is extremely limited. I have no doubt that a longer stay in the community would uncover a more complex picture.
22. Some Gypsy houses were never properly registered to begin with. In other cases, ownership is not clarified following an owner's death. Informal exchanges of property are similarly unregistered. All this gives rise to problems when a defaulting Gypsy insists that part or even the entirety of the house in which a family resides in fact belongs to siblings or other relatives.

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After short visits in earlier years, my field research in Kiskunhalas took off in summer 2017 with a focus on small businessmen. In later summer visits my curiosity gradually extended to cover virtually all aspects of urban life. However, it was never easy to combine enquiries among Hungarians with research into Gypsy affairs. I made more systematic attempts to do so in a stay of two weeks in August-September 2023. This article was drafted shortly afterwards. I am grateful to Gábor Demeter and Rita Laki for facilitating my work in the town and above all to Aurél Szakál, Museum Director *extraordinaire*. All unpublished materials cited in this article are available at the Thorma János Museum. Thanks also to Balázs Gosztonyi, Mihály Sárkány and Michael Stewart for their helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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