

DISCRIMINATION, OPPORTUNITY, AND MIDDLE-CLASS SUCCESS IN EARLY COMMUNIST HUNGARY*

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ABSTRACT. *This article explores the middle-class response to life under the early Communist state in Hungary. It is based on an oral history of the Budapest bourgeoisie, and challenges some of the dominant indigenous representations of the central European middle class as persecuted victims who were forced into ‘internal exile’ by the Stalinist state. Despite being officially discriminated against as ‘former exploiters’, large numbers achieved educational and professional success. Their skills were increasingly needed in the rapid modernization of the 1950s, and the state provided them with semi-official opportunities to remake themselves into acceptable Communist citizens. Middle-class testimony revealed how individuals constructed politically appropriate public personas to ensure their own upward mobility; they hid aspects of their pasts, created ‘class conscious’ autobiographies, and learnt how to demonstrate sufficient political loyalty. The ways in which individuals dealt with integrating into a system which officially sought to exclude them and which many disliked ideologically is then examined. In order to ‘cope with success’, respondents in this project invented new stories about themselves to justify the compromises they had made to ensure their achievements. These narratives are analysed as evidence of specifically Communist middle-class identities.*

I

During the early Communist period, the lives of the former middle class in Hungary were transformed.¹ On one hand, being officially defined as a socially

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¹ This term includes those who came from interwar middle-class families. I use Gábor Gyáni's definition of middle class to include the intellectual/professional classes (teachers, doctors, lawyers, and so on), the independent bourgeoisie (businessmen and tradesmen), and state officials; see Gábor Gyáni and György Kövér, *Magyarország társadalomtörténete a reformkortól a második világháborúig* (Budapest, 1998), pp. 224–54. There were the sharp cleavages within the Hungarian middle class, in particular between the more conservative ‘Christian national’ gentry-dominated civil service, and the intelligentsia and business communities who came from more heterogeneous backgrounds (including many of Jewish origin). Despite this, historians have increasingly argued for the presence of an identifiable middle-class

undesirable element under the Stalinist state of Rákosi resulted in discrimination and persecution. Those who came from the old interwar middle class could be negatively labelled, deported,² excluded from high status roles in the workplace,³ or barred from university as a result of counterselective quotas which favoured working-class students. On the other hand, a massive programme of modernization, mainly through industrialization, required a vastly expanded elite of managers and technical specialists.⁴ Despite anti-bourgeois state rhetoric, certain well-educated or aspiring members of the old middle class were given the opportunity to achieve a limited amount of social mobility.

This article explores how members of the middle class found success in both education and the workplace despite being officially excluded by the Communist state.⁵ It shows how many ensured their upward mobility by playing the system, inventing new pasts or public identities for themselves. The second part of the article will examine how members of the middle class dealt with their achievements in a system that officially endorsed their exclusion and that many disliked. It will argue that in order to ‘cope with success’, the middle class invented new stories about themselves, which justified the problematic moral implications of their social mobility and reconceptualized their relationship with Communist power.⁶

Indigenous post-Communist central European scholarship has shown little interest in studying the ways in which social groups benefited from Communism, especially in the period of ‘high Stalinism’ in the 1940s and 1950s. In these interpretations, the middle classes have been presented either as victims or as having emerged from the Communist experience unscathed, with their outlooks and values unchanged. In some works, particularly by nationalist writers,

ethic and lifestyle, especially in interwar Budapest, that provided a coherent sense of class identity. See, for example, Gábor Gyáni, ‘A polgári középosztály lakásviszonyai Budapesten a két háború között’, in Gábor Gyáni, ed., *Magyarország társadalomtörténete II: 1920–1944* (Budapest, 2000), p. 466. In this project, almost all respondents categorized themselves as middle class, on the basis of their upbringing.

² See, for example, Tibor Dessewffy and András Szántó, ‘*Kitörő éberséggel*’: a budapesti kitelepítések hiteles története (Miskolc, 1989).

³ There is a striking absence of literature on the experience of the professional workplace. There is some information on doctors’ experiences in György Ádám, *Az orvosi hálapénz Magyarországon* (Budapest, 1986). We know that counterselective procedures were used less frequently to determine access to the workplace. However, class-based discrimination often occurred once in post. See Szonja Szelényi, *Equality by design: the grand experiment in destratification in socialist Hungary* (Stanford, 1998), p. 201 (n. 19).

⁴ For details of the large expansion in technical education which served the rapidly industrializing economy, see Elinor Murray, ‘Higher education in Communist Hungary, 1948–1956’, *American Slavic and East European Review*, 19 (1960), pp. 395–413, at p. 396.

⁵ Class-based exclusion from the university and workplace was only officially ended in the early 1960s. See A. J. Von Lazar, ‘Class struggle and socialist construction: the Hungarian paradox’, *Slavic Review*, 25 (1966), pp. 303–13, for an exploration of how socialist modernization necessitated a retreat from the rhetoric of class war.

⁶ For an exploration of how a different social group ‘came to terms’ with its success under a Communist state, see Marianne Liljeström, ‘Success stories from the margins: Soviet women’s autobiographical sketches from the late Soviet period’, in Daniel Bertaux, Paul Thompson, and Anna Rotkirch, eds., *On living through Soviet Russia* (London, 2004), pp. 235–51.

Communism has been presented as an alien totalitarian system imposed from outside with which victimized local populations did not interact.⁷ Some left-wing and liberal writers constructed a model of central European (as opposed to eastern European) development, which presented the region's societies as repositories of western liberal, democratic, and market values, whose 'natural instincts' were denied by a succession of 'eastern' authoritarian regimes.⁸ These western values were considered most fully preserved within the middle classes, who protected them from the ravages of Stalinism and were able to pass them on to a new generation after 1989.⁹ However, giving more consideration to the experiences of those who attempted to create manageable lives for themselves in such a system, albeit in very difficult circumstances, challenges the idea that the middle class were solely victims and reveals the ways they were in fact altered by their interaction with the Communist state.¹⁰

The evidence for this article is primarily drawn from an oral history project in which I interviewed men and women about their lives under the early Communist state. I collected the experiences, views, and representations of educational attainment and professional careers from seventy-eight members of the Budapest middle class born between 1907 and 1938. This was part of a wider oral history project which also examined war memory, political expression, resistance, and the social and private life of the middle class. The interviews were conducted between 1998 and 2000. They averaged around three hours in length. There were thirty-one female and forty-five male respondents. All interviewees were promised anonymity; hence all names are pseudonyms.

⁷ For one public manifestation of this approach in the context of a contemporary Hungarian museum, see Mark Pittaway, 'The "House of Terror" and Hungary's politics of memory', *Austrian Studies Newsletter*, 15 (2003), pp. 16–17. The 'totalitarian model', which places an emphasis on what Stalinism destroyed or restricted rather than on what it created, is still the dominant paradigm in Hungarian history writing. For a recent popular general work which uses this framework, see Ignác Romics, *Hungary in the twentieth century* (Budapest, 1999), especially ch. 5.

⁸ This position has been strongly associated with leftist dissident voices: 'foreign domination prevents us from exercising the western option ... which represents our profoundest historical inclinations', György Konrád, *Antipolitics*, qu. in Timothy Garton-Ash, 'Does central Europe exist?', *New York Review of Books*, 9 Oct. 1986, p. 47. See also Elemér Hankiss, *East European alternatives* (Oxford, 1990), especially the introduction; Elemér Hankiss, 'Demobilization, self-mobilization and quasi-mobilization in Hungary, 1948–1987', *East European Politics and Societies*, 3 (1998), pp. 13–42. In the historical field, see Jenő Szűcs, 'The three historical regions of Europe', in John Keane, ed., *Civil society and the state: new European perspectives* (London and New York, 1988), pp. 291–332; András Gerő, *Hungarian society in the making: the unfinished experience* (Budapest, London, and New York, 1995), ch. 1.

⁹ See, for example, Iván Szelényi et al., *Socialist entrepreneurs: embourgeoisement in rural Hungary* (Oxford and New York, 1988), ch. 7. See also Tibor Gáti and Agota Horváth, 'A háború előtti kisvárosi középosztály utótörténete', *Szociológiai Szemle*, 1 (1992), pp. 81–96. They argue that those middle-class groups who lost their status after 1945 were able to re-emerge after 1990 and regain their former position. There is no consideration of whether the experience of the early Communist state actually changed aspects of their identity or outlook. The Stalinist experience is forgotten as an unwanted interlude which interrupted Hungary's natural trajectory towards 'embourgeoisement'.

¹⁰ For an example of this type of approach from the study of the Soviet Union, see Ekaterina Foteeva, 'Coping with revolution: the experiences of well-to-do Russian families', in Bertaux, Thompson, and Rotkirch, eds., *Living through*, pp. 68–90.

II

In central-eastern Europe after the Second World War, most newly established Communist states tried to exclude the former middle classes from higher education, in an attempt to break their numerical dominance in professional and intellectual fields. This was achieved to the greatest extent in Poland and East Germany. In Poland, the loss of 77 per cent of the professional, government, and business class during the Second World War made this task much easier.¹¹ In East Germany, the state's long-term commitment to worker education, an aspirational proletariat, and the flight of middle-class students to West Germany ensured the most worker-peasant-dominated student body and professional-intellectual elite in the region.¹² Elsewhere, the former middle class maintained a large presence in higher education: in Czechoslovakia, for example, students from worker-peasant backgrounds never filled more than 43 per cent of university places. Similarly in Hungary the percentage of students from non-manual backgrounds attending university hardly dropped from its immediate post-war level even in the period of greatest anti-middle-class discrimination.¹³ In both cases, this reflected the failure to recruit sufficient numbers of working-class students into a rapidly expanding university sector.¹⁴ However, in Czechoslovakia the Communist Party did not seriously attempt to challenge the dominance of its middle-class elite and thus prospective students did not face the class-based counterselective quotas and the anti-bourgeois rhetoric that greeted Hungarian university applicants.¹⁵ What happened to the Hungarian middle class was therefore unique in central-eastern Europe: they achieved upward mobility in large numbers in a system which officially endorsed their marginalization. It was this contradictory experience of official discrimination combined with unofficial opportunity which was to shape much of the middle-class testimony recorded in this project.

From its inception, the Communist state promised to reduce drastically the proportion of bourgeois students at Hungarian universities and developed sophisticated mechanisms to exclude them. After 1949, an 'entrance committee' (*felvételi*

¹¹ Mária M. Kovács and Antal Örkény, 'Promoted cadres and professionals in post-war Hungary', in Rudolf Andorka and László Bertalan, eds., *Economy and society in Hungary* (Budapest, 1986), pp. 139–52, at p. 151. This compares to a loss of 10 per cent of these social groups in Hungary during the Second World War.

¹² John Connelly, *Captive university: the sovietisation of East German, Czech, and Polish higher education, 1945–1956* (Chapel Hill, 2000), pp. 273–9.

¹³ Albert Simkus and Rudolf Andorka, 'Inequalities in educational attainment in Hungary, 1923–1973', *American Sociological Review*, 47 (1982), pp. 740–51, at p. 745. See also Szelenyi, *Equality by design*, pp. 125–6.

¹⁴ Czechoslovak elites failed to provide sufficient incentives to draw the younger generation of the Bohemian working class, which was suspicious of social mobility, into the university system and the new elite. See Connelly, *Captive university*, pp. 266–72. For an account of Hungarian industry's reluctance to give up its best workers for university education, and the problems that workers experienced with 'accelerated education', see Szelenyi, *Equality by design*, p. 127.

¹⁵ The Czechoslovak Communist state did not introduce quotas into higher education, did not force students to define their social origins, and did not vet applications for political reliability to the extent seen elsewhere. See Connelly, *Captive university*, pp. 269–70.

bizottság), consisting of an academic, a member of the Communist youth movement, and a local party representative, controlled admissions.¹⁶ It was instructed to look at candidates' social background and academic prowess. Applicants were judged on the basis of their personal file and application form (*törzslap*), which required information about family backgrounds, including parents' occupations both in the year of application and in 1938 (i.e. under the previous regime).¹⁷ The entrance committee placed university applicants into one of three categories: 'workers' (a very broadly defined group which included working peasants and all Communist cadres), 'intellectuals', and those to be excluded, known as the 'x-class'.

The vast majority of respondents, whose families had been members of the interwar middle class, could have been placed into only two of these categories: 'x-class' or 'intellectuals'. In official terms, the 'x-class' was judged by class background *and* political past: it included the children of the landowning aristocracy, owners of factories or small companies, owners of apartment houses, wealthy individuals, managers, political leaders, policemen, and military officers of the old regime.¹⁸ The criteria officially used to categorize 'intellectuals' were based solely on background; they included those whose parents had finished tertiary education and were, after 1948, employed in professions within the cultural or technical intelligentsia. In the early Communist period, the state promised to exclude all those applicants who were defined as 'x-class'. Candidates classified as 'intellectual' experienced spells of both marginalization and acceptance, according to the political climate.

In some cases, class definitions consigned respondents to total exclusion from tertiary education. Such marginalization occurred where parents' political or economic backgrounds were considered to be extremely negative, or were very well known, or where the individual was deemed 'unreformable'. One interviewee, a 'reactionary' member of the 'x class', who came from a rich upper-middle-class Buda home and whose father had been a minister in a pre-war Horthy government, considered herself a middle-class relic and realized that marginalization was inevitable. She was unable to go to university:

James: *How did the Communist regime describe your social position?*

Mária: Badly. As a 'bourgeois hangover' (*polgári csökevény*). That was the phrase which was used to describe those of the middle class who had stayed (*itt maradt középosztály*), the bourgeoisie, whom they were not able to help. We were called 'bourgeois hangovers'. A few of us remained here from the old middle class, those who didn't go, those who lived through it, [the state knew] that when we died then a new generation would come.

¹⁶ János Ladányi, *Rétegeződés és szelekció a felsőoktatásban* (Budapest, 1994), p. 47.

¹⁷ These were the questions on the application form for the University of Economics in Budapest. See Szelényi, *Equality by design*, pp. 11–12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Despite these cases of exclusion, many members of the old middle class did attend higher educational institutions. The Communist takeover had only a minimal effect on the proportion of students from non-manual backgrounds who attended university. One sociological study suggested that the percentage of sons from non-manual backgrounds fell slightly from around 41 per cent in 1947 to a figure of around 35 per cent for the early 1950s, whereas for daughters the figure remained relatively constant at just under 20 per cent.¹⁹ The Columbia University research project on Hungary, which interviewed émigrés who left after the 1956 uprising, discovered that only 18 per cent of their middle-class respondents had been unable to gain university places.²⁰ While figures from elite higher educational institutions suggested that class-based quotas were more successful, such institutions had a vested interest in under-representing middle-class students, and were probably unrepresentative of Hungarian higher education as a whole.²¹ Certainly the Communist elite were deeply concerned about the continued presence of the former bourgeoisie; one 1956 party report highlighted that approximately half the cultural intelligentsia and 60–70 per cent of professionals were still taken from the families of the old middle and upper classes.²² Although not large enough to be statistically significant, the sample from this project was consistent with this evidence: only four out of forty-one middle-class respondents who applied to attend tertiary education between 1948 and 1956 were completely excluded.²³ Moreover, for most of these respondents social mobility was not

¹⁹ Simkus and Andorka, 'Inequalities', p. 744. It is impossible to assess the extent to which different groups from the middle and upper classes were excluded, as these statistics do not distinguish between different types of non-manual occupations.

²⁰ The Columbia University Research Project on Hungary (CURPH) interviewed around 125 Hungarians. They concluded that although the percentage of middle-class students had fallen within the university system (as the system expanded), their absolute number remained high. It is difficult to use their statistics, however, as they conflate Communist definitions of class (x-class, intelligentsia) with respondents' self-definition (as middle class). Bearing this in mind, CURPH reported that five out of twenty-eight middle-class students, one out of twelve students from 'intelligentsia' backgrounds, and nine out of seventeen from 'x-class' families were completely excluded. If these figures are totalled, then 26 per cent (fifteen out of fifty-seven interviewees) of all those students which my project considered middle class were excluded from higher education in the CURPH research. See Elinor Murray, *Higher education in Communist Hungary (report)*, Columbia Research Project on Hungary, 1958, deposited in the Bakhmeteff Archive, Columbia University (henceforth BA), Box 30, Subject Files: Report of Higher Education, pp. 15–16. See also Murray, *Higher education (article)*, pp. 400–1.

²¹ János Ladányi argues that class-based quotas at elite institutions were successful in the period of high Stalinism, but that the proportion of working-class students fell away after 1956, eventually only comprising 44–48 per cent of the student body in 1963. See Ladányi, *Rétegeződés és szelekció*, p. 54. For criticisms of this thesis, and the suggestion that the promotion of working-class students was not successful even in the period of high Stalinism, see Szelenyi, *Equality by design*, p. 13.

²² Antal Örkeny, 'A társadalmi mobilitás történelmi perspektívái', in Nikosz Fokasz and Antal Örkeny, eds., *Magyarország társadalmi története, 1945–1989* (2 vols., Budapest, 1999), II, pp. 177–92, at p. 186.

²³ As the primary rationale of the interviews was to explore the ways in which some members of the middle class found success, rather than to establish whether the middle class was successful as a whole, it was not vital whether the sample was representative. However, it was unlikely that this project significantly overrepresented those who had been successful by self-selecting people who had achieved upward mobility and thus still considered themselves middle class in the 1990s. When respondents

regarded as unusual; going to university was considered a normal (albeit complicated) practice in middle-class milieus.

The old middle class managed to find opportunities for upward mobility in part because a programme of massive industrial expansion in early Communist Hungary required a vastly expanded elite of managers and technical specialists.²⁴ Student numbers expanded rapidly from 22,386 in 1949/50 to a peak of 60,687 in 1953.²⁵ The failure of the state adequately to prepare sufficient numbers of students from peasant and worker backgrounds,²⁶ combined with the pressures of meeting ambitious targets in the first five-year plan, meant that quotas were relaxed incrementally from the early 1950s onwards. In 1952, universities were informed of the pressing need to admit students from old 'intellectual backgrounds'.²⁷ In 1953, controls on university scholarships were softened: grants were no longer to be confined to those from worker and peasant backgrounds. In 1954, at the third party congress, Mátyás Rákosi announced that 'talent and outstanding marks' would now be added as relevant criteria in higher education admissions.²⁸ Despite these changes, official rhetoric still stressed the necessity of excluding 'former exploiting classes' from the education system. Only in the early 1960s were class-based quotas officially eliminated and educational establishments asked to judge candidates on the basis of their 'preparedness, suitability and moral attitude'.²⁹

Despite evidence of their success in the system, there has been little interest in examining how the former middle classes of east-central Europe experienced upward mobility in the early Communist period. Since 1989, historians

suggested other 'middle-class' individuals for interview, they usually did so according to pre-Communist definitions of class; hence those whose social status had declined during the Communist period were still recommended as interviewees. Moreover, when asked to recommend 'middle-class' respondents, many believed that I was exploring the Communists' persecution of unwanted social classes, and hence suggested those individuals who had experienced extreme forms of discrimination. Thus those with particularly negative experiences may be overrepresented in this sample.

²⁴ For this point, see György Péteri, *Academia and state socialism: essays on the political history of academic life in post-1945 Hungary and eastern Europe* (New York, 1998), p. 3. This tension between the demands of ideology and of rapid modernization also provoked debate over the 'rehabilitation of the bourgeois specialists' in the Soviet Union in 1931. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and social mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921–1934* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 213–17.

²⁵ See Andor Ladányi, *Felsőoktatási politika, 1949–1958* (Budapest, 1986), p. 230.

²⁶ Many applicants from peasant and worker backgrounds who had not completed secondary education were prepared for university through a one year 'szakérttségi' ('express' A-level equivalent). However, these students failed in much higher numbers once in higher education; at the Budapest technical university, in 1949–50, between 35 and 45 per cent of 'szakérttségi' students did not pass their courses. This is probably a conservative estimate; university staff were pressured into passing a politically acceptable minimum number of these students. See Murray, *Higher education (article)*, p. 402.

²⁷ Ladányi, *Felsőoktatási politika*, p. 49.

²⁸ Such pragmatic manoeuvres occurred elsewhere: in 1950, restrictions were lifted in Poland for children of the 'working intelligentsia' (in particular the children of schoolteachers), whose co-operation was seen as necessary for the fulfilment of the plan. See Connelly, *Captive university*, p. 239.

²⁹ Sándor Balogh and Sándor Jakab, *The history of Hungary after the Second World War, 1944–1980* (Budapest, 1986), p. 194, qu. in Szélenyi, *Equality by design*, p. 15. On the 1960s retreat, see Von Lazar, 'Class struggle'.

have frequently taken the early Communist rhetoric of exclusion at face value: the middle classes have primarily been presented as ‘demobilized’ victims and the subtleties of their interaction with the Stalinist system have been left unexplored.³⁰ Despite the state’s rhetoric of class warfare, however, the necessity of maintaining bourgeois expertise in the education system meant that the middle classes were given unofficial chances to succeed. The state could not be seen to be openly advancing members of formerly exploiting classes, however. This meant that such opportunities required many members of the old middle class to refashion themselves by ‘erasing’ their bourgeois backgrounds and inventing new ‘class conscious’ versions of their pasts. Some historians have termed this type of system a ‘biocracy’:³¹ one in which an individual’s chances of succeeding were determined by their ability to create a politically acceptable public autobiography (*önéletrajz*). In Communist Hungary these were constructed in curricula vitae and application forms at the point of university entrance and in job applications. Individuals manipulated information about their family or undertook political tasks in order to produce an appropriate version of their life story that would ensure their suitability for advancement in the eyes of the state.

Even some respondents from ‘x-class’ backgrounds were able to refashion themselves into acceptable Communist citizens. Testimony from this project suggested that the Communist state provided social processes through which individuals could ritually cleanse themselves of their class stigma. Those who were defined as ‘x-class’ were expected to employ the most extreme techniques to demonstrate that they were ‘free from contempt for physical labour’ (*nem veti meg a gyerek a fizikai munkát*). This meant practising downward social mobility, such as taking employment in a working-class profession.³² Flóra, for example, was excluded from grammar school as her family were labelled ‘bourgeois’ and ‘clerical’ members of the ‘x-class’. After being expelled, the authorities suggested that if she publicly shed her bourgeois background and worked as a labourer, this would compensate for her poor genealogy and she would be able to return to secondary school. When in 1953 there was a slight political relaxation, she was able to apply for university entrance. However, she judged that she was still negatively perceived by the state, so chose a university less politicized than those in Budapest:

³⁰ See, for example, Hankiss, ‘Demobilization’.

³¹ See Lutz Niethammer, *Biographie und biokratie: nachdenken zu einem westdeutschen oral history-projekt in der DDR fünf Jahre nach der deutschen vereinigung*, Paper presented at the ‘International oral history conference’ (Sao Paulo, 1995); Daniela Koleva, *Between testimony and power: autobiographies in socialist Bulgaria*, Paper presented at the conference ‘Texts of testimony: autobiography, life-story narratives and the public sphere’ (Liverpool, 23–5 Aug. 2001); Galia Valtchinova, ‘Ismail Kadare’s The H-File and the politics of memory’, in Daniela Koleva, ed., *Talking history: papers of the international oral history conference, Kiten, 24–27 Sept. 1999* (Sofia, 2000), pp. 172–83.

³² See Széleányi, *Equality by design*, p. 126. For other examples, see John Madge, *Deprivation experiences in Hungary*, CURPH, BA, Box 30, Folder: Report on deprivation experiences in Hungary, 1945–56.

James: And could you tell me something about your family background?

Flóra: Well, my father was a watchmaker and jeweller in this small town. Before the war he had at least one helper to assist him, but after the war he had none. Nevertheless, because of this particular trade, that's why we were called bourgeois ... I managed to end up with a very good mark at the end [of middle school], and I was expected to continue and go into the local grammar school. But that coincided in Hungary with when children were judged on whom their parents were, what their affiliations were, what strata of society they were associated with, and my family was labelled 'bourgeois' and 'clerical', and with this double burden I was barred from entering grammar school. In fact, I couldn't enter any kind of education after the age of fourteen, and I was absolutely devastated – so was my family. My family tried to do everything, whatever they could. I went and attended private classes with teachers who were first class but couldn't teach any longer because they weren't appropriate for the Communist regime. That went on for about a year, then my family was told that if I do physical labour – let's say two, three, maybe even four years, maybe there is going to be some redemption and then I could go to secondary school. So I tried to work in all sorts of places, but not being used to it, it was pretty daunting. I was working in a paprika mill in my home town, because my home town is very famous for its paprika ... and I became very ill, and somehow that coincided with a slight relaxation of the rules, and I was told, when I recuperated, that I could continue³³ ... Although I came top of my class, I was advised that I had to be very careful when I applied to university, because I might not get into university with this background at all. And, um, therefore I didn't apply for a place in Budapest, because I was absolutely certain that I wouldn't get in, and judging by what happened to some of my contemporaries, who were in a similar position to myself, that was a very wise move. But I applied for a place at the university of Szeged, and I was called for an interview, and, yes, I was accepted. So in 1954 I went up to university in Szeged, studying Hungarian language, literature and history.

Many of those who came from stigmatized 'x-class' backgrounds were not able to throw off their bourgeois heritage through these official channels, and therefore decided to conceal crucial information about their pasts if it was the only way to ensure university admission.³⁴ Interviewees acquired a keen sense of the extent of their biographical liabilities in the eyes of the state and the degree to which their family's past had to be modified. It was a potentially hazardous strategy: any disguise risked discovery and might result in expulsion from higher education. Magda's grandparents were rich landowners, her father was an appeals judge under the Horthy regime and she had been educated in Switzerland. She concealed information about her relatives' occupations but was expelled when her background was uncovered:

James: Did you tell the truth [on your CV]?

Magda: No, no, rather, I should say, I had to [lie]. I didn't write down my family's land or the factory. Because if I had written it down, I would not have been admitted.

³³ This was in 1953 with the introduction of Imre Nagy's 'New Course'.

³⁴ This point is also made in Szelényi, *Equality by design*, p. 126.

It was a common technique that people tried to deny the reality of their pasts, or simply tried very hard to present something in a certain way. There were jokes. There was a person I knew who owned a forest, but he said that he was a forest ranger. A person who was a landowner said that he was a servant (laughs). So there were these jokes in middle-class circles, but this was how it really was.

James: *And did it [lying on your CV] cause you any problems later?*

Magda: That I didn't write those things down, and they found out? Yes. It came out because of the silent system of informers they had, the mass of anonymous reports ... because then after the 1956 trial [of her husband] notes came out and we saw, that there was ... a tip off ... we had no idea who it was and we still don't know ... they found out and they used it to kick me out of university.

Not all respondents from middle-class backgrounds had to resort to these extreme measures. Those whose parents were in intellectual professions such as medicine or teaching, had not held high-ranking posts in the Horthy administration or army, were not considered to have 'reactionary' political views, or had expertise considered potentially useful to the economy, were classified as '*értelmiségi*' (intellectual) rather than 'x-class'. After 1952, the educational opportunities for those defined as 'intellectual' were mixed. On one hand, these students had an expectation of upward mobility. Pál thought that he would be successful even though his father had published illegally and been a member of the freemasons, and Pál himself had tried to escape the country: 'I was "*értelmiségi*" [intellectual] ... I had a file of being a somebody they would have to try to win.' On the other hand, they realized that they were not as favoured as students from worker-peasant backgrounds and that their opportunities might be circumscribed at certain points according to the political climate. Ágnes described the ambiguous way in which 'intellectuals' were treated. Her husband had come from a conservative and deeply anti-Communist family, but despite this he was valued for his technical knowledge and incorporated into the Communist intellectual elite. However, being unwilling to compromise with the state, he did not gain all the advantages that accrued to those who joined the party or came from more favoured social backgrounds:

Ágnes: My husband, he belonged to the young post-war generation. He never joined the party, but I think he was considered part of the technical stratum, a really good specialist. When he worked in the factory, he was able to strike the right note with the workers, and he had a good relationship with his staff, and in an odd way he was considered some sort of outstanding worker ... Basically, they considered him to be a great specialist, and I think it was for this one reason that they kept him on, despite the fact that he didn't sympathize with the Communist regime at all, he didn't agree with it.

James: *Did this cause you problems?*

Ágnes: Perhaps, from a certain point of view, in that those who were party members got higher salaries. They received all sorts of advantages, they could go on holiday, go abroad, their pay was higher, but for us it was much more important that we could look at ourselves in the mirror in the morning.

The strategies used by those from ‘intellectual’ backgrounds to ensure upward mobility were determined by their ambiguous social position, sandwiched between ‘x-class’ and ‘worker-peasant’ students. On one hand, they were not required to resort to extreme forms of reinvention such as practising downward social mobility or joining the party (as x-class students were). Nevertheless, they realized that they would have to develop their public image. The state provided official contexts in which these students could improve their autobiographies through minor displays of loyalty. In 1952, Erzsébet demonstrated her support for the regime by carrying out First Aid ‘community service’ (*társadalmi munka*) as part of the preparation against possible invasion from Tito’s Yugoslavia (the ‘imperialist attack’): ‘So to assist the possibility I did First Aid courses, which at that time was considered as preparation against the imperialist attack. And was taken as a political good point.’ If students refused these activities, they experienced difficulties in gaining university places:

Tamás: So I had great difficulties once, at the end of the second year, when I had my *érettségi* [A-level equivalent]. There were some military barracks they constructed and this secretary [of the Communist Party at his school] was organizing some voluntary labour for us to do in our spare time. I just wanted to concentrate on my studies and get a good grade, and I knew if I didn’t get good grades I wasn’t ‘politically mature’ enough to carry on with my studies. That was my only way to go forward, and I was almost expelled from the school, because I refused to participate in this voluntary work.

Unlike ‘x-class’ students, these respondents did not need to renounce or completely repress their pasts. They were aware, however, that their chances would be improved if they refashioned their family’s history into a suitable format. Many had a keen sense of the acceptable contours of Communist history and developed ways to remould their own life story into politically appropriate versions of the past. Csaba, for example, realized that his true place of birth might create difficulties. Like other respondents who had lived in outlying eastern areas of Hungary which were no longer part of Hungary after the war (students who originally came from northern Transylvania had the same problem), his presence in Hungary might have suggested that his family had fled in the face of the ‘liberating’ Red Army. Not wishing to be seen as a ‘reactionary’ who had sought to escape discovery by Soviet troops, he implied that he had always lived on Hungary’s western border with Austria in Kőszeg:

Csaba: I didn’t lie. I wrote down what my origin was, that I had an *érettségi* [A-level equivalent], things like this. My family environment, my brothers, things like this. There was something sensitive in my CV, which was ridiculous, but it was a sensitive issue. We lived in Ungvár in 1945 when the Russian front came. Ungvár is in the east, it’s now part of Ukraine, and we fled from Ungvár. So I couldn’t write that we fled, because then they asked why ... you fled from the Soviet army. It sounded bad, so I just wrote that I got my *érettségi* in Kőszeg and that was it. I left Ungvár out.

Márton worried that he would not get into university as he had family members who had emigrated to France. Relatives abroad were seen as sources of potential ideological contamination, or as evidence of a family's antipathy towards the regime. He could not hide regular correspondence so therefore reversed the direction of his family's migration, pretending he had come from a French working-class family who had chosen to emigrate to Communist Hungary:

Márton: A correspondence with the Western countries was not taken as a good point. Two siblings of my father lived in France, and during the Rákosi period I got round this by – and this is true – by beginning each autobiography (*önéletrajz*) stating that I came from a French working-class family. Then nobody gave me any difficulties about the fact that I received letters from France, nobody asked me any questions ... it was always a habit with me to begin every autobiography with that.

Whereas the above respondents chose to polish their autobiographies through minor omissions or adjustments, some from intellectual backgrounds sought not to hide their pasts, but to comment on them in such a way as to make them appear sympathetic, useful, or reliable to the regime. Respondents developed 'class conscious' autobiographies which publicly recognized their liabilities, highlighted their biographical assets, and demonstrated fundamental loyalty. Politically or socially stigmatized members of the family were demonized, relatives who had pasts sympathetic to the Communist regime were stressed, and 'intellectual' rather than 'bourgeois' roots were emphasized. Such subtly organized narratives could thus turn ambiguous and often complex backgrounds into politically acceptable biographies. This phenomenon was not confined to the Hungarian middle classes: a study on social mobility in Bulgaria noted that members of the former pre-Communist elite learnt how to demonize members of their families in their public biographies by using sufficiently class conscious language such as 'oppressor' or 'petty-bourgeois philistine'.³⁵ One Hungarian middle-class respondent, Ádám, who had joined the party immediately after the war, reported that if he was prepared openly to present his bourgeois heritage as a liability he was accepted: 'I always started my written CV with the statement that I am from a bourgeois family ... I was never trying to hide my origin ... and they said that, "Ádám, we know about that, and that's alright."'

In some cases, middle-class respondents had internalized these politically acceptable biographical formulas to such an extent that they reproduced them when asked about their family in interviews conducted in the post-Communist period. Fülöp came from a wealthy manufacturing background in Kosice: his family had owned two factories and employed between twenty and thirty people. At the beginning of the interview, when asked about his social background, he marginalized this part of his family's history. He preferred to emphasize his

³⁵ Koleva, *Between testimony and power*, p. 4.

‘intellectual’ roots and presented his father in a light that would have made him a sympathetic figure to the Communist regime:

James: Tell me about your family background.

Fülöp: Can I talk about the origins of my family? It’s important that I do, as mainly because of my parents, before 1956, I could say that I was an intellectual ... my grandfather was the owner of a large joinery business, a large manufacturer. But my father came to Pest to go to the technical university, so he became an intellectual (*értelmiségi*) in Budapest ... In the 1920s my father became an engineer and worked as an employee (*alkalmazott*). Mainly he was employed in a large tram factory, later he was their director of trade. That was up until 1945. From there on our history has been pretty stormy. In 1944 the war began, and the Arrow Cross [the Hungarian Fascist Party] took power. That was when Miklós Horthy and his old bourgeois gang (*régi polgári gamitúra*) were expelled. The far right Arrow Cross took power in the country ... and they took all the country’s factories to bits and sent them westwards from here [i.e. to Nazi Germany]. There was no opposition here, no Soviet troops. [My father] was at that time the top director in the company and he did everything he could to intervene so that ... they didn’t take away the machinery. The factory where he worked wasn’t bombed, so the owner and the company had much to thank him for. Despite this, a charge was brought against him for supporting the Arrow Cross and he was put on trial after the war. It is true that he served them – if you put it in quotation marks – as he was a member of an Arrow Cross factory committee, but he did this at the request of the factory owners to save the firm. Really and truly he saved the factory, but nevertheless he was put on trial as a member of the Arrow Cross ... The real reason for this was that he was their director of trade ... and someone wanted his position ... he was put on trial after the war, but it was not a judicial trial, but a political scrutinizing committee (*igazoló bizottság*) ... which only approved a person if they hadn’t served the far right regime. If they had worked for them, then they had to be removed from their posts. If they had heavily compromised themselves then in that case they went to prison. Now when my father went before the scrutinizing committee he was able to bring out a defence witness who was able to verify that everything he did was in the interests of the firm. There was even a Communist worker who was arrested for concealing weapons in 1944 who testified that he owed his life to my father. Since there had been martial law, the Communist who hid the weapons would probably have been executed, but my father had an acquaintance in the police, who was able to arrange it so that this man was allowed to flee, was set free. So this Communist was really able to thank my father for his life.

His narrative was still shaped by the dictates of Communist ideology. He immediately directed attention away from his upper-middle-class roots to his father’s status as an ‘intellectual’ who was an ‘employee’ rather than an owner. He then used ‘class conscious’ language to demonize the previous regime as that ‘old bourgeois gang’. He might have been expected to avoid the delicate subject of his father’s suspected collaboration with the Hungarian fascist regime in an interview with a British interviewer in post-Communist Hungary. However, it would have been impossible for him to sidestep this subject in a Communist era autobiography,

as his father had been accused of collaboration during the official process of ‘political screening’ which followed the Second World War, and this would have appeared on Fülöp’s personal file. Moreover, his justification for his father’s behaviour was shaped by the post-war Communist adoration of Hungarian Communist anti-fascist resistance: his father could be excused a superficial form of collaboration as he had saved a Communist insurgent. Only by marginalizing his wealthy upper middle-class grandfather in his life story, showing politically conscious attitudes towards Hungarian history, and explaining away the charge against his father, could he maintain his family’s classification as ‘progressive intellectuals’. His self-presentation in the post-Communist period still bore the marks of the way in which he had refashioned himself to gain upward mobility in the early Communist period.

Admission into higher education depended not only on one’s public autobiography, but also on the subject and the university to which the prospective student applied. Decisions about subject and institution might reflect an assessment of one’s biographical liabilities rather than one’s academic interests. Those from negatively defined backgrounds avoided politicized subjects and prestigious institutions and chose courses where expertise was in short supply.³⁶

Humanities courses were considered politically sensitive, both as they contained a considerable amount of Marxist theory, and as they were often preparation for careers (such as journalism or teaching) where class consciousness was deemed particularly important. Lóránt, whose father had been a successful businessman, realized that his background might bar him from these subjects:

Lóránt: I wanted to become a theatrical director, but, for political reasons, that was a totally hopeless ambition of mine. Since I was quite good at, and interested in, the natural sciences, and that appeared to be a more neutral area ... I went to the technical university and I qualified there ... [it] was a great relief, because being at the high school for drama, would have meant, if I had been accepted, it would have meant at least regular lip service to Communist values and ideas, and I don’t think I could have really done it.

Technical subjects associated with the industrial expansion of Stalinist Hungary were frequently a refuge for middle-class people with negatively viewed backgrounds. So many students were required to fill these courses that class-based entrance requirements were difficult to uphold:

James: How did you decide which university to go to?

Fülöp: It was easy enough to get a place for engineering, because the vacancies for engineering had suddenly expanded. In the Rákosi period here, loads of technical

³⁶ Respondents outlined various sources of information about university entrance. Most referred to informal methods such as hearsay, or observed what had happened to students in the year above them. Other interviewees said that their teachers had given them advice about the political suitability of particular subjects or institutions. A brochure (*füzet*) which listed the number of students required by the state in different disciplines was mentioned by only a few respondents.

people were required ... so it was relatively easy to get in. I had a bad letter of reference ... I had been to a church school and I was never a member of the Communist youth movement, so it was not definite, it was just in the hands of the state. I had loads of bad references, but I was very glad when I was admitted.

Respondents also reported that as a member of the old middle class one was less likely to be admitted to university if one studied the same subject as one's parents, since the Communist state was particularly sensitive to the preservation of professional traditions within families. Franciska was stigmatized both because she came from a prosperous middle-class family and because her father had fought in the Hungarian army during the Second World War. She was barred from studying the same subject as her father because the entrance committee had wanted to prevent the establishment of 'dynasties'. However, she still gained a place at university in a similar subject:³⁷

James: So tell me about your decision to go to university.

Franciska: Well, I always wanted to go to university but I wanted to get on to a veterinary course ... And I was told, no, no, no, you can't go there because we don't want to create dynasties of veterinarians. That was the only reason. Because your father is a veterinarian, therefore you cannot be a veterinarian. So I got a place at the agricultural university [instead].

Most middle-class respondents interviewed for this project were able to ensure their own access to higher education. Like their counterparts in Czechoslovakia, their presence at universities was not seriously challenged, even in the early 1950s. Unlike prospective Czechoslovak students, they were faced with a Communist state that had officially decreed their exclusion and set up mechanisms to marginalize them. However, respondents reported that the state interpreted social classifications in very flexible terms; it offered them opportunities to shed previous bourgeois identities, remake themselves and become politically acceptable Communist citizens. Within this system, respondents developed a complex understanding of the extent to which their family background affected their life chances. They in turn developed sophisticated strategies in order to ensure their successful passage into higher education: hiding information about their backgrounds; showing class-conscious attitudes towards politically stigmatized relatives; engaging in minor acts of loyalty and avoiding politicized courses and institutions from which their pasts barred them.

³⁷ CURPH also reported that many students failed to get their first choice of subject (usually owing to strict quotas insisted on in the plan). Of the Hungarian émigrés they interviewed in the United States, only 43 per cent of students from all classes obtained a university place for their first choice subject prior to 1956. This figure does not include all those students who had rejected their first choice of subject even prior to application as they realized their ambitions were not compatible with the requirements of the Communist state; see Murray, *Higher education (report)*, p. 23.

III

There has been little interest from either historians or social scientists in the way in which the former Hungarian middle class were altered by the experience of Communism. In part, this has been due to the assumption that, as victims of discrimination, they withdrew into 'internal exile' and maintained pre-Communist values in private settings.³⁸ Yet the middle class did not just withdraw; their desire for social betterment combined with the state's need for their expertise placed them at the centre of the Stalinist modernization of Hungary. The discovery that many were indeed successful raises the question of the extent to which individuals were forced by such achievements to rethink their identities as Communist citizens. Recent studies have highlighted the ways in which, for other social groups, involvement in the Communist system had a major impact on self-perception and personal identity.³⁹ There has been virtually no work, however, on how the experience of Communism affected the outlook of officially marginalized groups.

This section will analyse the personae that respondents adopted in order to make sense of, or make bearable to themselves, their experience of upward mobility in the early Communist period.⁴⁰ It will analyse how they fashioned acceptable stories both about the opportunities the state had presented to them and their responses to those offers. These narratives were frequently ambiguous or misleading; successful careerists would categorize themselves as victims whilst those who were discriminated against characterized themselves as being 'needed' by the Communist state. Such apparent contradictions are key to understanding the ways in which the middle class came to terms with their own achievements after 1948.

For most conservative and Catholic respondents, social mobility was a *moral* issue, as it required an engagement with a regime which they considered an illegitimate, un-Hungarian, and foreign imposition. Some therefore preferred to preserve an identity as a marginalized victim, rather than morally contaminate

³⁸ See Széclényi et al., *Socialist entrepreneurs*, ch. 7. He argues that 'bourgeois values' had been stationed in 'parking orbits' during the Stalinist period, ready to emerge unscathed at a point of political and economic liberalization. See also Gáti and Horváth, 'A középosztály'.

³⁹ Earlier 'totalitarian' writers have assumed that the average Communist citizen wore a public mask of compliance whilst maintaining their 'true feelings' only in private. Rejecting this simplistic division, social historians since the end of the Cold War have investigated the way in which the experience of Communism altered groups' value systems and identities. Most of the best work has been done on the Soviet Union. See, for example, Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic mountain: Stalinism as a civilisation* (Berkeley, 1995), and Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., *Stalinism: new directions* (London, 2000).

⁴⁰ It was difficult to assess the extent to which the presence of a young western researcher from a British university would affect the testimony given by interviewees. As a foreigner, respondents gave me considerable detail about their experiences, since they assumed a low level of knowledge about Hungarian history. However, it is likely that the narratives they gave were similar to those they might have given to others in their own society. First, interviews were as unstructured as possible, in order to allow interviewees to frame responses to questions in their own terms. Secondly, the structure of respondents' responses often suggested that they were not answering my question directly, but engaging with their own agenda, or a debate current in their society, of which my question had merely reminded them.

themselves through an attempt at educational or professional advancement. Ildikó was offered a place at the Marxist-Leninist university but asserted that nobody who was a 'real Catholic' could attend such an ideological institution. She preferred to present herself as an anti-Communist martyr, rejecting opportunities the state presented to her and enduring poverty to maintain her integrity. Eventually, when she reconsidered her options and decided to attend evening university, she characterized all her fellow students as collaborators with the system:

James: So do you remember, at that time, why you said no to the Marxist-Leninist university?

Ildikó: Of course, of course, because I hated them. So that's why. Listen, nobody who was a real Catholic could accept that. And then when I got to this evening university I realized – later on – that all the people who came with me, 80 per cent of them, came from the ÁVO [Communist state security service] ... one of them was very cruel and hit people in the eye [during torture], and that was a 'nice colleague of mine' (said sarcastically), but I only knew that afterwards, after 1990. So, what else can I say about why I said no to Marxism-Leninism?

James: Was it an opportunity or a temptation?

Ildikó: No, never. Never. I said, 'No,' and then they wanted to get me into the ÁVO. You could say no, I could always survive. Even when my father died. But when my father was alive, he was on a *segédmunkás* (unskilled worker's) salary, and he could always get *zsíroskenyér* (bread and dripping).

Despite this fear of moral contamination, many of these respondents did decide to attend university. However, they constructed the story of their upward mobility in such a way as to explain away the ethical implications of the compromises they had made to ensure their success. Erzsébet's family were Catholic, conservative, and connected with the previous regime; her father had held a high-ranking post in the ministry of education until being sacked for refusing to join the Hungarian Workers' Party:

Erzsébet: I tr[ie]d to gain good points in other directions which didn't conflict with my conscience, like, for example, to hope for university entrance, if you came from a so-called middle-class family, that was out of the question. It didn't matter how well you had done in your exams, or generally in your schooling, to become a university student was almost impossible. So to assist the possibility I did First Aid courses, which at that time was considered as preparation against the imperialist attack. And was taken as a political good point. For me it was part of the preparation for university as I was heading for medical school anyway. So it was an easy way of gaining so-called political good points without actually being political. And so I became an instructor in First Aid and that was definitely counted. When I finished school with a gold medal, that alone would not have allowed me university entry, [but] added to it my First Aid courses, and at that time my father lost his job and I became a working-class girl. So ...

James: So how did that work?

Erzsébet: Simply because the questionnaire for university entry, amongst other personal details, asked for occupation of father, and in all honesty I could write down labourer. They didn't ask who he was, just who he is. So immediately I became

a member of the proletariat (laughs). And with good results at school, First Aid, I got the largest university scholarship, not just a university place.

Like many conservative respondents, her story was often paradoxical; no matter how much success she achieved, her self-identity remained that of victim. She began her narrative by highlighting the complete exclusion she was bound to suffer, claiming that it was impossible for her to go to university as a member of the former middle class. However, her narrative quickly undercut this initial assertion; she described not only how she had got to university, but how she obtained the largest scholarship in her year.

This contradiction should alert us to the importance of victimhood as an identity for this group. Erzsébet presented herself in this way as it helped to explain away the concessions she had made to the state. She began her narrative by explaining that she was forced into making compromises only because she was otherwise doomed to exclusion. As a victim, she was relieving herself of ethical responsibility for her own actions. The remainder of her narrative reinforced this point; her account was an attempt to explain how the concessions she had made did not taint her ('didn't conflict with my conscience'). For example, it was important for her to maintain a distinction between morally acceptable and unacceptable forms of compromise. Despite the fact that she gained a gold medal for 'community service' and admitted that this helped her, she emphasized that it was not a political decision but 'an easy way of gaining so called political good points without being actually political'. It was true that this type of social activity (*társadalmi munka* or 'community service'⁴¹) did not require individuals to carry out explicitly political work on behalf of the regime. Respondents knew, however, that it was a method of demonstrating loyalty towards the system. She therefore needed to assert that it was a natural choice as she was 'going to medical school anyway'. Even when involved in clearly politicized activities, she needed to deny that they had tainted her. Only as an apolitical victim, forced by virtue of her excluded position to make compromises with the state, could she find an identity that made her experience of success morally manageable.

Stories of victimhood dominated conservative testimony. Certainly, they had multiple languages of persecution on which to draw to construct their life stories. They were repeatedly told they would be victims in the anti-bourgeois rhetoric of the Communist state (especially prior to the early 1960s) and experienced discrimination in many other areas of their lives. They later became celebrated for surviving marginalization in anti-Communist nationalist rhetoric after 1989. Yet we should not take these victim stories, which have often been used as evidence for the Communist state's capacity to persecute and exclude, at face value. These narratives do not provide evidence of the state's power, but rather illustrate individuals' attitudes and responses to that power. Conservatives drew on the

⁴¹ For other examples of community service, see Ladányi, *Rétegződés és szelekció*, p. 119.

identity of victim in order to come to terms with the moral implications of their success at upward mobility.

Other middle-class respondents constructed very different stories about how they had achieved success. These rejected the idea that upward mobility under Communism was a problematic ethical issue. They did not associate their professional achievements with assisting an immoral foreign regime (even though many disliked Soviet influence in their country). Rather, they valued their role in rebuilding Hungary after the war and in modernizing the country, regardless of the power structures that surrounded them. Many of these respondents understood their experience of social mobility as ‘being needed’ and found meaning in their social usefulness. These included a number of respondents who had joined the party. However, they also included those who disliked the Hungarian Workers’ Party but identified with the leftist language of collective national rebuilding.⁴²

Krisztina was Jewish and left-leaning in her politics. She disliked the Hungarian Workers’ Party itself, but identified with their anti-fascist rhetoric and considered them less anti-Semitic than other post-war political groups. However, she was officially stigmatized after 1948 as her father had been a director of the timber section of the Austro-Hungarian bank and her mother had worked in the stock exchange:

Krisztina: I learnt German, French, English, art appreciation and went to the best school in Budapest, and the idea was I would go to a finishing school in Switzerland. We had a cook and a maid. But my husband’s family had a cook and two maids!

James: *So how did the Communists describe your family?*

Krisztina: Very badly ... capitalists.

Despite the fact that she was stigmatized owing to her rich upper-middle-class background, she never presented herself as a victim. Rather, she recognized that despite official rhetoric, her skills made her necessary for the new economy. Moreover, ‘being needed’ provided her with an identity with which she was comfortable:

James: *So how did the Communist state describe you?*

Krisztina: Me? They had very few people who could speak three languages. They needed them. And I had a very good job, because my boss couldn’t speak any [other languages], only Hungarian, so I was needed.

⁴² Others scholars have noted that the generation who were socialized by the Communist state in the 1940s and 1950s often identified with the notion of collective solidarity and post-war rebuilding, even if they disliked their local Communist party. By contrast, the younger generation socialized in the 1960s and 1970s absorbed western ideas about individual identity and expression which undermined the Communist state’s ability to construct collective solidarities. See, for example, Anna Rotkirsch, *The man question: loves and lives in late 20th century Russia*. University of Helsinki – Department of Social Policy Research Reports (Helsinki, 2000).

In contrast to conservatives, there was a constant tension in these life stories between the desire to 'be needed' and the actual experiences of discrimination these respondents endured as members of an officially unwanted class. Benedek was a Communist Party member who wanted to integrate himself into the intellectual elite. He was shocked when he was twice excluded from scholarships because of his class background and his association with those implicated in the Rajk show trial.⁴³ Rather than use experiences of discrimination to present himself as a 'victim', he instead clung to the expectation he would be 'accepted':

Benedek: I went to the technical university in Budapest for one year to do electrical engineering, and I was nominated to go to the Soviet Union. In 1949, when the Rajk show trial came, as a result of the Rajk process, they eliminated all unreliable elements. As I was of non-proletarian origin, I was sent away ... I was excluded first in '49 from going to the Soviet Union, for the second time in '54. So this rejection obviously psychologically created this sort of thing that, as a very faithful Marxist ... if you're not accepted then you begin to wonder who is accepted.

Even when these respondents were persecuted, they did not take refuge in the identity of victim, but rather found ways to reconcile their suffering with the sense of being needed. Krisztina was imprisoned for attempting to leave the country. Instead of using the experience to bear witness to the exclusion of the former middle class, she described the prison as a 'marvellous bed and breakfast'. She had been able to manipulate the prison authorities who had always 'needed' her:

Krisztina: We were in that marvellous bed and breakfast place (laughs), and the military commander says, we were in cells, and he said, 'is there anybody who can cook for thirty people?' and I said, 'I can cook for thirty people.' 'Alright, you come with us.' And I said, 'before I start cooking I want a shower'. You had only so much water a day for washing. They said, 'alright, there is a shower in here, you can have a shower'. And I said to the soldier, I said to him, 'would you be so kind and go to the cell where I came from and bring down my husband's shirts and I will wash them while I have a shower?' They accepted that. So we were clean. And I cooked. I think nobody could eat my cooking (laughs). Because I was brought up as a princess. I didn't have to do anything because I had servants. Then the head of that institution came down and said, 'I see that you can type and you have shorthand and you are a secretary.' And I said, 'I used to be, but lately I've become a cook.' And he said, 'you won't be a cook because I need a secretary and you come up and you work for me'. So I worked for a week as his secretary, and on perhaps the third day he said to me, 'I have deported your husband.' I said, 'you wouldn't do that to me – to deport my husband to another prison and I can't say goodbye to him'. 'Yes, I deported him.' And I was taken back to my cell and my husband was sitting there. They gave us a cell for the two of us as a reward because I was a good secretary.

⁴³ In 1949, László Rajk, the former Communist minister of the interior, was arrested, put on trial, and then executed.

Through these descriptions of interactions with authority figures, Krisztina revealed her particular construction of Communist power. For her, the prison was not a symbol of oppression but a space in which she was needed as a cook and secretary. Whereas some would have seen such activities inside prison as a form of collaboration, for Krisztina it was a way she could be of use to the state in return for occasional rewards. She rejected the notion that she was a victim. She employed the cliché of the unpredictable totalitarian state common in conservative testimony, reporting the commander's comment that he had arbitrarily deported her husband. However, she then undermined this victim narrative, revealing that she was in fact rewarded for her labours with a conjugal cell. For Krisztina, co-operating was not a form of moral compromise. Rather, it was a legitimate kind of behaviour in a society which she believed still needed her, even whilst it persecuted her.

A further group of respondents, mainly from liberal backgrounds, viewed their social mobility as the result of an unspoken bargain between the old middle class and the state: they would be allowed limited educational and workplace opportunities as long as they confined themselves to narrow professional ambitions and remained politically inactive. They therefore rejected both the identities of victimhood and being needed. Rather, they saw themselves as merely 'tolerated' (*megtűrt*):

James: How did the Communist regime describe your social position?

Anna: We were a borderline case. We weren't 'enemies of people'; they tolerated us (*megtűrték*).

It is true that during the early Communist period many from the old middle class experienced both opportunities and discrimination as 'borderline cases'. However, it was only this group who used this story to make sense of their experience of upward mobility. They drew on this narrative as, unlike conservatives, they did not see all compromises with the state, and minor displays of loyalty that ensured their professional status, as morally degrading. Rather, the concessions they made were an acceptable consequence of this silent bargain between state and the old bourgeoisie. Csaba, for example, entered into what he saw as an unspoken agreement with the Communist state, in which, in return for being tolerated, he would refrain from public dissent. As an artist, this had required him to desist from making explicitly political statements; instead, he took up the role of the technically proficient craftsman:

James: Were there things in your past which you wanted to keep secret from the Communists?

Csaba: Of course, I didn't brag about going to a church school, I didn't brag about it, but of course they knew, because they knew everything about everyone, but I didn't make that or myself conspicuous. They made me feel that if I stayed quiet and I behaved myself, then things would be alright. They would tolerate me. In a sense, this attested to their tolerant treatment of me, but despite this, I had to stay silent. Now I trained as a painter, an artist, but I was not used for propaganda and it was not a career where a person had to say a lot, but rather did his craft. It wasn't

really difficult to always play the craftsman. I didn't take part in the life of the party, nor did I take part in any sort of movement, but there were obligatory things. The May 1st parade was obligatory during my university years.

However, there were ethical limits to the strategies these respondents were prepared to adopt to achieve their success. For conservatives, any act of compromise was seen as morally degrading. Liberals, however, were prepared to co-operate with the state, but only within certain moral boundaries. Defining acceptable levels of compromise was therefore an important feature of their narratives of upward mobility. Csaba (above) was prepared to display a superficial loyalty, but it was also necessary for him to indicate the limit of his deference; he had been prepared to attend parades, but he would not take part in the life of the party or 'any sort of movement'. In the next quotation, Fülöp admitted that he was prepared to be seen at May Day marches in order to keep his university place. However, by describing his quick exit from the ranks, he sought to demonstrate how perfunctory his obedience was:

Fülöp: There were times when I went on the parade, there were times when I didn't. I should mention a nice episode. The first time I am sure I marched was when I was glad that I had been admitted to university and I didn't want to get a bad mark against my name. That was May 1st 1952. We left the university, everybody holding a banner in their hands, or a red flag, or the national colours ... I was very annoyed, because I knew that if you were holding a flag it was impossible to leave the procession, because it would be very suspicious if you disappeared down a side street ... However, by a lucky accident, I was able to escape from the procession because we marched down a small alley and there was a toilet with an open door. And I went in with the intention of leaving the flag there and going out. That was a lovely moment, as when I went in, there were already a load of other banners there, so I wasn't the first person who had gone into the toilet with a flag and came out through another door without one. Having left my flag behind, I disappeared into a side street.

IV

By the early 1950s, the Communist state recognized that it needed the expertise of the former middle class. However, it could not openly admit ideologically unacceptable social groups into the new elite. Respondents realized that the state was prepared to offer them the chance of advancement within the system only as long as they were prepared to present themselves as committed Communist citizens. They developed a variety of strategies to ensure their success: practising downward social mobility to become 'working class', remoulding their family histories or acting out displays of loyalty.

Respondents' testimonies refuted the idea that the middle class withdrew into private settings and emerged in 1989 unscathed by Communism: rather they were co-opted into the modernization of Hungary and they entered into a dynamic interaction with the new state that forced them to decide what sort of Communist

citizens they wished to be. They were given chances to gain upward mobility and many succeeded. As a result they were forced to come to terms with the fact that a system that discriminated against them (and that many disliked ideologically) had nevertheless provided them with opportunities and achievements.

In examining these stories of successful social mobility, this article has challenged the idea that descriptions of victimhood, 'being needed' or 'being tolerated', actually illustrated the state's power to exclude individuals from, or co-opt groups into, the new elite. Far from being objective accounts 'from below', they were manifestations of the identities which middle-class respondents took on in order to explain their experience of success in the Communist system in a way that was acceptable to themselves. Thus, party members and left-leaning respondents testified to their 'being needed' (even when they had also experienced exclusion and marginalization) because they wanted to think they had played a part in the collective rebuilding of Hungary after the war. Where respondents testified to their status as victims of the system they were seldom simply victims, since many were given opportunities for advancement. Rather, they chose victimhood to explain away the awkward moral implications of the compromises they had made to achieve their successes in the early Communist period.