

Pass it on...

The challenges of passing on ethnic identity to the next generation: A look at the Hungarian American community

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According to U.S. Census data, every 10-year cycle, fewer 2nd and 3rd generation Hungarians claim their ethnic identity. From 1990 to 2000, the number of people claiming Hungarian ancestry fell by more than 200,000, reducing the Hungarian American population to 1.4 Million. At this rate of decline, the Hungarian American community is in danger of disappearing altogether within the next few generations.

When we examine what leads to this disturbing trend, it is clear that a combination of complex factors - some community related, some environmental - are to blame.

For example, statistics show that fewer Hungarians are teaching Hungarian to their Hungarian American children. ***According to the 2000 Census data, only 7% of Hungarian parents teach their children the language in the U.S.*** (100,000 of 1.4 million) This is important because language skills are often seen as a primary predictor of the development of strong, long-term ethnic ties.

In addition, in all ethnic communities, the further one gets away from the first immigrants, the weaker the ethnic tie becomes unless the family makes ethnicity an integral part of daily life and repeatedly exposes young people to direct ethnic experiences that are reinforced. This is becoming rare.

There are also environmental factors to consider. Whereas in the 20th century, Hungarian American communities were often created easily around a job – like a mine - or based on a new wave of immigration, today presents a much different reality. In addition, as Hungarian Americans became more financially successful they often moved out of the old neighborhood and into a new community. This meant that both communities and families that were once closely linked to one another were now separated.

A number of other factors have also contributed to the dilution of ethnicity:

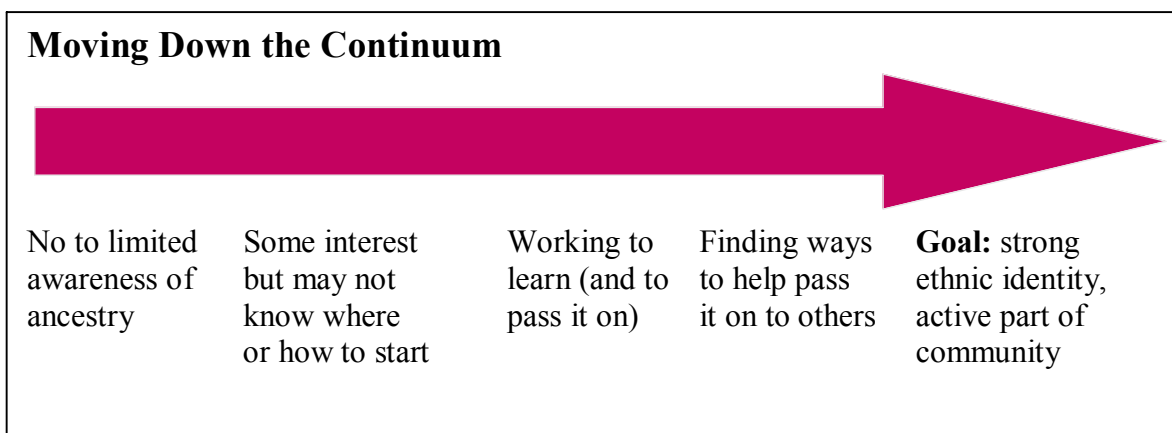
- family members (often the first immigrants) pass away,
- marriage to non-Hungarians (who are interested in passing on their own roots),
- lack of local community or institution (ex: church, Scouts, school),
- limited time, energy and money for the family to focus on this as a priority,
- a shortage of educational tools and/or approaches to engage the young generation,
- and a failure to effectively utilize new channels of communication.

Although there are programs around the country to help cultivate and maintain Hungarian ethnicity – the Hungarian Scouts is one excellent example – many of them focus on Hungarian Americans who already have Hungarian language skills. This leaves a large part of our population untouched, and therefore at risk of being lost to the community. In addition, finding Hungarian Americans who are not affiliated with a local community has become like finding a needle in a haystack. We have our work cut out for us. The goal of the *Pass It On...* project is to create ways to reach this under-served and disconnected portion of our community and find ways to reverse this trend.

Goals of the project

Expose...Educate...Engage...Evolve...

Through the *Pass it On...* project, we hope to identify ways to reach the youth and connect / re-connect 2nd and 3rd generation Hungarians with their ethnic background to strengthen ties to their ethnicity (so they too will pass it on...). This entails identifying “at-risk” members of the community and engaging them in learning about their ethnicity, thereby moving them down the continuum.



In order to accomplish this task, there are several smaller issues we need to address:

- 1) Determine what comprises ethnic identity
- 2) Determine the most effective ways to strengthen ethnicity
- 3) Identify some “at-risk” groups to target within the community
- 4) Create new ways to reach out to the community...especially the youth
- 5) Look at existing programs we can model (both within the Hungarian community and in other ethnic groups)
- 6) Get the entire community involved in a high-level awareness campaign

1) What comprises ethnic identity?

Ethnic identity is loosely defined as a connection to a country, a shared history and culture. Although there are a number of factors that can define ethnic identity or ethnicity, I have focused on 4 major and 2 additional factors for *Pass it on...*

Language

- Language is often seen as a primary indicator of ethnicity

For Hungarians, our language is an especially strong bond due to the uniqueness and complexity of the language. It can also act as an inhibitor to reaching the community because lack of Hungarian knowledge often prevents people from attending programs.

Culture

- Art, dance, music, literature, folk art

Since language skills are not required to enjoy many cultural programs, this is a vital component to the success of this project. Hungarian cultural programs are a wonderful way to build pride and connect with someone who may have lost touch with his/her Hungarian roots. In addition, music, folk-dancing and art, in particular, are easy ways to start exposing very young children to their culture.

History

- Understanding and having pride in Hungarian history (the Revolution of 1956)
- Stories passed on through families, legends (the women of Eger)
- Stories, legend, myth, song (Janos Vitez)

To reach the Hungarian American community, it is important to teach not only Hungarian history, but also Hungarian-American history. Without strong ties, it is unlikely that a teenager will be interested in hearing how St. Stephen brought Christianity to Hungary, but he may be interested to hear about the Darr Mine disaster in Pennsylvania or the events of the 1956 Revolution and how 35,000 Hungarians came to live in America as a result. If we can get them interested in Hungarian American history, Hungarian history is just one more step down the continuum.

Religion

- Common traditions, shared characteristics, similar behavior
- Membership in a Hungarian church

According to the old Hungarian expression “a templom es az iskola,” other than the family, the source of Hungarian identity springs from church and school. It is no accident that the strongest areas of Hungarian community have churches as part of their infrastructure. The question becomes, in communities where no church exists, how can we duplicate at least some of what is provided by the school and church in this area?

2 important, additional factors...

Family traditions / Hungarian traditions

- Holidays (how do they differ from American holiday traditions)
- Experience, exposure, heritage (what you're handed down)

Family traditions and Hungarian holiday traditions are an important way to pass on culture and history to the next generation. Despite some of the challenges that may be faced later (such as marriage to a non-Hungarian, limited community involvement, etc) exposing children at a young age and repeating it over time – for example, Mikulas on 12/6 and locsolas on Easter - can form a lasting impression that is likely to be passed on to the next generation with little effort.

Food / Gastronomy

- Memory of Nagymami cooking nokedli in the kitchen
- Special family recipes
- Community cooking classes

Food is more than just nourishment. It can connect families, generations, and communities and can be the center of a powerful multi-generational experience if Mom and Nagymami are teaching their daughter / granddaughter how to make beigli or palacsinta for Christmas. Cooking together or passing on recipes allows family to pass on culture and traditions from one generation to the next through the memorable aromas and unique ethnic tastes that are discovered...not to mention the fun in the kitchen. This should not be underestimated as an important and effective way to connect or reconnect people to their Hungarian background.

2) Strengthening components of ethnic identity

In order to strengthen ethnic ties, we must do more than just expose Hungarian Americans, but find ways to reinforce the lessons and continue to move people down the continuum. The following is a list of ways to strengthen ethnic ties and build on the initial first step in this process.

Direct involvement

- Traveling to Hungary and surrounding region
- Speaking the language consistently at home
- Having a consistent source of Hungarian information and influence

Community infrastructure

- Cserkesz troop (Hungarian curriculum and community)
- Church
- Hungarian school
- Local Hungarian organizations (civic, religious, educational)

Consistent exposure

- Various educational tools and experiences

- Community or family reinforcement
- Local radio shows (where available)
- Hungarian American newspapers (LA, Chicago)
- Hungarian books, concerts, poems translated into English
- Encourage Hungarian American students to research and write about Hungarian topics in school

Reinforcement

- Family members
- Local organizations
- Nationwide organizations
- International events

If no formal community exists to provide infrastructure and reinforcement, we must find ways to help Hungarian Americans create their own.

3) Targeting “at-risk” communities

The following is a list of 3 communities I propose we focus on to help reverse the trend and bring Hungarian Americans back into the community.

2nd generation Hungarian-Americans (who do not speak the language)

- Build on traditions
 - Holidays, Grandmother’s recipes
- Educate parents along with their kids
 - Multi-generational tools & activities
- Create easy ways to help parents pass it on to their children
 - Hungarian cookbook with kids, festivals for the whole family, playgroups, kids school, weekend school or programs

Young 3rd generation Hungarian-Americans (Toddlers to teens)

- Expose them from a young age
 - Coloring books, videos, weekend Hungarian school, Playgroups
- Use tools and new media they are interested in
 - Games, community websites, comic books, trading cards, etc
- Find ways to directly expose them
 - Travel to Hungary (with parents), participate in organized programs in Hungary, visit Hungarian museums where available, attend Itt Ott, Magyar Tanya, local festivals

Non-Hungarian spouses

- Find ways to engage them, involve them in the community
 - English-language programming and resources
 - Awarding “Hungarian by Osmosis,” or “Most Supportive Spouse,” or “Honorary Huszar” awards to make them feel part of the community

4) Create new ways to reach out to the young community

To reach the youngest generation of Hungarian Americans, we must utilize effective communication tools and create new educational materials to reach them. I propose we use multimedia tools and create a virtual community site. Not only does this provide a welcome forum to speak to them in their “own language,” but it also allows us to reach many more Hungarian Americans, who may live where no formal Hungarian community exists. The following is a brief description of four projects we are currently undertaking: a community website and three educational tools.

Hungarian American Community Site

www.TheGulyasPot.com

Establish a community website through the Hungarian American Coalition (HAC) to: present information on all organizations in one place (respected resource), collect local Hungarian American history (involving many people and organizations) and allow a networking site dedicated to our community.

By working with local representatives of all HAC member organizations, our goal with www.TheGulyasPot.com is to create a site where: important resource material is posted, users create some of the content (such as the Hungarian American history project) and also have a space for their own social networking (similar to a Hungarian American Facebook or MySpace).

Depending on who makes the gulyas, this soup or stew has many different ingredients, but it is always associated with Hungary. By using the name, the Gulyas Pot, we convey a sense of fun but also accomplish an educational goal by teaching Hungarian Americans the correct spelling and pronunciation of this traditional Hungarian dish.

Multi-generational Educational Tools

While the community website above creates a virtual community, the goal of the multi-generational teaching tools below is to create a mini-community within the family. If 2nd generation mothers are learning along with their young 3rd generation kids, a shared (and oftentimes, repeated) learning experience can form a lasting impression for both generations. When the Hungarian grandparents come in for a visit, a different learning experience will occur as each generation has different stories to share. This is all about planting the seeds but also finding ways to reinforce the lessons across generations...without a formal community, this is one approach to consider.

“Kis Majom” DVD (Lauer Learning)

Create a DVD that introduces basic language and concepts (alphabet, numbers, words) through poetry, music, artwork, puppetry and entertains through puppet skits, making of musical instruments, digital images, comedy, pictures, etc. An activity guide will also be included so that parents and grandparents can interact with their children on the same themes and topics and reinforce the teachings from Kis Majom. (This concept is based on the Baby Einstein series.)

“ABCs and 123s of Hungary” book (Lauer Learning)

Introduce kids (along with their parents) to Hungarian traditions (ex: Mikulas, Husveti locsolas, stb), favorite Hungarian tales and songs, and at the same time, teach the alphabet, numbers 1-10, colors and shapes. Each page of the book will have educational nuggets for children of various ages. For example, while young children learn shapes and colors on a particular page, older kids will learn to tell time and be able to recognize a Munkacsy painting in the background. Additional educational reference material will be available in the back for kids and parents who wish to learn more.

Multi-generational Cookbook for Kids (Lauer Learning)

Create a Hungarian cookbook that involves the entire family with making traditional foods. Throughout the recipes, there will be small educational nuggets, like the story of paprika, why people ate lard in the 50s, etc. We'll also include a place for people to insert special recipes and family favorites to make this book their own.

5) Examples in Hungarian American Community we can build on...

There are many successful programs already in existence that help reach our community in different ways. This is by no means a comprehensive list, but a beginning. Please share any other relevant examples you may know about.

Cserkeszet / Hungarian Scout Association – year-long programs focused on language, history and culture (focus on Hungarian language)

- Summer Scout camp, Hungarian curriculum, local community projects
- Membership Numbers - Worldwide – 4,000, US – 2,000
- Largest hubs are Cleveland, OH, NJ and NY, and Los Angeles, CA
- Denver, CO – parents just created a new troop for their kids. To reach further into the community, they are also sponsoring bilingual programs for English-speaking kids to be offered alongside the traditional Scout program for Hungarian speakers.

Minnesota Community

The small but active Minnesota community creates good tools like a coloring book to teach young kids about Easter traditions. In addition, a group of 2nd generation Hungarian Americans in “mixed” marriages created a Kids Club, where playful educational activities are created for young kids to learn some Hungarian, folk songs, etc.

Students without Boundaries (Toronto, Canada), Honismereti Tabor (Rakoczi Foundation)

- 150 teens (all Hungarians living beyond borders), 15 teachers (program alums)
- To date, 1,500 teens have gone through program
- 10-day-long trip, 3 centers within Hungary – rotate locations
- Budget is approximately \$100,000
- application process – 3-5 page essays, advertised in local papers
- Last few years, the Hungarian government also helped support this project

NOTE: There are other programs that involve tours of Hungary and the region.

Itt Ott (MBK)

A 35-year-old, multi-generational tradition consisting of a week-long summer program in Lake Hope, Ohio, which focuses on Hungarian culture and current events, a tabortuz (campfire), some English-language programs, a week-long children's program and church services.

Magyar Tanya (PA)

- Started by 10 families who pooled their resources
- Physical location consists of a large house, pond, pool, hotel rooms, ballroom, kitchen (outdoor and indoor), etc.
- Work in English wherever they can - Hungarian day in July, newsletter in English
- Poetry night, 1848 and 1956 Commemorations all in Hungarian

Hungarian Heritage Experience Summer Camp (William Penn)

- One week in August (2nd week) at a college campus near Somerset, PA
- Tuition charged, but minimal
- Used to be focused on language, now it's more focused on culture
- Trying to actively recruit more young people to attend

Hungarian Sunday Schools

These programs are scattered throughout the US. They oftentimes create their own educational materials and will sometimes offer English-language programming for non-Hungarian speakers.

Hungarian Museums

- Cleveland Hungarian Heritage Museum – hosts a lecture series about Hungarian topics and historical characters, they also just announced an interactive learning program that includes gathering folklore and preserving it through oral history interviews posted to their website
- Other Hungarian Museums are located in Passaic, and New Brunswick, NJ

American Hungarian Foundation (Gus Molnar, New Brunswick, NJ)

- Hungarian Heritage Museum (exhibits, educational programs)
- large and successful fund-raising operation
- Recognizes Hungarian American leadership by presenting the annual George Washington and Lincoln Awards

Program Examples from Other Cultures

In an effort to gather research on the best practices in passing on ethnicity, we are also gathering effective examples from other cultures that we may be able to replicate within our community. Please share any examples you may have.

In researching this topic, two sets of examples stood out. One concept is to create a weeklong celebration in a central location, and provide people the opportunity to celebrate every major holiday in person, as a group, over the course of that week. For example, a 10-day Jewish camp held in Szarvas, Hungary, provides teens from all around the world religious and cultural instruction. Every day is a different holiday. Another example, the Plum Village, is an annual weeklong camp organized in France for Vietnamese people living across Europe. It is an opportunity to come together and celebrate every major holiday in person and learn about Vietnamese culture, language, history and traditions.

Another interesting idea is the creation of a school to keep an ethnic community united. There are two recent examples of this in the Arlington, VA area – one for the Bolivian community, the other for Mongolians. Both are tuition based and offer classes on the weekends to teach about the sites, sounds and customs of their countries. They are parent organized and family focused. The Bolivian school (which has 150 students) has recently expanded course offerings to include parenting classes, leadership training and college prep for any Latin American students. Its goals are to keep families united through language and to boost literacy and achievement.

6) Get the entire Hungarian American Community involved in a high-level awareness campaign

Building on the worldwide exposure Hungary and local Hungarian American communities received for last year's 50th anniversary of the 1956 Revolution, we can continue to keep Hungary and our ethnicity in the spotlight. Here are a few examples of upcoming programs/events we can all build upon in our local communities:

- 2007 – Completed survey of Hungarian American Community
- 2009 - Year of Hungarian Culture in the U.S.
- 2010 – Pecs will be the Cultural Capital of Europe
- 2012 – Hungary will be President of EU

This is important because if we can keep Hungary in the news across the U.S., we may inspire Hungarian Americans who are not affiliated with a local community to join us.

Call to Action

This paper presents many different ideas that we as a community must begin thinking about in earnest if we hope to reverse the trend and reclaim lost Hungarian Americans. As a community, we must find ways to work together to pool resources, identify best practices, find new ways to reach out to Hungarian Americans of all ages and re-energize some programs and community members. This will be a long-term battle to connect and reconnect lost segments of the Hungarian American community, but one that we must wage and we must win. The Hungarian Americans will only survive if 2nd and 3rd generation Hungarian Americans connect and identify with their rich and wonderful Hungarian culture. It is up to us to make sure this happens.

Please feel free to visit www.thegulyaspot.com and make any suggestions or participate in whatever way you can as we work together to pass it on...

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