

Children Don't Like Eating What They're Supposed to Eat... A Study of Public Catering for Children in Hungary from a Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Childhood nutrition is an important element of lifestyle research, since the regularity and nutritional content of our meals as children, and the way in which they are eaten, determine our physical and mental health throughout our lives. Prior to 2018, there was no basic interdisciplinary research on this topic in Hungary, thus to fill the gap, an interdisciplinary research group was established in 2018 at the Institute of Ethnography, which carried out nationwide research. The present study is based on fieldwork undertaken by the author in two schools — the János Lenkey Primary School in Eger (formerly Primary School No. 1) and the Tamás Bolyki Primary School in Ózd — as well as a large amount of information gleaned from questionnaires and interviews. My research was also extended in terms of a historical and geographical perspective: I studied archival sources and expanded the field of my investigations by including Salgótarján, a research location familiar from my earlier research, which provided a vantage point alongside Ózd and Eger, as a third city typical of Northern Hungary. Public catering for children has undergone significant changes in the last six to seven years, although prior to this it had appeared relatively uniform, in line with the ingredients available at the time. The obligation to provide public catering and the general obligation to work, which began in the Rákosi era and culminated in the Kádár era, significantly changed family eating habits. Traditional elements typical of a particular locality disappeared as the globalization efforts of socialism were accomplished. The ever-decreasing amount of time devoted to preparing, cooking, and consuming food moved society in the direction of canteens, fast-food restaurants, and later, after the regime change, global fast-food chains. Education on proper nutrition is not currently part of academic teacher training, thus for want of a better alternative, teachers organize children's school meals based on their own experience and socialization or following the school's regulations (where they exist), without having a unified concept. The number of meals eaten at home has been reduced to light breakfasts, lunches, and

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dinners, with families mostly sitting down together at the table for dinner, when they often consume ready meals. Lack of contact with foodstuffs and with the person preparing the food has a negative impact on children's psychological development. Relying on extensive basic research and participant observation, and through the joint efforts of specialists from several fields of the social sciences, a significant improvement could be achieved in both public catering and education on healthy nutrition.

KEYWORDS

labor, history of public catering, Northern Hungary, Palóc cuisine, state socialism

Childhood nutrition is an important element in lifestyle research, since the regularity and nutritional content of our meals as children, and the way in which they are eaten, determine our physical and mental health throughout our lives. Food-related customs and menus are passed down from generation to generation, often imperceptibly. Nutrition, and specifically public catering, is an exciting area of ethnographic and social history research, in which almost every member of society, from pre-school onwards, participates. However, prior to 2018 there was no basic interdisciplinary research on this topic in Hungary in the field of either children's catering or factory catering.

To fill the gap, an interdisciplinary research group (encompassing the fields of ethnography, history, food science, and dietetics) was established in 2018 at the Institute of Ethnology, HUNREN Research Centre for the Humanities headed by ethnographer Anikó Báti. The group implemented a research project funded by the National Research, Development, and Innovation Office (NFKI): *The Social Embeddedness of Children's Public Catering. Issues and Opportunities* with the participation of prominent experts in the respective fields. The author of the present study joined the research group from a background of lifestyle research on the working class and working-class children and is grateful for the opportunity to be an active participant in such an outstanding basic research project, which is also hugely socially beneficial.

The present study is based on two fieldworks in two schools: the Lenkey János Primary School (former Primary School No. I) in Eger and the Bolyki Tamás Primary School in Ózd. I carried out participant observation lasting several days in the school dining rooms on several occasions and conducted focus group interviews with pupils in grades 2 to 8. I also recorded guided interviews with teachers, teaching assistants, catering staff, and catering managers, and examined the results of questionnaires completed by pupils, teachers, parents, and kitchen staff. I also expanded my research in terms of a historical perspective by exploring sources in the Heves, Borsod, and Nógrád County Archives, as well as the Hungarian National Archives and the Metropolitan Archives of Budapest. I extended the geographical scope of my research to include Salgótarján, a third typical North Hungarian city alongside Ózd and Eger and a location I was familiar with from my earlier research. The Heves County Archives preserve county decrees that include menus associated with public catering for poorer children in the 1930s.

In connection with children's catering in Ózd and Salgótarján, the management documents of the ironworks Rimamurány-Salgótarján Vasmű Rt.¹ — an industrial enterprise that significantly influenced the development of both industrial towns — represented an important archival source. In terms of the public catering introduced after the emergence of state

¹MNL OL [Archives of the Hungarian National Archives] Z371.



socialism, I was able to draw a more comprehensive picture from a significant collection of archival sources: letters of complaint written to the People's Control Committee and the related inspections. These sources shed light on the particular problems of the period as well as on the operations of the cooking and finishing kitchens investigated by the committee in Ózd, Eger, and Salgótarján.² The Heves County Archives of the Hungarian National Archives preserve a rich collection of sources from the 1960s and 1970s on catering at Primary School No. I in Eger, which allow us to examine kitchen hygiene, kitchen equipment, menus, and problems, as well as the background, qualifications, and wages of the kitchen staff. To ensure a more nuanced picture, I conducted an in-depth interview with the former head nutritionist in Salgótarján, who managed and supervised the kitchens in the city and the surrounding settlements, including the cooking kitchen at the Tamás Bolyki Primary School in Ózd from 1981 to 2005 (having previously worked as a pre-school catering manager in Salgótarján from 1973 to 1981).

To complement the historical picture, I conducted interviews with senior residents aged 80 years and above in Ózd and Salgótarján about the characteristics of childhood nutrition before the introduction of public catering, and the diets and eating habits of steel factory workers and the families of officials before World War II. Since my research was conducted in Palóc settlements in Northern Hungary, I also examined the characteristics of traditional Palóc cuisine both in the menus and during the guided interviews. I have also published independent studies on the above subtopics (NICKEL 2018, 2020, 2021a, 2021b; VÁRKONYI-NICKEL et al. 2019). Hungarian nutrition research boasts a variety of important works, which I have of course reviewed, although social scientists³ have only rarely examined the past 70 years of public catering for children, and there is still no monograph dealing with this subject from a historical perspective. To date, only Anikó Báti has examined the specific social impact of public catering for children from an ethnographic perspective (BÁTI 2018).

Processing the abundant amount of data obtained from a total of more than 22 h of interviews, 14 days of participant observation, several hundred pages of questionnaires, and approximately three linear meters of informative archival sources, and shaping them into a study, was work that required considerable concentration. The diverse and far-reaching outcomes of my research are presented chronologically, in the interests of clarity.

ON THE HISTORY OF NUTRITION IN THE PERIOD BEFORE WORLD WAR II

Research on the feeding of the poor and the related catering for children in the 19th century and following World War I has been, and continues to be, carried out by Laura Umbrai (UMBRAI 2018a, 2018b). From the end of the 19th century, permanent/municipal soup kitchens were

²The People's Control Committee sources related to the canteen at the steel factory were first examined in the following study: NICKEL 2021a.

³From the ethnographical perspective, for example: Sándor Bálint, Anikó Báti, Ibolya Bereczki, Erzsébet Bódi, Eszter Kisbán, Judit Knézy, László Kósa, Imre Romsics, Éva Pócs, and István Tálasi; from the historical perspective: Borbála Benda, Laura Umbrai, and Tibor Valuch; from the psychological perspective: Attila Forgács and Ferenc Túry; from the perspective of sociology: Emese Antal and László Molnár; and from the perspective of archeology: Gabriella Kohári.



being funded by the membership fees of social associations and municipal grants (BÁTI – UMBRAI 2020:67). In a joint study carried out with Anikó Báti, Laura Umbrai showed that although the first traces of school canteens date back to the 1880s, the professionalization of mass catering can be associated with the two world wars (BÁTI – UMBRAI 2020:55). Laura Umbrai has also highlighted the fact that the soup kitchens did not represent a solution to the food-related problems of the middle class, for reasons of pride (UMBRAI 2018a:143).

When attempting to answer the question of why school catering, known in Hungarian as *menza*, a word of Latin origin,⁴ continues to evoke negative feelings in many people today regardless of their age, gender, and level of involvement in public catering, the fact that one of the precursors to public catering for children was the soup kitchen for the poor would seem to be a good starting point. One of the great pioneers of the psychological study of memory was Frederic C. Bartlett, who, in the 1930s, pointed out that individual memory is very much associative in nature (BARTLETT 1995). Put simply, individual recollections are greatly influenced by how others remember a given event. Thus, if an activity is repeatedly associated with negative emotions over generations, we may find it difficult to see it realistically. What we refer to simply as memory in everyday language is in fact a complex network of different activities, which, when examined, reveals the past to be a changeable rather than a constant image, since we are constantly selecting and filtering our memories based on the problematic situations and imperatives of the present.

Following World War I, one of the biggest student canteens in Budapest opened on October 8, 1918, when the Hungarian National Israelite Educational Society [*Országos Magyar Izraelita Közművelődési Egyesület* (OMIKE)] provided catering for 350 university students and 100 secondary school students for the entire academic year (Fig. 1).⁵ Students were also allowed to use the institution's library and, on request, could even have dinner after spending the day there. It was not only the big companies in the capital city but also those outside the capital that provided welfare systems of varying quality for their workers: the Rimamurány-Salgótarján Ironworks maintained a social and cultural system of a particularly high standard at all its sites, including Salgótarján and Ózd.⁶ The Ludovika Women's Association for Children in Salgótarján was founded within the framework of the Officers' Casino and remained active up until nationalization. At the beginning of each school year, it launched its so-called breakfast campaign, when needy working-class children were given a breakfast of 300 mL of milk and 40 g of bread. Lunch campaigns were also organized.⁷

A 1926 article in the local paper *Munka* (Labor) also reported that “lunches are provided for 38 children.”⁸ In this case, the children's meals were not cooked in a central kitchen but were provided by the families of officials, or by the foremen and skilled workers. As I was unable to find any menus or suggestions for the children's meals among the factory documents from either

⁴Cf. Latin *mensa* “table,” and *mensa academica*, “student dining room.” The German *mensa*; Italian *mensa*; Czech *mensa*, *menza*; Slovak *menza*; etc., all meaning “student dining room,” are also from the Latin. A magyar nyelv történeti-etimológiai szótára [Historical-Etymological Dictionary of the Hungarian Language] 2. H-Ó, 1970.

⁵*Budapesti Hírlap*, January 30, 1901 (quoted by UMBRAI 2018a:143).

⁶For further details, see the following monographs: NAGY 2016; NICKEL 2017.

⁷MNL OL [Archives of the Hungarian National Archives] Z371 63. cs.

⁸Editorial of the newspaper *A Munka*, February 6, 1926.





Fig. 1. Lunch at the Jewish Orthodox school and daycare center in Budapest's 7th district, 1946. (Source: Fortepan.hu, item ID: 105253, donator: Gyula Hámosi)

Ózd or Salgótarján, I had to rely exclusively on interviews with people who were children in the 1930s.⁹ Meals that one of my interviewees referred to as “Palóc dishes” were also common in Ózd and Salgótarján: “Palóc dishes, like *sztrapačka*, *tócsni*, cabbage and creamed dishes (green beans, salad, sorrel, potatoes, beans) often featured on our family menu. Interestingly, we didn't eat spinach when we were little.” (István K., interviewed by Vira Réka Nickel, Salgótarján, 2020)

In 1927, the National Institute for Public Health was established in Budapest, which then set up the Green Cross (KEREKES 1987:241). Its health protection tasks included, among other things, the provision of a district nurse service, while it also organized lunch campaigns, both in the capital city and rural areas. The Heves County Archives preserve the sublieutenant's correspondence relating to the Green Cross lunch campaigns from the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁰ Social historian Tibor Valuch divides the history of nutrition from the end of the 1930s to the present day into four periods: World War II; 1950 to the end of the 1960s; the end of the 1960s to the mid-1980s; and the second half of the 1980s through the period of the regime change to the present day (VALUCH 2013:285).

THE WORLD WAR II PERIOD

In general, the World War II period was characterized by increasing deprivation and general food shortages caused by the devastation. Due to the wartime economy, food supply shortages

⁹There is little in the literature on the nutrition of the working classes. Attila Paládi-Kovács addressed the subject in PALÁDI-KOVÁCS 2007.

¹⁰MNL HML [Hungarian National Archives, Heves County Archives] IV-404/a. 648 d. 83/1942. Green Cross campaign for children's catering.



were already apparent in Hungary during the World War II period. The difficulties in supply are illustrated by the fact that from 1940, the organization of food production and food trade was taken over by the minister without portfolio for public supply, and during the year every municipality had to establish its own public supply office. These offices were required to keep accurate records of the identity and origins of all industrial license holders, wholesalers, distributors, and retailers, and of the products they distributed (UNGVÁRY 2006). This was the only way to alleviate shortages, while in the meantime further soup kitchens and daycare centers for children were set up. The Heves County Archives preserve circulars sent by the sublieutenant on the establishment of daycare centers during the summer months.¹¹ These reveal that the setting up of the daycare centers was subsidized by the National Fund for People and Family Protection [*Országos Nép- és Családvédelmi Alap* (ONCSA)] to the tune of between 100 and 1,500 *pengős*, depending, logically, on the number of children being cared for. From July 1 to August 31, 1943, a total of 50 days' care were provided for needy children. Families in need could enroll their children in the daycare center by paying 50 *fillérs* a week, or 2 *pengős* a month. (By way of comparison, cooks earned between 100 and 150 *pengős*, and a child's daily meal cost about 80 *fillérs*.)

Children from families enjoying reasonable financial circumstances could receive the food on payment of 35 *fillérs* per day. Green Cross nurses and district social workers helped to organize the summer daycare centers. To set up the kitchens, each municipality needed to hire a cook and inform the sublieutenant, who approved the contract and the wage agreement. Cooks were employed at very low wages; they frequently had to work overtime and often had to feed more children than expected. Shortages of ingredients caused problems in several villages, and the mandatory delivery of supplies, which came into force on July 1, was a cause of concern for the head of the Tiszánána kitchen.

In Sarud, even setting up a kitchen proved impossible because the vegetables in the local gardens had frozen during the winter of 1942, while there were no gardens in the area using forced production methods such as hotbeds and irrigation that could supply vegetables in large quantities; fat stocks were also running low as there were no animals left to slaughter in the village, nor was any support received from the Ministry of Public Supply. From the perspective of child nutrition research, the most exciting item in the archive is a menu and list of ingredients from 1943, which offers a good insight into the weekly menu of the summer daycare center in Hatvan.¹²

At the time, the kitchen in Hatvan received the biggest subsidy in the county, amounting to around 1,500 *pengős*. Their accounts reveal a substantial income, thanks to the generous support of parents and the town's citizens. This allowed them to operate two daycare centers, one in the center of Hatvan and the other in the Újhatvan district. It was thus a well-stocked kitchen, by wartime standards. In a report dated September 1, 1943, the manager of the daycare centers summarized the most important catering-related information over the 50 days of operation.¹³

¹¹MNL HML [Hungarian National Archives, Heves County Archives] IV-404/a. 727 d. Requests for expenses for organizing summer daycare centers by settlement.

¹²MNL HML [Hungarian National Archives, Heves County Archives] VIII – 120/a. 6. d. A. 15. 12633/1943.

¹³The report here is quoted here from the written version of Veronika Varga-Nagy's presentation *Analysis of public catering documents from Heves County in the 1900s*, delivered on October 3, 2019, in Székesfehérvár, at the XLIV Convention of the Hungarian Nutrition Society.



The daycare center in Újhatvan catered for 32 children, while the one in the center of Hatvan catered for 40 children, offering three meals a day on six days each week. For breakfast, the children were given milk with a slice of bread; for lunch they received a two-course hot meal; and for their afternoon snack and dinner they had the leftovers from lunchtime “topped up” with bread and honey or jam, and possibly coffee. The latter was not explained in detail, although in all likelihood it was cereal coffee. The centers used 15 L of milk a day, which was provided by the Health Protection Association free of charge to the kitchen in Hatvan, and at a price of 45 *fillérs* in Újhatvan. The average daily cost of a child’s meal in both daycare centers was 80–81 *fillérs* (which covered the wages of the cook and matron and the cost of the firewood). Meals were provided on six days of the week (Sunday being the only day off). Out of the six days of catering investigated, meat (in the form of goulash soup) was served on two occasions by the kitchen in Hatvan and on only one occasion in Újhatvan. The manager of the daycare center in Újhatvan specifically mentioned difficulties in procuring meat. Although in this case the meat-free days were largely due to wartime shortages, they were also a regular occurrence in peacetime.

In general, my interviewees in Ózd and Salgótarján, who were over 80 years of age, recalled that workers’ families ate meat only at the weekends but did not eat meat on weekdays, or at most once during the week. However, one interviewee, who came from the family of an official in Ózd, remembered meat being on the table in their home several times a week, although Wednesdays and Fridays were pasta days each week (see also [PALÁDI-KOVÁCS 1997](#)). This was essentially for religious reasons. Fridays were observed as fast days, in line with Catholic, Palóc customs, and “pasta days” were also observed by well-to-do peasant families, as Attila Paládi-Kovács described in 1982 ([PALÁDI-KOVÁCS 1982:99](#)). Only my interviewee from the family of an official in Ózd mentioned salami being served with bread and butter for snacks. Most of my other interviewees remembered taking bread with dripping, jam, honey, sugar, paprika, or “mock liver paste” made from breadcrumbs and yeast to school with them for their afternoon snack.

In 1943, the kitchen in Hatvan served bread with honey or jam or plain bread with milk for snacks, and soup, vegetable stews, and boiled or baked pasta for lunch on meat-free days. Analyzing the composition of the menu, it is clear that the meals were based largely on ingredients with a high carbohydrate content. In the Újhatvan kitchen, pasta-based dishes were served on three occasions every six days and a potato-based dish on one occasion, while dishes of some kind thickened with roux were served almost every day. This was quite familiar to locals, who also frequently ate soup thickened with roux at home. On the examined menu, vegetables were not served raw but were used in the preparation of the meals. They were typically given to the children in the form of soups, sauces, and vegetable stews. There was no fruit on the menu at all, nor was there any fish or oily seeds. Milk and dairy products, on the other hand, played a fairly large role in catering for children. The amount of milk served in the kitchen in Hatvan exceeded the amount prescribed by present-day regulations.¹⁴ This may be due to the fact that the nutritional studies of the time had already become common knowledge and it was generally accepted that milk and dairy products were the most important sources of

¹⁴In the case of three meals a day, an average of 3 L of milk or dairy products with an equivalent calcium content over a period of 10 days.



calcium, which the Hungarian population in general did not consume in sufficient quantities (TARJÁN 1954). As a result, a regular supply of milk and dairy products was already a public catering objective during these years. Relatively little information can be gleaned from the list of ingredients attached to the weekly menu. We have no information on the extent of seasonings, for example, which are merely listed without quantities. The use of salt and paprika is typical.

Although mandatory deliveries were introduced on July 1, 1943, food supply had deteriorated to a catastrophic situation by late 1944 and early 1945. The Provisional National Government set up the Ministry of Public Supply,¹⁵ and in 1945 several prime ministerial decrees addressed the issue of public supply. In Decree No. 295/1945 M.E., the minister of public supply ordered a reduction in rations and tightened the system of supply, making the supply of produce, live animals, and slaughtered animals compulsory, at an official price set by the ministry.¹⁶ It was not possible to get out of this obligation, and the decree included severe punishment for anyone who tried. The weakest point in food supply at that time was the supply of meat and meat products, because as the front moved across the country, it wreaked enormous damage and destruction on livestock.

In addition to war damage, food supply difficulties were compounded by the law on the abolition of the large estates system and “land distribution to the tillers of the land” (Law VI of 1945), which meant that farmers who had previously worked on large farms were now trying to produce the requisite amounts of grain on fragmented estates or small plots of land, hampered by a lack of capital. In Ózd, as in Salgótarján, the school did not have a dining room and the children went home for lunch. The children brought their morning and afternoon snacks with them from home. Before World War II, the school day ended at noon and there were no school activities in the afternoon. Wartime education was an exception to this, with teaching being divided into two sessions. There were morning and afternoon classes, which meant that each pupil received half a day’s schooling.

NATIONALIZATION AND THE 1950S

The Ministry of Public Supply was abolished and transformed into an agency under Act XXXV of 1947, almost at the same time as public catering came into being with the establishment of the National Institute of Food and Nutrition [Országos Élelmezés- és Táplálkozástudományi Intézet (OÉTI)].¹⁷ The tasks of this institute included comprehensive scientific research on nutrition, the professional supervision of catering, the provision of expert opinions and advice, as well as professional training and further education. After World War II, the term *menza* (“canteen”), which was originally used in the context of catering for boarders at institutes of higher education and high schools, was extended to cover all forms of student catering, and, after the communist takeover, when the church-run daycare centers were nationalized, kitchens were temporarily shared between the members of the monastic orders and the schools (Fig. 2).

¹⁵Magyar Közlöny 1945/7.

¹⁶Decree No. 4040/1945. M. E, Magyar Közlöny 1945/65.

¹⁷Government Decree No. 4.182/1949 (VIII. 6.) on the Establishment of a National Institute of Food and Nutrition, §1 (1).





Fig. 2. Lunch at a school in 1959 (Source: Fortepan.hu, item ID: 113307, donator: Sándor Bauer)

Besides nationalization, society was confronted with another baffling, hitherto unknown situation: the appearance of female workers in factories — especially in the larger industrial centers such as Salgótarján and Ózd.¹⁸ Before the war, women had tended to be employed in offices, but now men had to accept increasing numbers of women working as crane operators, lorry drivers, and other jobs that required technical skills. This was not easy, as it went against centuries of tradition. While before the war it had often been considered shameful for a man to see his wife forced into employment, the working woman now became part of the socialist human ideal almost overnight. Meals and catering emerged as the next major problem, since working women were less able to run a household, although most of them tried their hardest to fulfill their traditional female role as well.¹⁹ “They worked their eight hours in the factory, then went home, cleaned, did the washing, cooked at night, and looked after the children. A woman always worked at least two shifts” (Éva M., interviewed by Vira Réka Nickel, Salgótarján, 2019). The ideal of the modern socialist woman did not include cooking or running a household. The propaganda of the time portrayed domestic work as a ball and chain that kept women tied to the kitchen. The establishment and mass provision of public catering was an important aspect of socialist modernization, as the female workforce was greatly needed in terms of production. In return, the state provided for all members of the family. At least in principle. In Ózd and Salgótarján, construction also began on a kitchen for the steelworks school. The steelworks factory kitchen was also extended, from where lunch could be taken home, which also provided temporary help.

¹⁸I explored the social problems caused by “socialist modernization” in the steel factory colony of Salgótarján in the following study: [NICKEL 2018](#).

¹⁹The subject is discussed at length in [TÓTH 2007](#).



In the meantime, the system of mandatory supply in the villages exacerbated social tensions to the extreme. In 1952, more than 800,000 peasant families were left without even the necessary grain for making bread as a result of the so-called attic sweeping. By 1953, the national food supply had descended into chaos once again (VALUCH 2013:290). In 1953, the Budapest Municipal Council proposed the creation of a “Children’s Catering Company” that was supposed to cater specifically for children and alleviate the serious shortcomings in this field, since until then most public catering kitchens had combined cooking for daycare centers and everyone else. The Children’s Catering Company “will make it possible to cater for children in a uniform and scientifically sound way (...) and to ensure that the staff of the children’s catering kitchens have specialized professional qualifications.”²⁰ Food shortages began to ease again around the end of 1953 and early 1954, but after years of quantitative starvation, high-calorie foods occupied the most important place in the diet for at least a decade and determined the nutritional culture of the remainder of the period. The staple food during this period was bread, which was still mostly home-baked (BÁTI 2017). One of my oldest interviewees, who was a teenager in the late 1940s, told me that in a family of three, bread was baked once a week: one large loaf and one smaller one. The larger loaf was about 5 kg and the smaller one around 2 kg. Weekly bread consumption per person in this working family therefore reached, and sometimes exceeded, 2 kg: “Bread was eaten with soup. And even with melon in the summer” (Ilona U., interviewed by Vira Réka Nickel, Salgótarján, 2019).

Ensuring adequate quality was a real problem in the outdated kitchens. At that time, there was no standard recipe book to regulate mass catering. By the late 1950s, however, a conscious, politically driven reform of Hungarian cuisine had begun, and increasingly Soviet-style mass catering in the larger cities replaced the centuries-old, historical cuisine, transforming the entire food culture of the past not only by changing the time and space devoted to eating, but also by standardizing recipes.

It was during these years that the typical menus and “public tastes” of subsequent decades were consciously developed under centralized control. The new era was associated with the name of József Venesz, who achieved international success as a chef at the 1958 Brussels World Fair with his Hortobágy-style meat pancakes. Building on his fame, the Communist Party gave him a leading role in the development of a new, modern, centralized public catering system, where nutritional value remained one of the top priorities. His cookbook, *A magyar konyha* [Hungarian Cuisine] (VENESZ 1958), was first published in 1958, with numerous editions coming out right up until the early 2000s.

FROM THE 1960S TO THE 1980S

In 1962, a ministerial regulation came into force, according to which state catering establishments were obliged to follow the recipes contained in the 1961 book *Egységes vendéglátó receptkönyv és konyhatechnológia* [Standard Catering Recipe Book and Kitchen Technology] (VENESZ – TURÓS 1961). The aim was to create a uniform mass catering service providing cheap

²⁰Minutes of the Executive Committee meetings of the Budapest Municipal Council, HU BFL [Budapest Municipal Archives] XXIII 102.a.1.1953.12.17 https://library.hungaricana.hu/hu/view/HU_BFL_XXIII_102_a_1_1953-12-17/?pg=0&layout=s, accessed September 10, 2023.



and filling meals. As a result of the centrally regulated recipes, certain dishes, with their specific flavors and high carbohydrate and fat content, spread throughout the country while the regional features of Hungarian cuisine slowly began to disappear.

The cuisine of Northern Hungary, which is the subject of the present study, was no exception. In the third phase discussed here, between the end of the 1960s and the mid-1980s, the gap between the well-nourished and the quantitatively and qualitatively starving widened in society, as kitchen equipment and eating habits changed. Cereals and pseudo-cereals, such as barley, millet, and rye, which symbolized poor nutrition, slowly disappeared not only in Eger, Ózd, and Salgótarján, but also in the Palóc villages, to be replaced by wheat and rice, while potato consumption also rapidly increased. Sociological research in the second half of the 1970s also highlighted the excessive use of fat and carbohydrates in children's catering due to the meagre budgets, thus promoting the large-scale development in adulthood of diseases caused by unhealthy, carbohydrate-laden diets (PATAKI et al. 1961:16).

In most families, family meals were increasingly limited to dinner, and hot meals were consumed less and less frequently (PATAKI et al. 1961:12). While in peasant society individual meals were also charged with symbolic meaning and thus represented community cohesion, public catering menus were drawn up solely and exclusively from an economic and partly from a health point of view. It was not only modernization — the advent of the refrigerator, electric stove, and gas cooker — that transformed the traditional, region-specific, and varied cuisine, but also the mass use of canned foods and frozen products, which were spreading rapidly and becoming available to all.²¹ From 1967, flavoring was dominated by *Vegeta*. This “soup powder,” used as a flavor enhancer, was developed in 1959 in Yugoslavia by Zlata Bartl and her research team, one tablespoon being able to reproduce the flavor of approximately 1 kg of fresh soup vegetables.²²

In the Heves County Archives, I found fascinating data on cooking and finishing kitchens in Eger from the second half of the 1960s. The educational material sent to Eger Primary School No. I in 1967, “The duties of cooks working in daycare centers on the preparation of food and the respective observance of personal and environmental hygiene,”²³ lists in detail the compulsory examinations required for those working in catering, the basic hygiene requirements, work safety, the arrangement of the kitchen, the principal steps in cooking and washing up, the enjoyment value of food, storage, and the importance of variety in the menu. Cleanliness and fastidiousness are major aspects of the regulation. In the chapter on nutritional health, the role of potatoes is still emphasized as the primary source of vegetable protein. The educational material mentions menu planning only briefly, emphasizing the importance of a varied diet and the use of seasonal vegetables and fruits. It provides examples of weekly lunches for the winter, early summer, and late summer/autumn periods. Vegetables or fruit and meat already appear several times on this menu, while it clearly reflects “Hungarian-style cuisine” with its potato-based side dishes and stewed or roast beef and pork. Baked goods and pastry-based

²¹Frozen foods were introduced in Hungary in 1943 under the Mirelite brand, and the offer began to expand significantly in the 1950s, along with canned foods. For further details, see VALUCH 2013:308.

²²Miklós, Dániel: Étélizesítő háború: a delikát ébredése [Condiment War. The Rise of Delikat Seasoning]. <https://ntf.hu/index.php/2018/05/10/etelizesito-haboru-a-delikat-ebredese/>, accessed September 3, 2022.

²³MNL HML [Hungarian National Archives, Heves County Archives] VIII – 120/a. 6. d. A. 15/1964.



desserts also appear by way of snacks, all of them including dairy products (e.g., cottage cheese) or fruit. A longer chapter deals with the environmental factors that influence appetite, such as the condition of the dining room, the table setting, and the various smells coming from the kitchen.

Among the archival sources from the 1960s and 1970s, I came across several complaints about the quality of the food, as well as about transportation and workforce problems. Lunch was delivered to the finishing kitchen (Fig. 3) of Primary School No. I in Eger in containers of 25–30 L, for example, but: “The lorry was manned by the driver only, without an assistant. The containers, together with the food inside them, weighed between 40 and 50 kg and had to be dragged inside by the kitchen girls.”²⁴ Immediate action was called for to address these dangerous conditions. The Eger municipal public health and epidemiological supervising officer inspected the kitchen on October 18, 1972, and identified additional problems: among other things, he found that it was only the plates that were washed in three phases, while the other dishes were cleaned in just one phase and the amount of bleach in the solution used as a disinfectant was insufficient; several plates and cups were chipped, and, to the surprise of the inspectors, work clothes were soaking in the washing-up sink. These shortcomings were brought to the attention of the kitchen manager for immediate rectification.²⁵

In the 1970s, the overburdening of kitchens was a continuous problem in Eger. In 1974, the biggest central kitchen was producing 1,356 portions a day (for four schools), although the



Fig. 3. Finishing kitchen, 1963 (Source: Fortepan.hu, item ID: 126216, donator: Sándor Bauer)

²⁴MNL HML VIII – 120/a. 6. d. A. 15 23/1971.

²⁵MNL HML VIII – 120/a. 6. d. A. 15 23/1972.



maximum amount allowed by the National Public Health Center [*Közegészségügyi és Járványügyi Állomás (KÖJÁL)*] was 1,000 portions.²⁶ Although guest meals were allowed only under strict conditions — for retired teachers of the given school, for example — in 1975 the number of meals served to visitors was almost twice the number of regular meals.²⁷ In December 1975, the Heves County Peoples' Control Committee discussed “compliance with the requirements of modern nutrition in children’s institutions”²⁸ and found that the use of vegetable oils in the kitchen of the Széchenyi Street Kindergarten (from where Primary School No. I was also supplied) was insufficient. In a letter of reply, the school director pointed out that vegetable oils were underused because “children are reluctant to eat things fried in oil.”²⁹ In 1972, the production of sunflower oil and margarine began at the Rákospalota plant of the Vegetable Oil and Detergent Company, with the aim of replacing animal products (mainly milk), which were then in short supply, and to promote the new products through a series of advertising campaigns (KOVÁCS – LELOVICS 2016:38). It was at this time that the advertising industry began to have a significant impact on eating habits.

In 1973, the activities of the National Institute of Food and Nutrition were supplemented by studies of public nutrition and the development of guidelines for healthy eating. Obesity problems and an increase in the incidence of diabetes led to a demand for low-calorie, low-fat, sugar-free, diabetic foods. In Hungary, as many as 300,000 people were registered with diabetes by the end of the 1970s (PATAKI et al. 1961:16). My interviewee from Salgótarján had also encountered this problem as a kindergarten catering manager in the mid-1970s. “Food was taken from the big container before it was sweetened. There was a cook in charge of this (...) in the case of diabetes, you had to pay particular attention to the accurate measuring of carbohydrates (...) I made separate nutrient calculations” (Mrs. Péter L., interviewed by Vira Réka Nickel, Salgótarján, 2022). By the early 1970s, the number of overweight people was estimated at nearly 3 million (VALUCH 2013:318). From the 1970s, sociologists observed a nationwide standardization of tastes and the spread of fatty and heavily spiced foods, most notably goulash, which had previously been typical only of the Great Plain. Average calorie consumption per capita rose from 2,938 kcal in 1960 to 3,189 kcal in 1970, which led directly to obesity problems in society (HOLÉ 1979:14). As a result, an increasing number of specialists were needed to treat and prevent nutrition-related diseases. My interviewee from Salgótarján had graduated as a nutrition nurse in Budapest in the late 1960s. Although the training of nurse nutritionists had already started in Hungary in 1922, it had been interrupted by World War II and continued at the State School of Nutrition Nursing from 1957: “The director, Mrs. Sándor Langfelder³⁰, was someone I remember with great fondness, although she must have had the same fondness for me, because I passed with distinction and was awarded a red diploma” (Mrs. Péter L., interviewed by Vira Réka Nickel, Salgótarján, 2022).

²⁶MNL HML VIII – 120/a. 6. d. A. 15 26/1974.

²⁷MNL HML VIII – 120/a. 6. d. A. 15.

²⁸MNL HML VIII – 120/a. 6. d. A. 15 23 030-5/1975.

²⁹MNL HML VIII – 120/a. 6. d. A. 15 24/1975.

³⁰For 18 years, the school director was Mrs. Sándor Langfelder (Magda Deli), a student of the founder, Professor Aladár Soós, who guaranteed the continuation of the Soós school tradition. Participants in the training were required to have a high school leaving certificate and experience in food preparation.



In 1978, the People's Control Committee also ordered further investigations in Salgótarján in the field of children's catering, which provided a great deal of useful information for the present research.³¹ One of the sites of the investigation was the primary school of the former steelworks, then known as Malinovszkij Road Primary School, where an inspection was carried out on May 23, 1978. The school's cooking kitchen had a capacity for 600, although the actual number of people eating there was about 700, made up of 620 children and 80 adults. The evaluation was generally positive, as the equipment, cleanliness, and machines conformed to the required standards. The inspector found the dining room to be clean and aesthetically pleasing, bearing in mind its basement location, while the starting and finishing times of the meals were properly adjusted to the children's school schedule. In 1978, in addition to the midday meals (Fig. 4), the school offered the possibility to purchase food during the morning hours in the school canteen: "e.g., cartons of milk and cocoa, salami sandwiches, various types of processed cheese, and on several occasions sweet pastries with walnuts, poppy seeds, or other fillings."

The other site of the investigation was the Rákóczi Ferenc II Primary School, which was inspected on May 3–5, 1978. In this school, meals were provided for 300 of the 606 pupils. There was no cooking kitchen, and the finishing kitchen was only just adequate for catering for this many children and their teachers. The inspectors found the equipment and cleanliness of the kitchen to be satisfactory. They noted that the pupils could choose between two menus each week and the school ordered their lunches for each week based on the majority choice.



Fig. 4. Fried, breaded luncheon meat with creamed split peas is one of the "classic" school meals, although it has never been one of the most popular (photo by Vira Réka Nickel, Eger, 2019)

³¹The following quotes are from the box indicated in the archival reference: MNL NML [Hungarian National Archives, Nógrád County Archives] XVII 956. 1978. d. ST NEB vizsgálatok [People's Control Committee inspections] 3.d.



Nevertheless, the finishing kitchen had no dedicated dining area, thus three classrooms were opened together at lunchtime. The third location was the Néphadsereg Road Elementary School, where the inspection was carried out on May 24, 1978. Catering was provided for 130 of the 175 pupils, along with 21 adults who also ate lunch at the school. Meals were delivered from the kitchen of the Mártírok Road Primary School. The inspectors described the otherwise cramped canteen as surprisingly homely. Tables for four were always set with clean tablecloths, which was something they had not come across in any other school. According to the principal, there were four changes of tablecloth, two of which were always at the laundry. This represented a significant cost to the school, which nevertheless insisted on “civilized” conditions at lunchtime. It was in the records of this inspection that I first encountered the term “weight-watching diet.” Five of the pupils surveyed said that they did not have breakfast at home and did not bring any food to school because they were on a diet. Unfortunately, the inspectors did not record the gender or age of these children. The question nevertheless arises as to whether, after long decades of quantitative starvation, this could perhaps have been the first tangible evidence of childhood obesity, or perhaps of the impact of the fashion industry on girls. The site of the fourth investigation was the Bartók Béla Road Primary School, where 150 pupils ate school meals during this period. The school did not have a kitchen (lunch was delivered from the nearby kindergarten), although it did have a dining room. The equipment and level of cleanliness were found to be satisfactory during the inspection, although the entire school building was in need of complete renovation at the time.

The fifth school to undergo inspection by the committee was the Mártírok Road Primary School, which had a cooking kitchen and provided lunch to other schools. The only problem identified during the inspection was the outdated and overcrowded area for the storage of dry goods and vegetables, although the school management countered that this area was about to be renovated. The most serious issues, however, were found at the Hétköz Student Hostel in Baglyasalja, where the cooking kitchen was licensed for just 100 persons, while it in fact provided meals for over 300 mostly disadvantaged and vulnerable students aged between 6 and 16. “Five women are cooking in very outdated conditions. (...) The stove is a traditional mixed-fuel stove, the sides of which are hanging off and almost hazardous.” The Zagyvapálfalva Primary School also faced problems with overburdening: the kitchen had a license for 300 pupils but was cooking for 600 each day, as it also supplied meals to the nearby daycare kindergarten. The cooking kitchen at the primary school in Somoskőújfalu was also small, although the biggest problem here was the fact that they were unable to put together a weekly menu at all during the period under review. In fact, the procurement of goods proved so difficult that the catering manager was unable to say one day in advance what lunch would be the following day, and in most cases the school cooked using tinned ingredients because of the shortages.

My interviewee who was a dietician from Salgótarján had been managing and supervising the kitchens in her district since 1981: “at that time, it was quite typical in Salgótarján for housewives who loved cooking to be put in charge of the catering. So they didn’t really have the qualifications (...). I was transferred there in ’81 with the idea that I was going to manage the catering professionally, so that the regulations laid down by the National Public Health Institute [Állami Népegészségügyi és Tisztiorvosi Szolgálat (ÁNTSZ)] and the National Institute for Food and Nutrition Science [Országos Élelmezés- és Táplálkozástudományi Intézet (OÉTI)] would be properly implemented”. In 1980, many of the staff in the Salgótarján cooking kitchens were made redundant, which led to significant changes as there were far fewer people having to do the



same amount of work. There was a good relationship among the kitchens, and any kitchen that could spare some of its staff directed helpers to another kitchen that was in need.

FROM THE LATE 1980S TO THE PRESENT DAY

By the mid-1980s, shortages in the food industry had become rare, with the longstanding exception of imported exotic fruits. Around 96% of Hungarian families now regularly consumed some kind of canned products, despite the fact that their prestige was far lower than that of homemade preserves and syrups. Those living in the capital and larger cities consumed more canned foods than those living in the countryside, although the biggest consumer of canned foods was the state itself and the cooking kitchens the provided public catering (BALATONI – FARKAS 1976:22). By the early 1980s, more than 3 million people were participating in public catering on a daily basis (BÁTI 2017:165). The increasing prevalence of food intolerances was already causing serious problems in cooking kitchens in the 1980s: “we had to work out how to ensure that there were separate cooking pots and separate sinks, and how to deliver food in separate containers and boxes” (Mrs. Péter L., interviewed by Vira Réka Nickel, Salgótarján, 2022).

The fourth phase in the history of nutrition runs from the second half of the 1980s, through the period of the regime change, up until the present day. In the politics of the period, public catering has been treated as part of social policy and even been used to level out differences in provision, thus once again many people regard it as catering for those in need. While quantitative hunger has declined significantly among schoolchildren, qualitative hunger has gained prominence. In the 1990s, the biggest problem in the canteen at the Acélgányi Road school in Salgótarján was the number of meals served, as parents (perhaps due to carelessness) failed to register their children for school meals, but the children still turned up for lunch, thus the cooking kitchen did not know in advance how many meals would be needed, even though the state fully financed meals for cumulatively disadvantaged pupils. With the change of regime, fast-food chains appeared in Hungary and began to spread rapidly.

The consumption of semi-prepared and ready meals in households also spread. At the beginning of the 1990s, powdered soups and instant mashed potatoes also appeared in catering establishments in Salgótarján. My interviewee had a very low opinion of them: “Would you call that mashed potato?! I would have banned it if I’d had my way, but I didn’t. (...) we’re feeding kids with chemicals, and they consume far too many of them as it is” (Mrs. Péter L., interviewed by Vira Réka Nickel, Salgótarján, 2022). In the end, thanks to opposition, the contract with the distributor was terminated and instant foods were removed from the school meals served in Salgótarján. By the turn of the millennium, most food-related traditions and social customs had lost their binding force. Earlier differences in terms of how, and how often, meals were eaten, such as the adaptation of the timing and number of meals to peasant labor, as well as meal-related rituals, now disappeared, while the eating of three meals a day became widespread. In focus group interviews with schoolchildren in Ózd and Eger, meat soup, bean soup, and goulash soup were mentioned among the most popular meals, which is consistent with the results of the sociological studies conducted in the 1970s, while my dietician interviewee in Salgótarján recalled similar data from the 1980s and 1990s. Although the emergence of weight problems has increased demand for low-calorie, low-fat, sugar-free foods, it has not significantly influenced the way food is prepared or the ingredients used. “This is what we got used to over generations, precisely because of the norm that there wasn’t enough money, that meatballs were



so soft that they fell apart in your mouth because they were full of bread. But if you take away the bread, you're left either with adding some kind of texture enhancer, or it becomes drier" (Mrs. Péter L., interviewed by Vira Réka Nickel, Salgótarján, 2022).

My research has highlighted the important fact that current health-protection measures, such as cutting down on carbohydrates, salt, sugar, and spices, clash with tastes that have been developed over generations, which cannot be transformed from one month to the next. If children are not eating the healthier foods served to them in the canteen but are instead choosing from the school tuck shop or the nearby convenience store, provision will not solve the existing problem.

The present research also fills a gap in that I have explored not only flavors and cooking methods but also the place and timing of the meals, and their connection with the meals eaten at home. Anikó Báti's comparative research in Budapest and Cserépfalu demonstrated that, now that people are no longer baking bread, the requisite knowledge and practice of making yeasted doughs has been relegated to the background over two or three generations and, almost uniquely, pizza has now become the most popular variety of homemade bread (BÁTI 2017:165). Pizza is also a big hit among children, and the vast majority of the primary school children surveyed in Eger and Ózd between 2018 and 2022 wanted to see pizza on the school menu as often as possible. One of the main questions explored during the participant observations and focus group interviews in Eger and Ózd was which foods and customs featured in the children's everyday diets and meals, and how these corresponded to traditional, home-cooked meals. Further questions included how the children responded to new flavors, and the role of globalization in their diets.

Last but not least, the observations and interviews explored the extent to which personal relationships influence children's appetites and eating patterns. The participant observation revealed that in almost all cases, children who were hostile to school meals felt antipathy either towards the kitchen staff or specifically towards the teacher who was in charge at lunchtime. Eating is an opportunity for the expression of human relationships. Meals are not just about the consumption of food; in fact, in the context of social interaction, the last thing they are about is nutrition. Eating together has been one of the most important social events since ancient times — "Those who are loved and respected are given food, and meals are shared with them" (FORGÁCS 2018:151). In the Ózd canteen, the kitchen workers change frequently; the washing up and tidying away of leftovers are mostly carried out as public work. Since the children regard these workers as strangers, they are reluctant to talk to them and do not even say hello to them.

The kitchen workers are similarly passive towards the children. Although the children have a good relationship with the catering manager, who often visits them in the dining room, they are distant and sometimes downright hostile towards the kitchen staff. However, they may express their views on a particular meal to the catering manager in person, who may encourage them to taste it and may explain why it is good for them. My interviewee is someone with a colorful personality and a great deal of experience in catering, who sees the job of catering manager as an important challenge and who has many ideas for reform that are reflected in the creativity of her menus. In keeping with the regulations, the children in the Ózd canteen are given standard portions, which are often too big for the smaller children, while higher-grade students typically remain hungry and are unable to get second helpings of everything (e.g., they can get more rice or creamed vegetables, but without the toppings). In the finishing kitchen in Eger, the situation is different. There has been a permanent kitchen staff here for years and the children have a relationship of trust with them; the children greet them politely and often chat with the manager



of the finishing kitchen. The children can expect full second helpings, although because of scarcities, seconds of meat are not on offer here either. In Ózd, children leave a relatively small amount of food on their plates as the portions are smaller, while in Eger the amount of leftovers varies; it depends specifically on the teacher how much food is left on the plates in each class.

In the course of the participant observation, it was striking that in the lower-grade classes, where the teacher briefly explained before lunch what the children would be getting on their plates, why it was healthy for them, and how the “kitchen ladies” had cooked it with love, a very high percentage of the children ate, or at least tasted, every part of the lunch. The focus group interviews with the children revealed that they had no contact with the cooking kitchen or with the people who prepared the food, nor were they given any information about them. When we did share this information with the children, they started to talk about lunch with more respect and became more understanding towards the kitchen staff. I consider it to be an important observation that when the accompanying teacher sternly forced the class to sit at the table and eat in complete silence (while those who did speak were made to stand up as a punishment), the children left a conspicuously large amount of food on their plates, day after day. This demonstrates that younger children (grades 1–3) are primarily selective about who they accept food from, and it is only the older children who begin focusing on the look, smell, and taste of the food itself. The biggest problem in Ózd was lack of space. The dining area was a classroom used by one of the classes and was separated from the finishing kitchen by a glass window (Fig. 5). At lunchtime, the children moved out of their classroom and tables and chairs were brought into the corridor from adjacent classrooms to accommodate those who were unable to fit into the makeshift “dining room.”

Here, as in Eger, the lower grades had to eat lunch according to a strict schedule, generally being given between 20 min and half an hour. Students in the higher grades arrived at the dining



Fig. 5. Classroom converted into a dining room in Ózd (photo by Vira Réka Nickel, 2019)



room alone or in pairs, without a teacher, and if they were unable to find a seat for themselves in the corridor they sometimes ate their main course standing up, or simply gave up on lunch and left. Mutual respect is extremely important in all social interactions, and it is very important where a person sits, whom they can sit with at the table, and whether or not they can find a seat in the designated dining area. School milk and fruit, which are a requirement for children in the EU, are also both an opportunity and a problem to be solved in the case of both schools. The dairy products served under the “school milk” scheme are delivered in the morning to both schools, but there is no refrigeration. At the end of the day, pots of yoghurt are still sitting there spoiling, their foil caps bulging, waiting to be taken home after lunch by anyone who still wants them.

The apples and pears distributed under the “school fruit” scheme are sometimes unripe and unappetizing, and quite often the pieces of fruit are too big for children to finish between classes (Fig. 6). An excellent solution has been found to this latter problem in Ózd, where, during the first two lessons, the available teaching assistants and teachers cut up the apples and pears and serve them on large trays or in colorful bowls on a bench in the school hallway during the main break and, if there is any left, later in the day too. This has proved an enormous success with the children, who are happy to “dig in” and eat the fruit as a “snack.” Because snacking is important, and since humans are basically gathering, grazing creatures, it gives pleasure and a sense of security, and everyone is happy to do it (FORGÁCS 2018:29). By taking advantage of this, the children’s vitamin requirements are being met in Ózd.

We asked in each location about the extent to which ingredients can be procured from local producers. In each location, the answer was that local suppliers are almost excluded by law, since public procurement is a requirement and it is usually cheaper to buy from further afield. Furthermore, small producers had problems supplying large kitchens on a regular basis. The catering manager in Ózd takes particular care to adopt an organic approach in the kitchen



Fig. 6. School fruit on offer in Ózd (photo by Vira Réka Nickel, 2019)



whenever possible. “I’d far rather work with local entrepreneurs and local suppliers; it would be a lot better” (The Ózd catering manager, interviewed by Vira Réka Nickel, 2020).

From among the traditional Palóc dishes that represent the town’s ethnographic background, thickened vegetable stews (of beans, potatoes, or green beans) and pickled cabbage with minced meat have been introduced with great success (Fig. 7). Among the soups, the children’s favorite is potato soup, as opposed to pumpkin soup, which they referred to as “seed soup” and which the vast majority of pupils would like to see removed from the menu if possible. “Palóc soup,” which has a sourish taste and which is associated with traditional Palóc cuisine in name only, was also eaten up almost entirely when we visited the Eger canteen. Examining families’ eating habits at home, we found that it is the Christmas menus that best preserve the typical, traditional flavors of the region. In a significant number of the interviews conducted with teachers, teaching assistants, catering managers, and pupils at the schools in Ózd and Eger, pickled cabbage soup, stuffed cabbage, fish soup, and poppy seed dumplings were mentioned as being commonly served, although not necessarily at traditional times of the day.

During the focus group interviews, most of the pupils also said they were familiar with pickled cabbage soup; it was something they regarded as so commonplace that they didn’t even include it among the typical Christmas dishes, merely agreeing when asked specifically if pickled cabbage soup was served at the Christmas meal. For most of them, cabbage soup has not been replaced or superseded by stuffed cabbage to this day, and both dishes still feature on the family Christmas menu. Naturally, due to the influence of the media and the film industry, roast Turkey is served at Christmas in more and more places in Ózd and Eger, following the Anglo-Saxon example. At the request of the director, the canteen in Ózd tries to follow traditional Catholic customs, offering fish and meat-free meals to children on fast days, and cabbage



Fig. 7. In Eger, many children reject the vegetable stew and take only the rissols (photo by Vira Réka Nickel, 2019)



and poppyseed dishes before Christmas. Although fish dishes are not particularly characteristic of the traditional cuisine of this region, attempts are still made to offer pupils a sufficient amount of fish in various forms, in keeping with the current regulations. According to the catering manager, this is almost always a complete failure, as the only fish product the children like is fish fingers. This is true not only of the traditional Palóc areas but is rather a national trend. After World War II, fish disappeared from traditional menus at national level; it was not featured in the standardized menus because of its low calorie content, and its reintroduction is proving to be a difficult task. In Hungary, river fishing has stopped, leaving catering managers with imported sea fish as their only choice of ingredient. The catering manager in Eger, with a little finesse, has nevertheless managed to find a solution to the problem of fish dishes: “spaghetti bolognese. Some of the ragout is made using meat and some using tuna. It doesn’t taste so much of fish, so they like it, because they love bolognese” (Fig. 8) (The Eger catering manager, interviewed by Vira Réka Nickel, 2020).



Fig. 8. Some children eat every last drop of soup
(photo by Vira Réka Nickel, 2019)



The school also has a good and informative relationship with the canteens in Ózd and Eger. My interviewee from Salgótarján also mentioned several times how important it was for her to receive continuous feedback from the schools. In Ózd, the parents also meet the catering manager in person when they pay for the meals, giving them an opportunity to share their opinions and suggestions about the school meals in person. In Eger, parents can report problems to the school, and these are forwarded formally to the catering manager.

There are some meals that many of the children refuse to touch. During our research, fried liver was one such meal. In Eger, the problem was addressed by serving only rice if the child did not want the liver. In Ózd, the children were not given this option. The catering manager in Ózd drew my attention to an important fact when we asked about the possibility of serving children only the part of their meal they wanted to eat: “it’s against the law. The parents have paid for it” (The Ózd catering manager, interviewed by Vira Réka Nickel, 2020).

SUMMARY

It is not easy to summarize such a colorful, four-year research project. Public catering for children has undergone significant changes over the last six to seven years, while before that it was relatively uniform and naturally reflected the ingredients available at the time. The introduction of public catering in the Rákosi era in the early 1950s, and its further development in the Kádár era from the 1960s, together with the general obligation to work, significantly changed family eating habits. Traditional elements of localism disappeared, and the globalizing aspirations of socialism were achieved. The steady decline in the amount of time devoted to meal preparation, cooking, and eating pushed society towards factory canteens, fast-food restaurants, and, after the regime change in 1990, global fast-food chains. Since the youngest members of Hungarian society today spend most of their waking lives and childhood not with their families but in public education, the school plays an enormous role not only in transmitting lexical knowledge but also in upbringing, including teaching them the basic rules of healthy nutrition and dining-room manners.

At present, teacher training at university does not include nutrition education, thus teachers are left to organize the children’s lunches according to their own experience and socialization, or according to the school’s guidelines (where they exist), without a coherent concept. Meals at home have been reduced to light breakfasts, lunch, and dinner, with families mostly sitting down together at the table at dinnertime. The making of yeasted doughs and bread has fallen out of fashion almost entirely, and nowadays the most common homemade baked dough is pizza. However, traditional Palóc dishes can still be found on Christmas menus. It would be important to improve children’s relationship with food, both in the two examined locations and nationally. It would be both exciting and useful to introduce the kitchen staff to the children and to explain to the children the steps involved in cooking, from menu planning to the procurement of ingredients, including recipes, food preparation, and finishing.

A relationship with food and with the person preparing it is a critical gap in children’s psychological development. If this were in place, it would be easier to introduce new types of food and to reduce the amount of salt, sugar, and flavorings. It will take extensive basic research, participant observation, and the combined work of a social scientists in a variety of fields to uncover the distressingly wide array of problems that are giving rise to digestive disorders, including childhood diabetes, obesity, and “guzzling” due to lack of time. Each of the studies in the present volume highlights important steps on the path towards physical and mental health.



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