

# **REMEMBERING LIVES: AN ANALYSIS OF HUNGARIAN OBITUARIES (1961-2000)**

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## ABSTRACT

The thesis examines obituaries appearing in the Hungarian daily, *Népszabadság* during the second half of the 20th century. It argues from a social constructionist stance that the reading of these texts gives us insights about the prevailing norms and values related to death. It posits that the issue of death brings to the surface general cultural values as well. Its aim is to see how these norms and values have changed as the political and social structure changed in Hungary. The paper also analyses how obituaries are activities of social memory through the construction of biographies of the deceased.

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## INTRODUCTION

The thesis examines – through the analysis of obituaries appearing in the Hungarian daily *Népszabadság* between 1961 and 2000 – how prevailing norms related to death and bereavement have changed over the course of the second half of the 20th century. It argues that obituaries represent activities of social memory (Fowler 2007:25): they are commemorative practices and narratives of the past in a two-fold way: for the contemporary readership and for the social researcher of the present as well. As explained by the constructivist model of grief, the purpose of grief is to “tell the story of a person” (Frankl 1984), to construct durable biographies. Thus obituaries recapitulate individual pasts that are always socially mediated and shaped. This emphasis on the relationship between obituaries and social memory gains further significance in the context of the era analyzed: how the totalitarian nature of the former communist regime, and society’s reactions to the regime affect social memory – distorts, manipulates, abuses it, is also explored in the paper.

The study takes a social constructionist perspective. In accordance with Berger and Luckmann’s view that “reality is socially constructed” (1966:1), the thesis argues that death is also more than a biological reality; it is historically situated and constructed through social and cultural processes. In this sense, every society has a particular death system (Corr, Nabe, and Corr 2000: 78-79), institutions that deal with the problems of death and bereavement (Kastenbaum 1995). Obituaries can be regarded as components of this system.

In order to gain insight about the context in which the research takes place, the Introduction provides background information regarding the social history of Hungary in the discussed period. Afterwards I review literature related to the study. I discuss the issues of social constructionism, social memory, death and grief – and how these topics are interrelated. The structure of the Methodology follows the steps of content analysis as discussed by

Krippendorff (1980). The findings of the research are presented afterwards. The Conclusion summarizes the results of the research and connects them to the theories explained in the literature review.

Before introducing the social context of my research, an explanation of the genre of obituaries and why I posit them as activities of social memory is necessary. The word obituary comes from Latin “obitus”, departure. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED2 1992), the obituary is “a record or announcement of a death or deaths, especially in a newspaper; usually comprising a brief biographical sketch of the deceased.” Obituaries are written by those who surrounded the deceased, in this sense they are different from necrologies written by journalists. Published in newspapers, obituaries are also different from death notices either appearing in public spaces or printed cards sent by mail, and they conform to general stylistic rules of the press. Obituaries are similar to necrologies in the sense that they are public announcements and are similar to death notices in the sense that their primary goal is notification.

The obituaries appearing in *Népszabadság* date back to 1944. They are paid for by the authors. However, their relatively low price made them affordable to anyone, which is why the relationship between price and content of the obituaries is not a factor that I analyze. Visually the obituaries didn’t have any significant features during socialism and they appeared on the same page with other common advertisements. In the beginning of the 1990s a small set of graphical choices were introduced: a figure of a chalice, a candle, a cross, a flower or a menorah may today accompany the obituary. Since only a small proportion of my sample applied these graphical features, I decided not to include them in the analysis.

Obituaries are only one of the many means to report the death of a person. Among the other forms of notification, the telegram was widely used until recently and has been replaced by

the telephone, mail, fax or – most recently - email. In rural areas in Europe and within Hungary the practice of the tolling of church bells [kiharangozás] is still common. (Paládi-Kovács 2000:827-828)

Obituaries are activities of social memory firstly as a form of communicative practice, during which the mourners collect private and public stories about the deceased and share it with a memory community. Thus, this communicative practice can be seen as one among the many steps of the mourning process. During the process events and achievements that are worth mentioning and remembering are recalled, recollected and selected by the authors. Secondly, obituaries are memory objects: external forms of sustaining one's memory. As objects, obituaries are preserved texts that belong to the larger group of death writing: from last wills, death cards to funerary inscriptions. As a text, the obituary is a memory vehicle which is heavily influenced by and influences larger cultural and political narratives and the social context. Finally, obituaries are also archival sources for researchers in the present and the future. As Eid remarks (2005:23): “the daily obituary columns will provide a mosaic of social history as valuable to future scholars as John Aubrey's “Brief Lives” (...) is to modern students of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.” The processual aspect of the obituary as social memory indicates that the authors' intentionality is central to my research: biographical data is not randomly selected but serves a certain purpose. The death writing aspect of obituaries explains many linguistic choices in the texts, their standardized and objectivized nature. Finally, positing the obituaries as archival sources has important implications for the research: the re-remembering in this thesis takes these texts out of their original context, my reading of them is distinct from that of the original audience.

Regarding the context of my research, a background on the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Hungary is necessary. Following World War II the communist takeover of Hungary – first within a parliamentary framework, then through the building of a dictatorial state – was

finalized in 1949. The 1956 revolution against the Stalinist regime was suppressed by Soviet troops and János Kádár became the new communist leader of the country. The following 36 years, also known as the Kádár-era, are not homogenous. The first few years between 1956 and 1961 were characterized by retaliations against the enemies of the state. The starting point of my research is 1961, an approximate starting point of the consolidated Kádár-regime (Ripp 2002). This is the year when Kádár gave his famous speech declaring – instead of “he who is not with us is against us” – that “he who is not against us is with us” (Rainer M. 2001). As signs of the consolidation of the regime, the United Nations abandoned the Hungarian problem in 1962, a nationwide amnesty for political prisoners was granted by Kádár in 1963.

In Hungary, as in other countries of the Eastern-bloc there existed an official communist ideology that overvalued equality and rejected social differences based on wealth. Communist ideology, power structures, constraint, prestige and privileges were the cohesive forces of the system at its peak (Kornai 1993). With regard to ideology, Bozóki (2009) distinguishes between a totalitarian (pre-1962) and an authoritarian (1962-1987) rule of power. The totalitarian state aimed to control every sphere of life and human rights became formalities as the state interfered in the private lives of individuals, whose measure of value became loyalty and political reliability (Valuch 2005:21-22). The post-totalitarian, authoritarian state exercised different measures, such as the so-called “de-politicisation” of the system. Szabó goes as far as to claim that the Kádár-regime was the opposite of the totalitarian Rákosi-regime in a sense, it allowed more personal freedom and a slow accumulation of wealth in return for political loyalty (Szabó 1988).

The Church that would otherwise have an important organizing role in the society and in the mediation of values – and not secondarily would play an important role in dealing with bereavement – gradually lost its significance after World War II, and because of lack of religious socialization Hungary is still a relatively secularized society even after the regime

change (Tomka 1998). The Kádár-regime at its maturity achieved relative social peace, where the power legitimized its being with excessive use of the welfare system, that later led to its crisis, and the society agreed to keep silent about political taboos, such as the 1956 revolution, the issue of poverty and ethnical matters (Muraközy 2008:154-158).

The second half of the 1980s marked the double – fiscal then political – crises of the Kádár-regime that eventually led to the regime change in 1990. The democratic transition brought by the reappearance of a number of values in public discourse, such as religion, diversity, free speech and nationalism, at the same time social and income differences starting off from a very low point have grown significantly (Ferge 2000).

The communist image of social structure corresponded to its ideological bases, implying that society was becoming more and more homogenous, the majority of which are workers. They had to be regarded as the ruling class too. Expectations and reality were far from each other though (Haraszti 1989).

With regard to mobility, Hungarian society became relatively open in the two decades following World War II, but this mobility wasn't organic. Instead of the homogenization of society the communist rule created new inequalities on the basis of political position and position in the labor force (Ferge 1969, Andorka 1995). Thus the 1960s – from a mobility perspective – can be described by the growing significance of political capital, the communist party became a channel of mobility in itself. The drastic marginalization of bourgeois and middle-class groups that took place in the 1950s slowed down in the 1960s. These groups later successfully adapted to the changed circumstances and their descendants found themselves in privileged positions when the democratic transition took place. (Utasi 2000, Utasi-A. – Gergely - Becskeházi 1996).



By the middle of the 1980s the landscape was very different from that of the 1960s: the informal economy became widespread, the prestige of those in the political apparatus decreased. Public opinion split into formal and informal spheres: the informal sphere preserved prestige-values from old ones (Kulcsár 1985). Channels of mobility were closing down: the gap between highly-qualified leaders and intellectuals and between other groups in society were widening. Following the democratic transition the role of education, qualifications, skills – especially convertible ones – increased, so did the importance of symbolic capital – connections, creativity, innovation (Kolosi 1991, Szelényi 1990). At the same time, significant groups experienced downward mobility (Ferge 2000).

These changes in the social structure are mirrored in the obituaries. These texts are more than general, public notices: they are written by a particular group of people and are intended to reach a particular audience with a particular aim. Who writes and reads these notices and why, are questions of significance in my analysis. As Peter Burke argues In *History as Social Memory* (1989:107): the aim of the study of collective memory is to find out: “Who wants whom to remember, what and why”. With regard to the question of “who”, it is important to note that the “obituary chances” (Fowler 2007:8) of different social groups vary not according to their moral career or age, but following the rules of elite or class reproduction. This aspect of obituaries is summarized by Gerbner (1980:66): “Obituaries are the Social Register of the middle class”.

The core readership of *Népszabadság* – and the primary authors of obituaries, as we will see – belong to either elite (political, administrative, military, academic, cultural) circles or to the middle class. Both groups are urban in their nature and experience tremendous changes in the era in our focus. The aim of the communist power was to replace the old elite with a new one, which was complete within the political elite and less successful in other spheres. However during the 70s a slow professionalization within the elite took place and mobility channels

started to close down. The middle class consisted of different occupational groups with very distinct trajectories: while the group of teachers, technical and agricultural intellectuals rapidly expanded during socialism and was a channel of mobility, the group of economists and physicians stayed a relatively exclusive one. The double-structure of the Hungarian middle-class has been explored by Szelényi (1992) and Kolosi (2000) as well. It refers to the existence of two intertwined spheres: one that is closely tied to the power and the state (political and middle leaders, cadres, administrative, public office middle leaders), and one that enjoyed a certain degree of independence from it (small industry and trade, economists, small business owners). Prestige research from 1985 (Kulcsár) showed that occupations in the public opinion were evaluated on the basis of knowledge primarily and other factors – such as the social power of an occupation, its usefulness or profitability – were regarded as less important. These prestige patterns, especially the reputation of the cultural elite and teachers are mirrored in the obituaries.

The first issue of *Népszabadság* was published on 2 November 1956 as a continuation of *Szabad Nép* (Free Folk) by the state-party Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) and it remained the central daily newspaper of the party until the regime change in 1989. Until 1994 its letterhead bore the phrase “socialist daily” to express this relationship.

While in my analysis I discuss inferences drawn from the sample, it has to be noted that *Népszabadság* is in no way representative of Hungarian society. Once the most read daily newspaper in the country, it always had rivals with different readership and values. The research is limited also because the newspaper targeted an urban audience, the death-related values and habits of which might be remarkably different from rural Hungary. The research is longitudinal: it aims to describe changes that took place in death-related rituals and behaviors, but it has to be noted that the readership of *Népszabadság* also went through significant changes in the past decades. According to data available the newspaper started off printing

half million copies; by 1971 – at its peak – 730 thousand copies were in circulation. From this point however the decrease is significant; around the time of the regime change the number of copies sold was around 300 thousand, and today it is around 35 thousand, less than one-twentieth of the copies 40 years ago. While *Népszabadság* lost its leading role in the newspaper market, news-consuming habits have also changed significantly. The newspaper-market shrank (Gereben 2002) and broke up into three sectors – the free, the political and the tabloid market – and the unequivocal loser of these changes is the political-public newspaper market.

If the loyal, communist party-member decorated factory worker was the archetypical socialist person, then *Népszabadság* was the archetypical socialist media in a two-fold way: it was the media representing the official values and ideologies of the state, and as the most widely-read Hungarian newspaper the place where the nation-wide practice of “reading between the lines” took place. As Haraszti – back in 1988 – noted:

Communication between the lines already dominates our directed culture. This technique is not the specialty of the artist only. Bureaucrats, too, speak between the lines: they, too, apply self-censorship. Even the most loyal subject must wear bifocals to read between the lines: this is in fact the only way to decipher the real structure of our culture. Real communication takes place only between the lines. And it is public life that is the space between the lines.

(Haraszti 1988:144-145).

The practice of reading between the lines and the fluidity of censorship led to a complex language with innumerable signifiers in public discourse. On stage, the story of Antigone recalled the story of Imre Nagy, the unburied prime minister. In movies, references to the

1848 revolution were filled with messages about 1956. While in retrospect these references are seen as dissident, they were also representing the tacit bargain between power and society. Consequently, when the democratic opposition organized itself in the early 1980s, their target was not to establish mass movements or pave the way towards a new revolution but to create parallel institutions of publicity, the so-called samizdat that would break this compromise and speak openly about the existing taboos without the use of doublespeak.<sup>1</sup>

The referential quality of public discourse during socialism has grave consequences for the analysis here as well: it is neither the manifest nor the latent message of the obituaries that holds truth-value but their relationality.

When looking at the Kádár-regime's relationship towards death, it is essential to point out that the era started with a death – the arrest and execution of Imre Nagy, the prime minister of the 1956 revolution – and ended with a reburial, that of Nagy and his fellow martyrs on 16 June 1989.

The way Kádár and the regime treated the corpse of Nagy is in close association with their identity and fears. The executions – unlike those that took place in 1945 – happened in secret. Nagy's remains stayed within the prison for three years, after which they were secretly transported to a remote, unused corner, Section 301 of the New Public Cemetery, next to the remains of animals from the Budapest Zoo (Dornbach 1994:13-14). Nagy was buried under the false female name "Piroska Borbíró", the coffin covered in tarpaper facing down. The refusal to provide any ritual honors for the deceased signaled that the intention was to erase

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<sup>1</sup> This strategic choice of the Hungarian dissident movement was heavily influenced by Adam Michnik's essay, *The New Evolutionism* (1976). Michnik discards the „reform or revolution” dichotomy as dangerous and instead proposes an innovative framework of action where dissidents address the public instead of the power and create parallel institutions where the power of truth will create an independent public opinion.

them and dispel their roles and ideas from social memory (György 2007). While censorship during the Kádár-regime was fluid, the mentioning of Imre Nagy was a strict taboo.

Thus it is no surprise that just as Nagy was the mythical dead of the regime, his reburial marked the death of it, “the symbolic burial of the post-1956 regime” (Kis 1999:28), followed by Kádár’s actual death three weeks later. Rainer M. ends his monograph on Imre Nagy with a chapter on the meaning of his reburial. In it he describes the cathartic experience of the day that “brought to the surface the very basics of the compromise between the society and Kádár just when the compromise broke up. (...) The horroristic details [of their original burial] made it possible for people to feel honest dismay. Hungarian society which never openly opposed Kádár’s regime recalled the events in 1989 that made an actual or potential opposition possible” (Rainer M. 2001). The symbolic ritual of Imre Nagy’s reburial thus became also the burial of communism and the foundational moment of the new republic. Imre Nagy’s reburial is discussed in detail in Katherine Verdery’s book, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies* (1999). In it she suggests that it was Nagy’s complex biography that made him a good instrument to legitimate various claims in order to determine historical truth and to create a new moral universe. The complicated relationship between regime change and reburials is examined in this research as well.

The era in the focus of my research marked significant ideological, social and discursive changes in Hungary: a shift from a totalitarian towards an authoritarian communist rule leading to the democratic transition in 1990, a politically induced restructuring of the social order and the rise and fall of the national practice of “reading between the lines” in public discourse. One of the aims of this research is to show how these processes were reflected in society through the reading of obituaries.

## CHAPTER 2: MEMORY, DEATH AND BEREAVEMENT

This thesis utilizes a social constructionist approach. Social constructionism emphasizes that every human experience is historically, socially and culturally situated. Research from such a stance focuses on how social reality is constructed and on the implications of these constructs (Willig 2001:7). Hacking (1999:5) warns about the possible overuse of the social constructionist perspective. In order to test its applicability instead of defining social constructionism we should ask, he argues, what is the point in applying it to our research.

In this research the aim is to examine the social aspects of death and mourning. However universal the fact of death might be, reactions to it vary over cultures and ages. As Huntington and Metcalf (1979:3) put it, the diversity of these reactions is never random but always meaningful. Death itself is considered to have numerous sociocultural meanings (Cicirelli 2002), but when facing death our most important cultural values also appear: “life becomes transparent against the background of death, and fundamental social and cultural issues are revealed” (Huntington-Metcalf 1979:3). Thus, the point of a social constructionist analysis of obituaries is to explore how norms and values influence – and are influenced by – the way the death of a person is portrayed.

As social constructionism argues that language has a central role in the construction of reality, language and its analysis is in the focus of this research. In their seminal work on metaphors Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that – more than being mere poetic tools – metaphors are central to society’s conceptual systems and practices. Metaphors are not just matters of language, “human thought processes are (...) metaphorical.” (1980:6). The conceptual metaphor theory helps us read obituaries in a certain way, since, as its argument states, a culture’s given values are coherent with the metaphorical structures prevailing in it.

From a social constructionist approach towards texts, it logically follows that the most fitting methodological tools are content analysis with a mixed methods approach. This is the framework in which my analysis of death-related values and norms in obituaries takes place.

The term collective memory was first used by Hugo van Hofmansthal in 1902 (1902) but the significant breakthrough was brought by the publishing of Maurice Halbwachs's work, *The Social Frameworks of Memory* in 1925 – in which he argued that contrary to what Bergson and Freud claim, memory is a social phenomenon (1925).

Building on, but also disputing Halbwachs' theory, Assman uses the terms “communicative” and “cultural” memory (2006). According to Assmann it is almost impossible to distinguish between individual and social memory. To a certain degree individual memory is always social, just like the use of language is. The term “communicative memory” serves to describe this social aspect of individual memory. It builds on human interactions and emotions are central to it. Thus, communicative memory is fluid – but there exists a cultural memory on the other end of the individual-public spectrum, which appears in traditions, myths, and historical accounts (Assmann 2006).

Pierre Nora's seminal concept, “les lieux de mémoire”, “sites of memory” assumes that memory went through a radical transformation, there are no longer “real environments of memory”, that is why sites of memory appeared (1989:7). Sites of memory are material, symbolic and functional at the same time and take many shapes (from archives to calendars, memorials to memorial days).

The observation that social memory is vulnerable to power appeared as early as *The Social Frameworks of Memory* by Halbwachs. According to him the memory of subordinate groups is always fragile (1925). Criticizing Halbwachs, Schwartz notes (1982:395-96) that while a re-evaluation of the past certainly exists, the past also imposes limitations on the present.

How does the concept of social memory help us understand obituaries and their meanings? Or to turn the question around: which aspects of social memory can be highlighted through the analysis of these texts?

First, from the perspective of death it is clear that memories are mediators between what is accessible and what no longer is. Nora (1989:19) makes this connection between sites of memory and death explicit: “For if we accept that the most fundamental purpose of the *lieu de memoire* is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish the state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial ... it is also clear that *lieu de memoire* only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis”. Thus, obituaries can be considered as sites of memory.

Second, obituaries shed light on communities and group identities that both influence how memory is structured and how it is recalled. The terms for describing memories are embedded in social membership and the importance of these networks is also reinforced through them.

Another way to conceptualize this relationship between obituaries and social memory is to locate them as activities of communicative memory as described by Assmann above. This approach is particularly useful when – as in my case – the communicative memory that takes place between the individual and the community and that builds on first-hand experiences is in friction with the more hierarchical, organized, official cultural memory. The task of harmonizing the relationship of the two necessitates different narrative strategies from those who remember (Kovács 2010).

Literature on social memory also points to an “inverse” reading of obituaries: namely what is missing from them. As Burke explains (1989:107-108), social memory can be understood through the examination of “the social organization of forgetting”, that is: “who wants whom to forget what and why”. The fact that remembering is not randomly selective, but mirrors the



social order is called “structural amnesia” by Myszal (2003:30). It is important to emphasize though that is not only dominant groups, institutions or coercion that shape forgetting; as explained by Buckley-Zistel, amnesia is a coping mechanism which helps the individual or the group to avoid antagonisms (2011:76). The terms “forgetting” and “amnesia” are interchangeably used here, it is important to note however that there is difference between memories that are repressed and later recalled and memories that really disappear. Consequently, as I show in my analysis, an inverse reading of obituaries is possible: they tell as much as they hide about someone’s life, selecting socially acceptable events and achievements, omitting improper ones. But once a political change takes place, “forgotten” life achievements can be brought back to the fore in the texts.

Finally, social memory has a special significance in societies in acute change. The complexities arising from such a transition are summarized by Andrews (2000:192). Following the democratic transitions Eastern European societies had to face the task of re-evaluating their pasts. “However, as biography precedes history, the individuals of these societies must first make the transition in their identities from the old regime to the markedly altered present. Who were they then, who are they now, and who do they now perceive themselves as having been then?” Mark (2010) emphasizes that the democratic transitions in Eastern Europe are radically different regarding the question of memory from other collapses of dictatorial regimes (Spain, Portugal, Greece). He argues that Eastern European transformations led to an intensification of collective memory practices, to an escalation of “memory wars” played out in the political field. The post-1990 obituaries and the biographies they contain serve as examples of these processes.

The idea that Western society is in denial of death was made popular first by Ernest Becker in 1973 (1973). This claim has been revisited and detailed in a number of significant works since then. Ariès (1983), who undertook the work to write the social history of death, argued that

death in modernity has become hidden from public discussion for a number of reasons: medicalization, commodification, technologization, secularization and individualization. Elias (1985) also claims that repression surrounding death and mourning increased in modernity and dying has been removed from the public. He claims that we are confused about death because we lost our rituals, and the individualistic modern society makes it hard to establish new ones. Not everyone agrees with the sequestration-thesis. Littlewood (1993) does not think that death-related rituals disappeared, he asserts that they have been relocated in the private sphere. Baudrillard (1993) has a different view: though he agrees that modern culture wants to repress death, he thinks that it ultimately fails to do so and death keeps coming back. Kellehear (2007) collects arguments that confirm a contemporary culture of death similar to what Ariès described as a romantic death: expressive mourning, a celebration of the individual. Mocking the death-taboo thesis, Walter (1991:294) writes: “Death is a very badly kept secret; such an unmentionable topic that there are over 650 books now in print asserting that we are ignoring the subject.” He draws up the ideal type of a postmodern death, individualistic and uncoded. Noys (2005) argues that both the sequestration-thesis and its counterarguments are simplistic views of the issue. Instead approaches are necessary that are capable of dealing with the “complex ways in which death is invisible and highly visible in modern culture” (2005:3).

Death-related taboos also appear when we describe the cause of death: instead of using the name of terminal illnesses people often use euphemisms. In her seminal work *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag (1977) argues that these euphemisms in the case of cancer render the disease “socially as well as physically mortifying.” The use of cancer-related metaphors make the illness look disgraceful, consequently she poses that they should be eliminated from discourse, to turn cancer into a biological problem instead of a social or moral one.

My thesis aims to translate these arguments to an empirical research in a particular, Eastern European historical context. Thus, in relation to the death-taboo its aim is two-fold: to identify in what death-related practices and expressions the death-taboo appears, and to examine how it takes shape in a social and political background different from the Western context from which these theories originate.

The analysis of the findings puts the above theories in an empirical context in a number of ways. Firstly, the sequestration-thesis that suggests that death is being removed from the community and is becoming a private matter, is examined in death-related practices and the authorship of the obituaries. Secondly, death-taboo is analyzed primarily through the linguistic choices in the obituaries, the appearance of metaphors, euphemisms and attributives. Finally, the sequestration-thesis also claims that modern death can be characterized by a loss of rituals, previously existing codes, and clichés. Whether such a change is taking place in Hungary in funeral-practices is also examined in my analysis.

As I already pointed out above, memories serve as mediators when facing the death of a person. The constructivist model of grief claims that the main task of grief is to create meaningful biographies of the deceased, which make it possible for the mourners to somehow integrate him/her into their lives (Kastenbaum 2002:385). Thus, as Viktor Frankl explains, after an encounter with death the first thing we face is the story of a person, and the purpose of grief is to find a meaning in this story (Frankl 1984). Dawkins goes as far as to claim that “mimetic immortality can be achieved when one lives on through the memory of one’s deeds” (Dawkins 1990:214). Obituaries as intersubjective spaces where this process of meaning-making is taking place, reflect on these meanings and how these meanings are socially patterned.

The relationship between mourning and memory is also historically and culturally situated. For example Ariès argues that it is the Christian judicial conception of the world that gave birth to the idea of “life as a biography” in the Middle Ages (1983:103). Le Goff – who also connects Christianity and death-related memory processes – claims that biographical accounts of the deceased became less pronounced in the same period (Le Goff 1992).

Regarding the present, modernity’s fascination with biographies led to Plummer going so far as to call the present the “auto/biographical society” (Plummer 2001:28,78). In *The Biographical Illusion*, Bourdieu (1986) gives account of why this focus on biographies is misleading. He claims that the assumption that life constitutes a totality, a coherent and oriented whole that can and must be understood as the unitary expression of a purpose of a project is mistaken and illusory. Bauman (1992) doesn’t argue with this illusion, instead he claims that it’s gone once society progressed from modernity to postmodernity. In modernity, identity “was something built and to be built level by level, storey by storey, from the ground floor up. (...) From childhood, through adolescence, into the mature age – this is how biography moved, never jumping stages either.” (1992:164-165).

What is important for the present research is to note that these definitely existing attempts towards the “biographical illusion” of a linear, progressing life take place against the backdrop of a very fragmented history where the expectations about sameness and consistency also played part in the construction of biographies. However, expectations are not the only driving forces of these attempts: as Goffman’s definition of the individual’s “moral career” suggests (1961), it is the interplay between external and internal identities from where a person’s biography arises.

The analysis of obituaries often focuses on the question of gender where findings are easily obtained and most visible (Kastenbaum, Paytn and Kastenbaum 1977, Moses 1994, Bytheway

and Johnson 1996). These papers all point to a continuing gender inequality after death: women are less represented in obituaries in a number of ways. As for the reasons for this inequality, a number of explanations have been considered. In his encyclopedia on death, Kastenbaum (2002:312-314) lists five possible effects: the cohort effect (obituaries do not reflect inequalities of the present but those that existed during the active years of the deceased); the period effect (a conservative wave in the 80s is reflected in the obituaries); the location effect (where women outnumber men, their obituary chances are better); the decision-making effect (obituary writers are men); and the social inequality effect (inequality in obituaries reflects social inequality).

The perspective that Bridget Fowler takes on obituaries in her book *Obituary as Collective Memory* adopts a similar perspective to mine: she puts her analysis in the context of social memory with the use of Halbwachs' and Bourdieu's work (Fowler 2007). Fowler connects theoretical, historical and empirical dimensions in her book – the driving concepts of which are drawn from Bourdieu's logic of practice, the structured mentalités of death and the concept of social memory. Finally, a research done by Gary L. Long (1987) shows many similarities with my research aims: he uses content analysis to see how the changes of social structure appear in obituaries: its hypothesis is that organizationally related content would grow in the texts and its findings show a growth in standardized, impersonal depictions of the deceased in obituaries.

In my research I examine the gender inequality present in obituaries utilizing Kastenbaum's classification of possible effects. My analysis also builds on Fowler's insights about the different obituary chances of the dead and about the obituaries functioning as "sociodicy". However, it has to be noted, that the texts she analyzed were written about people of a certain social significance chosen by journalists, "mundane" lives are not examined in her book.

Given the similar scope of our researches I used Long's work to compare my findings to his and to draw conclusions about the possible explanations behind the differences between them.

In conclusion, the historical context and death-related literature I discussed above shaped the direction of my research in a number of ways. First, it made it clear, that obituaries are a world in themselves, thus an examination of the genre of obituaries is necessary. Second, the research focuses on death-related linguistic choices and practices in order to draw conclusions regarding the death-taboo and prevailing death-concepts in society. Third, an analysis of social membership, continuing inequalities after death and the construction of biographies connects how social context affects practice and individual narratives. Finally, the political context and how it is related to memory in the obituaries is examined in detail in the thesis.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS AND FRAMEWORK

### 3.1. Research design

When drawing up the research design I followed the steps of content analysis as explained by Krippendorff (1980:83): unitizing; sampling; recording and coding; data reduction; inferring contextual phenomena and narrating the answer to the research question.

**(1) Unitizing:** One unit of analysis is one obituary taken from *Népszabadság*'s obituary page. Old issues of *Népszabadság* can be accessed in the National Széchényi Library in Budapest either on microfilm (1961-1993) or in the reading hall (1993-2000).

**(2) Sampling:** Sampling is generally defined as a method of selecting cases from a larger population in order to make inferences to it (Axinn-Pearce 2006:74). Two large categories within the field of sampling are probability (simple random, stratified random, some forms of cluster sampling) and non-probability (e.g. quota, opportunity) sampling (Sapsford-Jupp 2006:30). Krippendorff warns (1980:112-113) that when choosing sampling techniques for content analysis one has to consider problems that prevent the indiscriminate application of statistical sampling theory and probability sampling for a research. The sample design of the research has been drawn up bearing these considerations and a number of problems specific to obituaries in mind. I chose to analyze each obituary appearing in the month of June within the studied period. I chose non-probability sampling in order to be able to draw longitudinal inferences from the text and to compare different sub-groups within the sample. As opposed to quota sampling the desired number of sample cases was not pre-calculated: this gave me an opportunity to compare the number of obituaries appearing each year. I chose to include the month of June in the sample so as to be able to draw conclusions regarding funerary rituals that are not disturbed by seasonal differences (e.g. frosts or ground water leading to an increase in the number of cremations).

**(3) Recording/coding.** The obituaries from the sample were fully transcribed. The aim of the coding was two-fold: the examination of “specific narratives” and the analysis of “narrative templates”. According to Wertsch (2002:175) “specific narratives” give concrete information of facts, while “narrative templates”: are generalized schematic structures. The examination of the latter gives us insights about the types of storylines applied in the given narrative. The notion of narrative templates is similar to what Brown and Yule (1983) identify as “topic frameworks”: looking at the formal models of the text its constituent topics can be labeled and related. Once this topic framework was mapped, the identified sub-topics were driving the coding process.

**(4) Data reduction.** During the process of data reduction the texts of the obituaries were classified into a limited number of variables according to previously identified themes and topics, together with statistics about the texts themselves (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Key variables of the obituary sample**

Text	Authorship	Informing	Traits	Identity	Death	Achievements	Funeral
date of obituary	author	mourning	traits	gender	place of death	political title	place of burial
number of characters		thoughts, messages		age	date of death	political position	date of funeral
structure				name	word for death	political achievement	funeral invitation
				birth name	description of death	awards	funeral paid by
				original name		civic achievement	cremation
				nickname		personal role	funeral-related requests
				occupation		biography	religious references
						number of positions	
						timescapes	

**(5) Inferring contextual phenomena.** According to Krippendorff (1980:85) this process moves “an analysis outside the data. (...) It points to unobserved phenomena in the context of



interest” of the researcher, with warrants about its applicability. In the next chapter my findings are presented with a reference to either available statistics regarding demographical data (mean age of the deceased, migration data, occupational statistics, causes of death statistics)<sup>2</sup> or put in a political context where necessary (the cultural politics of the time, censorship and taboos, the memory of 1956, a background on political awards). Finally, a number of obituaries are contextualized with information available about the deceased. For the sake of consistency, these biographical data are based on the online version of the Hungarian Biographical Lexicon, *Magyar Életrajzi Lexikon 1900-1990* (Kenyeres 1994).

**(6) Narrating the answer to the research question.** The Results & Analysis chapter of the thesis contains both the findings and their interpretation.

### 3.2. Validity and reliability

When using the term validity, a distinction between internal (validity of the classification scheme) and external validity (validity of the interpretation) is often being made (Weber 1990:18). Cresswell (2007) draws up eight validity-strengthening strategies – two of which at least are necessary for qualitative researchers: prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer review, refining hypothesis as the inquiry advances, clarifying researcher bias, the researcher solicits participants views, rich and thick description and external audits. The present thesis builds on a pilot study analyzing obituaries from 1961, 1986 and 2001 (Nagy 2012). A theoretical triangulation – an attempt to apply different theories to observations – is present in the Results & Analysis Chapter. The thesis has been reviewed during workshops and consultations at Central European University. My aim was to give a detailed description of the findings and data both in order to allow the readers draw

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<sup>2</sup> Wherever such a statistical comparison is made, data are taken from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office’s (KSH) tables published on the KSH’s website.

their own conclusions. Finally, during the research a number of external audiences and review – notably an interview about the research in HVG (Bedő 2013) and discussions with historians - helped me refine my focus.

Reliability is “the extent to which a test or procedure produces similar results under constant conditions” (Bell 1999:117). Krippendorff identifies three types of reliability in the context of content analysis (1980:130-154): stability, reproducibility and accuracy. In order to avoid inaccuracies and potential recording and coding mistakes the texts were reviewed several times. In order to achieve accuracy during the coding phase, computer programs (SPSS, Microsoft Excel) were used.

### **3.3. Research ethics**

Since archival research doesn't involve active participation of respondents, no approval from them was necessary. The issue of confidentiality – whether the names of the deceased should appear in the research – was considered. However, for the sake of inferring contextual phenomena I decided to keep the names. The use of *Népszabadság* for academic purposes raises no copyright issues.

### **3.4. Limitations**

As discussed in the Introduction, the sample taken from *Népszabadság* is not representative of Hungarian society. The method of content analysis poses a number of limitations as well: instead of causal links my aim was to draw attention to contingencies.

A further difficulty arises from the fact that the language of the obituaries, namely Hungarian, is different from that of the thesis. Instead of translating the full amount of the source material, I chose to conduct the steps of the research in Hungarian and translate the findings to

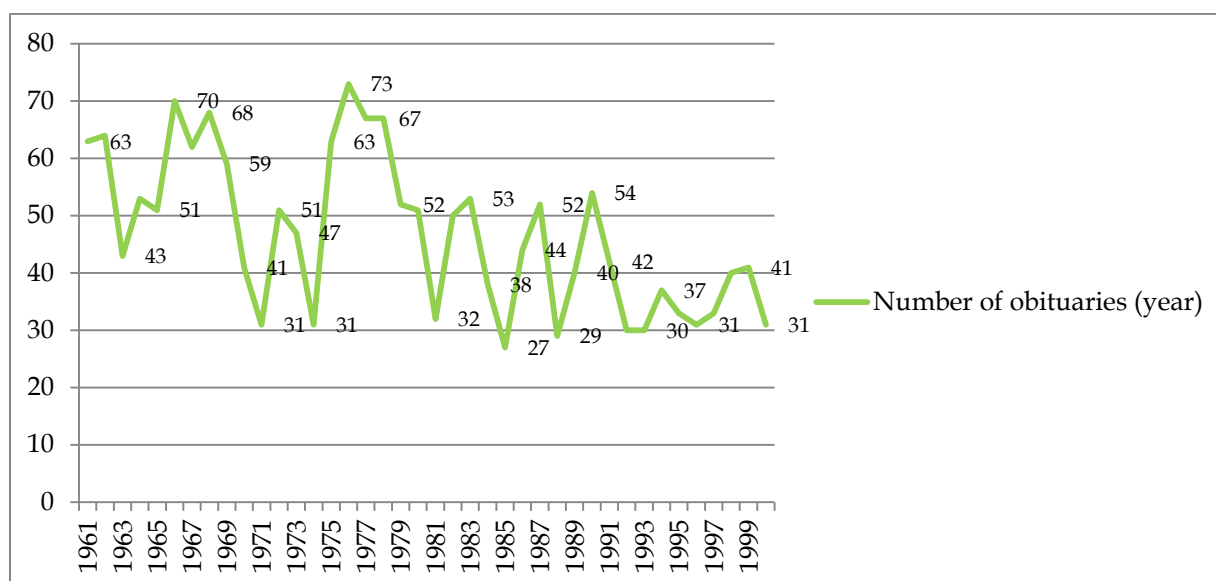
English. When the differences between the source language and that of the thesis are meaningful, the verbatim translation is given.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS & ANALYSIS

### 4.1. Obituary as a genre: statistics and characteristics

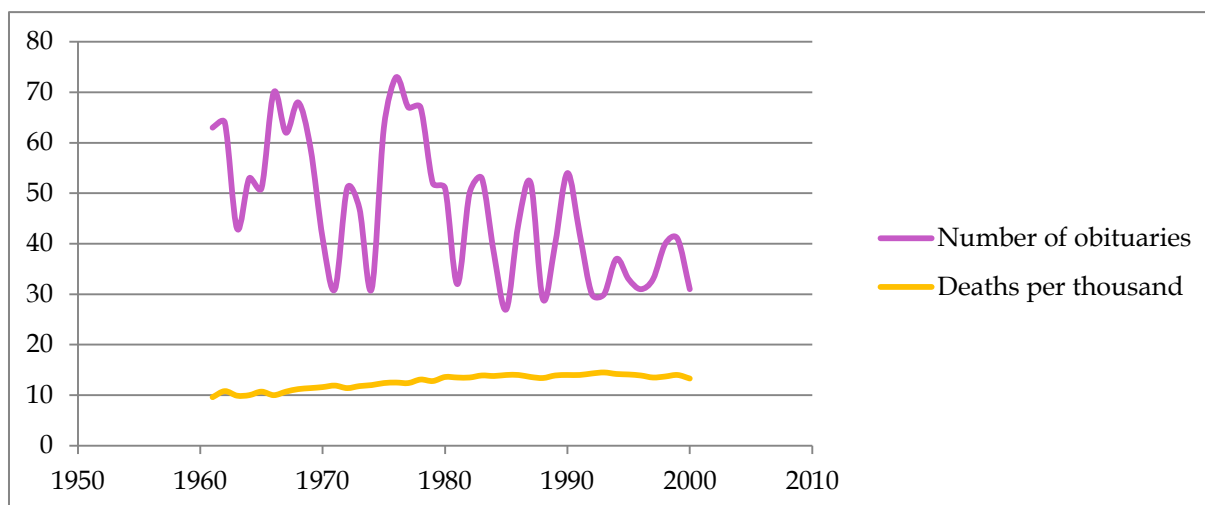
The overall number of obituaries in the sample is 1876. These were collected from between 1961 and 2000. The annual breakdown of the sample and the annual gender statistics are given in the Appendix. Figure 1 shows that the number of obituaries declines after the regime change – both an effect of the changing readership and a possible change of the genre's position. It can be argued that this decline is in line with the trend that death-related rituals are becoming more private (Littlewood 1993). In order to examine whether any of these changes represent changes in actual mortality numbers, Figure 2 compares these statistics. It clearly shows that no such connection exists.

**Figure 1: 1961-2000 Number of obituaries**



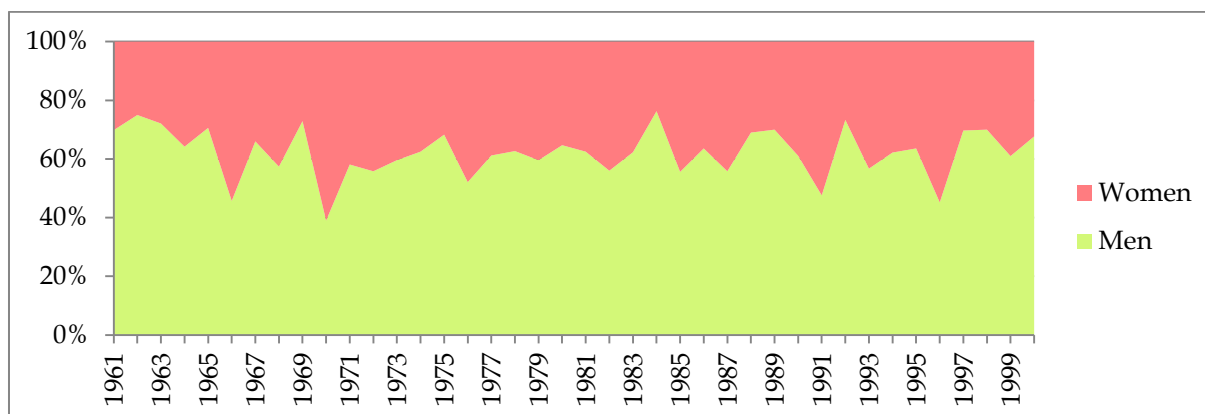
**Figure 2: 1961-2000 Number of obituaries / 1961-2000 National deaths per thousand**

Source: KSH



The overall male-female ratio within the obituaries is 63.5% to 36.5%. Figure 3 contains the annual breakdown of these numbers. It is clear that no trend or change is visible that would suggest that women are getting more representation in obituaries than they used to. Connecting this finding with the different effects described previously (Kastenbaum 2002: 312-314) it seems the decision-making effect and the social inequality-effect are plausible explanations of gender indifferences in Hungary. While the period and the location-effect do not apply to this research, one possible explanation, the cohort-effect, is clearly falsified: women with more emancipated lives are not represented by a higher number of obituaries.

**Figure 3: Gender distribution in obituaries**



For both men and women, the average ages of death in the obituaries are between 66 and 68 and relatively constant throughout the decades. Nationally there is considerable difference between the life-expectancy of women and men and over time a substantial change also took place: prospects for men became worse, while those for women became better. The differences between national statistics and the sample warn that age influences obituary chances, possibly in relation with the presence of a surviving widow or family member who can publish an obituary. Those who die alone thus have fewer obituary chances.

As I described previously, the use of a topic framework helps me get an overview of the structure of obituaries, the variation of this structure and to locate an internal hierarchy of the text. The aim of identifying topic frameworks in the present study is two-fold: analyzing structural variation – whether it increases or decreases over time, and identifying the optional and obligatory elements of the text.

Table 3 gives an example of the ideal type of a Hungarian obituary – in Hungarian and English. I located seven different sections within the obituaries with a relatively fixed structure: the order in which the sections follow each other doesn't vary much within the sample. This suggests that the genre of obituaries is a static one which doesn't allow for much freedom of expression. The only “moving” section within the obituary is “authorship”, which tends to appear either as the first or as the last part of the text.

**Table 3: Obituary structure**

Authorship	Informing	Traits	Identity	Death	Achievements	Funeral	Authorship
A Vasas gyár munkatársai	fájdalommal közlik azokkal, akik ismerték, hogy	szeretett	munkatársunk, Horváth János	hosszú szenvedés után elhunyt.	A munkásmozgalom hűséges tagja volt.	Temetése június 20-án, a Farkasréti temetőben lesz.	
The workers of Vasas Factory	regretfully inform those who knew him that	that our beloved	colleague, János Horváth	passed away after long suffering.	He was a loyal member of the workers' movement	The funeral will take place 20 June, in Farkasréti cemetery.	

Table 4 shows the most common obituary-structures. We see that the texts show very little structural variation: four-fifths of them follow the order described in the example above. However, a “complete” obituary, with all the elements listed is very rare. The most common elements missing are traits and achievements – in other words, life-related content – while death and identity are considered obligatory parts of the text. We also see that obituaries usually contain what is considered essential: quotes, messages, requests, thoughts almost never appear in them.

**Table 4: Structural variation of obituaries**

authorship	informing	traits	identity	death	achievements	funeral	percentage
							24.1%
							16.8%
							10.3%
							8.9%
							5.7%
							4.7%
							3.6%
							3.5%
							2.9%
							1.8%
							<b>82.5%</b>

With regard to changes in the structure of the obituary, the most significant of these is that the ratio of life achievements grows within the text throughout the era. In the initial year researched it takes up 12% of the obituary's text; in 1980, this ratio reaches 18.4% and in the last year, 2000, it reaches 24%. The depiction of life becomes more and more central within the obituary. This may be related to the changing function of such a text – less serving notification than commemoration. These changes are in accordance with the claims of relevant literature that as death-related rituals have been removed from the community in modernity (Littlewood 1993), intersubjective space, such as obituaries, is used for interaction to create meaning and narratives to fill this void (Kastenbaum 2002:386). This is also very similar to what the constructivist model of grief claims, that “the biographies of the dead” seem to be a primary resource for repair work (Long 1987:988).

#### **4.2. Death-related practices and values in obituaries**

Death-related values, practices and their changes can be captured in a number of ways. Firstly, I analyze descriptions of death to draw conclusions from the linguistic choices of the authors. Secondly, I look at mourning expressions from the same perspective. Finally, I summarize funerary practices and their changes to give a view on how they have changed.

Structurally and thematically the announcement of death is the center of the obituary. It includes information regarding the circumstances of death, the antecedents of death, and the event of death itself.

With regard to the circumstances of death I expected that these details would become less frequent as we progress in time from the 1960s, mirroring the changing function of obituaries already discussed previously. The place of death is indeed disappearing from obituaries. No such longitudinal trend could be observed in the case of date of death. With the



medicalization of death, the majority of modern deaths take place in hospitals which carries no personal meaning for the deceased or the family.

The death of the deceased is expressed with the term “passed away”, or “died” in 90% of the cases. The puritan wording does not change during the years. Very few religious references appear after 1990. Table 5 shows the phrases used to express the death of the deceased. Direct synonyms are grouped together in the second column, their distribution is shown in the third one.

As is postulated by the extensive literature about the taboo nature of death, the death-metaphors and euphemisms in the obituaries could be read as signs of such a death-taboo. As Elias explains, dying has become a blank area (1985:28) on the social map and taboos prohibit the expression of feelings when talking about it. Walter blames the norm of privacy for hiding the pain of dying from public view (Walter 1994:23-24). Kastenbaum (2002) goes as far as to point to those who are responsible. He argues that the euphemistic description of dying became common place in the US and in Europe in the early 20th century because “of the sensitive nomenclature fostered (...) by unctuous funeral directors” (246).

In contrast to these approaches I believe that a more profound examination of these metaphors is necessary. The prevalent use of metaphors does not prove the sequestration-thesis, at the same time the lack of them does not falsify it. As Lakoff and Johnson argue (1980), notions as intangible as life, love, memory or death are often metaphorically represented – and this has very little to do with their taboo nature. The conceptual constructs surrounding death are given in the first column of Table 5. In 95% of the cases death is simply seen and described as the end, and only in the remaining 5% do other constructs – death as a rest, death as a journey, death as a loss, death as a joyful life – appear. This shows a quite secular, demystified

approach to death. The secularization of death is a trend often mentioned in related literature (Ariès 1983, Elias 1985, Feifel 1959) as a feature of modern death.

**Table 5: Expressions of death**

Concept	Expression	Occurrence
<b>Death is the end</b>	Passed away	1535
	Died (death, deceased)	155
	Funeral will take place (will bid farewell, will bury him/her, will put his/her remains to rest)	72
	Finished his life (finished his Earthly life, finished his work, ceased to be, ended, ended his illness)	12
	His/her heart ceased beating	6
	Ended his life	1
<b>Death is a journey</b>	Left us alone (left us forever, left me forever, left those who loved him forever, left me, left me alone)	53
	Departed (departed from among us, departed forever, followed our mother)	16
<b>Death is a rest</b>	Fell asleep (fell asleep forever, came to rest)	17
<b>Death is a loss</b>	Became victim of (an accident, a fatal accident, a fatal car accident)	4
	Lost his/her life	2
	We lost him/her	1
<b>Total:</b>		<b>1876</b>

Specific causes of death are given in 18 cases, 15 of which are accidents. In every other case euphemisms are used to describe the cause. Table 6 lists these descriptions. While we do know that these are coded names for terminal diseases or causes of death, there is no data available to compare them in order to deduce the real meaning behind the obituaries. Conventional knowledge connects “tragic circumstances” to a violent form of death – either suicide or murder. But the term “tragic suddenness” may refer to a number of other causes, i.e. from cardiovascular diseases. These numbers are in correspondence with general statistics available regarding causes of death in Hungary (KSH 2008). Diseases of the circulatory system were responsible for 45% of deaths in 1960 and 52% of deaths in 1990. Neoplasms

caused 17% of the deaths in 1960 and 21% of all deaths in 1990. Violent deaths occurred in 5% of all deaths in 1960 and in 1990. While diseases of the respiratory system were more common in 1960, 11 of all deaths were caused by such illnesses, while starting in 1990, diseases of the digestive system became common, causing 6% of all deaths.

**Table 6: Expressions of antecedents of death**

Description	Occurrence
<b>Unexpectedly</b> (with unexpected suddenness / with tragic suddenness)	311
<b>After a long illness</b> (after a grave illness / after a grave illness filled with suffering / after a long, grave illness / after grave suffering / after long suffering / after long and painful suffering)	256
<b>After a short illness</b> (after short suffering)	96
<b>After a long illness born with patience</b> (self-discipline, heroism etc.)	43
<b>Silently</b> (peacefully)	35
<b>Tragically</b> (among tragic circumstances)	34
<b>In an accident</b> (car accident, traffic accident, tragic accident, sport accident, plane crash)	15
<b>In an incurable disease</b>	7
<b>During work</b>	4
<b>In a heart attack</b>	3
<b>At a young age</b>	2
	806

As for the function and significance of the use of euphemisms, Sontag's seminal work, *Illness as Metaphor* (1977) offers a possible explanation: diseases that are feared and thus treated as "mysteries" are felt to be contagious and sufferers are shunned from society. Though Sontag's work focuses on cancer as the master disease of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the observation is a general one.

I find the link that she draws between euphemisms, stigma and the isolation of the terminally ill from society to be powerful. Yet, there is no correlation between diseases that are more stigmatized in society and the euphemisms used to describe them in my research: cancer has a

euphemistic description just as cardiovascular diseases or diabetes. Instead, I propose that we look at euphemisms as tools that actually facilitate conversation about painful, problematic matters, such as terminal diseases. As Anne Hunsaker Hawkins remarks (1999), Sontag's suggestion to strip diseases from their symbolic meaning is neither possible nor desirable because it is through the use of metaphors and euphemisms that one makes sense of his/her experience. These euphemisms have an additional value compared to simply identifying the cause of death – they can contain information about the experience of the dying trajectory. The emphasis put on the “length” of the illness/suffering preceding death marks a characteristic of modern death: namely that with the emergence of chronic diseases as main causes of death in modern societies, the dying trajectory of the terminally ill becomes a gradual decline. There is another aspect from which these temporal features of the antecedents of death can be examined, the references made to the length of an illness or the tragic suddenness of the event: the fact that only a small proportion do not mention the temporality of death might indicate how society's concepts of a “good death” are related to a timely manner of death.

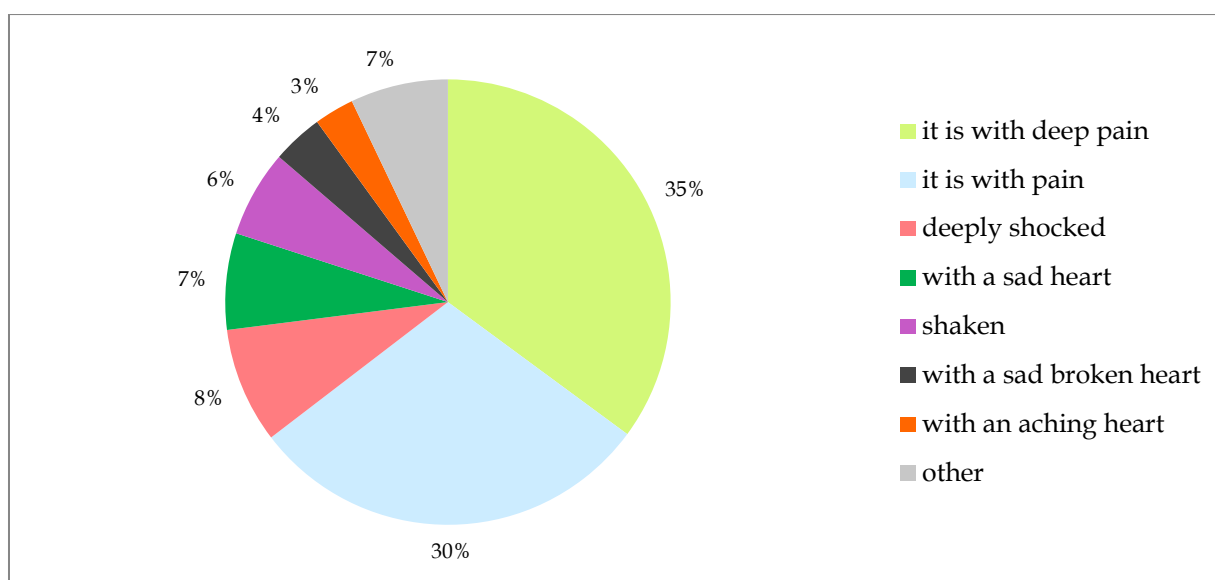
Regarding the behavior of the terminally ill, a modified version of Parsons' concept (1951) of the sick-role is taking shape: the terminally ill is expected to behave with “patience”, “humility”, “self-discipline” and “heroism”. As opposed to the original version of the sick-role concept, here, the dying person is no longer expected to fight the disease but to accept it and bear it with dignity.

Informing phrases in the obituaries appear in 79% of all the cases. They may take two general forms: a more objective one (“the family announces that”, “we inform you about”), and one that contains references to emotions felt by the mourners (“we are heartbroken to announce” “it is with a sad, broken heart that the family informs you”). These expressions of individual grief take place in the context of a society which always controls and polices mourning

(Kastenbaum 2002:387). Consequently a look at the form these emotions take reveals information about norms and rules related to mourning.

Figure 4 contains the most common expressions of mourning: 69% of all obituaries contain such expressions. We see that they take a relatively standardized form – two-thirds of them state that “it is with pain / deep pain” that they announce the death, 15% express shock and being shaken. The rest are synonyms with these terms. Very few of these phrases contain expressions of extreme emotions.

**Figure 4: Expressions of mourning**



It is argued both by Ariès and Peters that clichés or a code of behavior is necessary for mourners to express their emotions. Ariès claims that these are needed because the transition from everyday life to the world of feelings is not an easy one, as “the distance between the languages is too great” (1983:578). Peters (2007:89) uses a quote from Thomas Mann’s *Joseph and His Brothers* to give an example of why “mythic clichés” are crucial in expressing private emotions:

Crimson and swollen, he said, his voice trembling, “is my countenance weeping. For deep-bowed in my affliction I sit down to

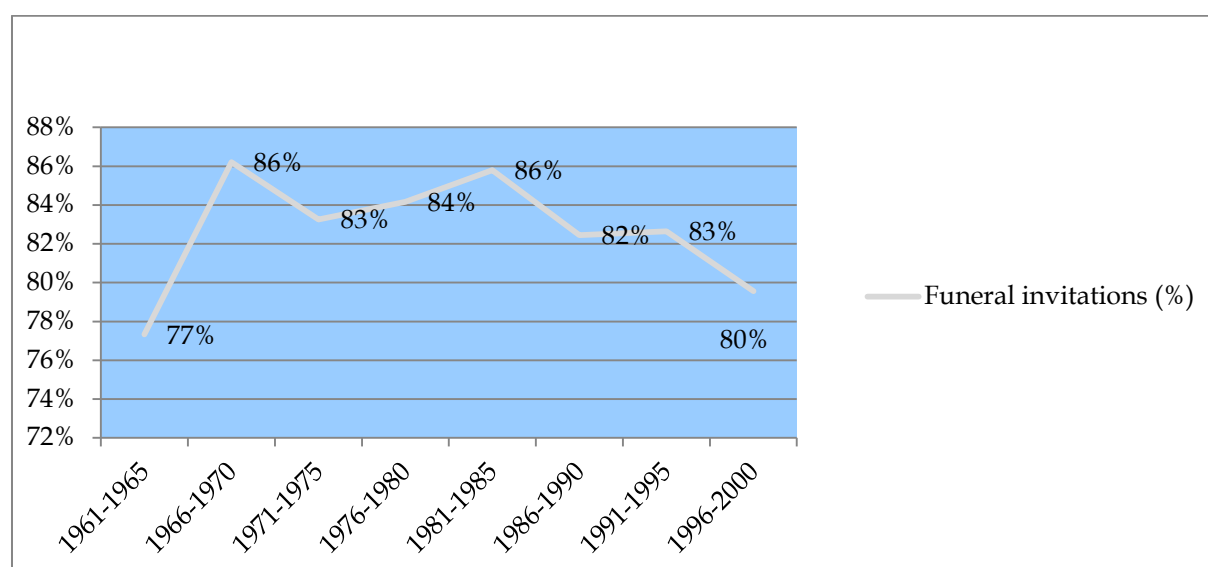
weep, and my face is wet with the tears that flow down on it.” The words, as one could tell, were not original with him. For Noah, according to the legend, was supposed to have said some such thing, and Jacob made it his own. And indeed it is good, it is convenient and consoling, that from the suffering of our ancestors we inherit right and suitable words in which to clothe our own, which then fit it as though they were made for it... Certainly, Jacob could do his grief no greater honour than to set it on a level with the great flood and apply to it words which were coined for that catastrophe. At all events, he spoke and lamented much in his despair, in words already coined or only half-coined.

(quoted by Peters 2007:89)

Many theories that suggest that in modernity death has become a taboo, find evidence in the contemporary expressions of mourning for their claim. Elias (1985:24) states that while these clichés are still in use, they have become shallow and meaningless, therefore people are turning away from them. This is in harmony with Walter’s claim that after old rituals became emptied of meaning, postmodern death is characterized by an individualistic, expressive show of feelings during mourning (Walter 1996:194). None of this is reflected in the data I analyzed. While it can be argued that the clichés used are shallow, there is no change in their usage over the years. It is reasonable to suggest however that a certain suppression of mourning is reflected in the phrases shown above. Agreeing with Ariès, I also found that modern mourning is an “extension of modesty” (1983:578), where the mourner is in control of his/her pain.

Not every obituary is an invitation to a funeral. In a number of cases only the death is mentioned, often times the funeral already took place (“in a narrow family circle”). These decisions made by the mourners are influenced by a number of factors. One of these is time, others may be last wishes of the deceased (“in accordance with his/her last wishes we buried him/her in privacy”), and funerary norms: potential changes in the private nature of funerals. Figure 5 shows how the proportion of obituaries that contain funerary invitations has changed over time. We see that the change is not linear: in the first period, there is an increase (1961-1965), in the second period, the ratio of funeral invitations is relatively high (1965-1985), finally, it slowly decreases again (1985-2000). The relatively low number in the early 60s is explained by the technical difficulties: in many cases there was simply not enough time between the death and the funeral for invitations. Even after the post-1985 decrease, funerals are still public events in Hungary, only every fifth is held in privacy. This finding does not support Ariès’s (1983:576) claim that funerals become more private in the modern age, which he sees as connected to the general privatization of death.

**Figure 5: 1961-2000 Ratio in funeral invitations in obituaries**



25% of the obituaries specify that the funeral will take the form of cremation. Note that this is complementary, the casket burial is never indicated – as it is the mainstream funerary

practice. It is useful to compare the data in obituaries with national historical data available (Davies-Mates 2005) (see Figure 6). The first mention of initiatives towards cremation in Hungary dates from 1833, necessitated by the large number of victims claimed by that year's plague (Halasy 1987:327). However, it wasn't until 1951 that the first Hungarian crematorium opened in Debrecen, and the second – the first in Budapest – in 1968. The proportion of cremations reached 12.7% in 1977 and grew to 16.53% until 1984. The third crematorium opened in Szeged in 1985 and by the regime change in 1989 the ratio of cremations reached 12.59%.

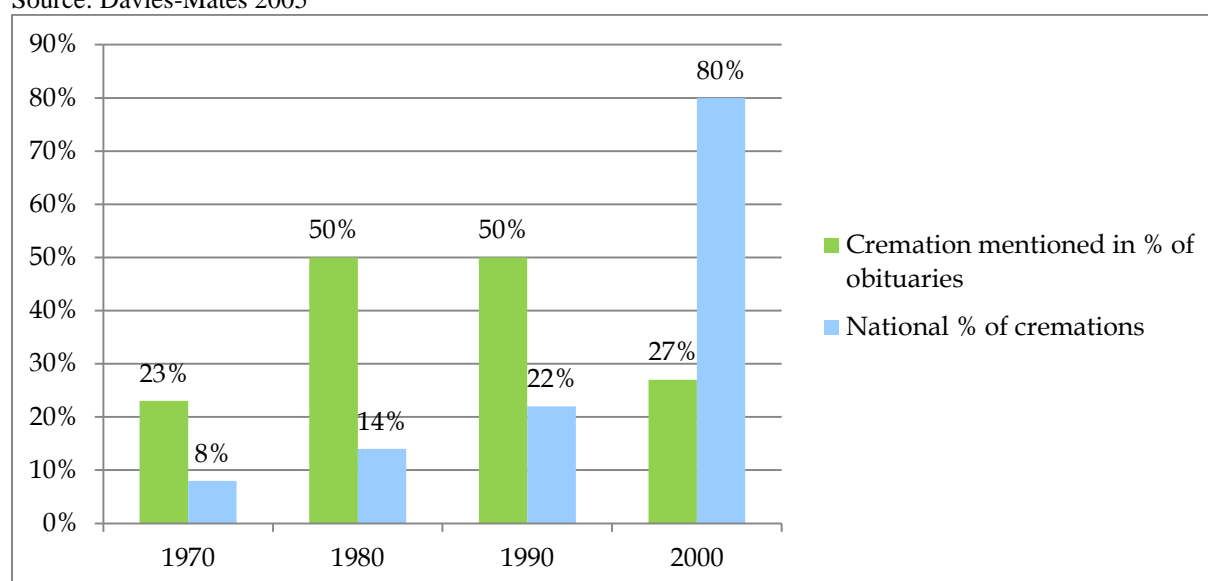
Tremendous changes took place between 1990-2000 caused by a combination of factors which led to the ratio of cremations to rise to 80%. With the arrival of the free market, the number of crematoriums quadrupled and reached 12 (Davies-Mates 2005:251-256). At the same time, Hungarian cemeteries suffered from lack of space and also fostered cremations themselves. Burial costs also became a central factor: while during the years of communism – where unemployment was virtually non-existent – the workplace often paid for the funeral, this became private responsibility after 1990. Cremation was and continues to be cheaper than casket funerals. It also carries less long term duties with it. While graves usually need regular gardening and a renewal of a contract in every 25 years, urns are often placed in urn cemeteries and so-called “scattering of the ashes” – the cheapest form of burial available – has become particularly common.

It is remarkable that the mentioning of cremation in the obituaries does not follow the above described pattern but diminishes significantly after 1990. Once cremation became the mainstream funeral type it was no longer specified, just as casket funerals were never mentioned in the obituaries.



The growing number of cremations is interpreted in death-related literature as a sign of the funeral becoming more private and informal, consequently, as evidence of the changing nature of death in modernity. Ariès (1983:577) argues that cremation as a choice means the rejection of the cult of cemeteries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Instead of interpreting it as a sign of indifference from the side of the mourners, he suggests that cremation signifies a rejection of the physical reality of death and the public character of the cemetery. Connected to this is Kellehear's observation (2007:442) that the scattering of the ashes also shows how memorialization is becoming more and more informal. While the present analysis is unable to explore the exact motives behind funeral choices, the growing number of cremations fits into the pattern Ariès has described as the technologization, secularization and individualization of death (1983).

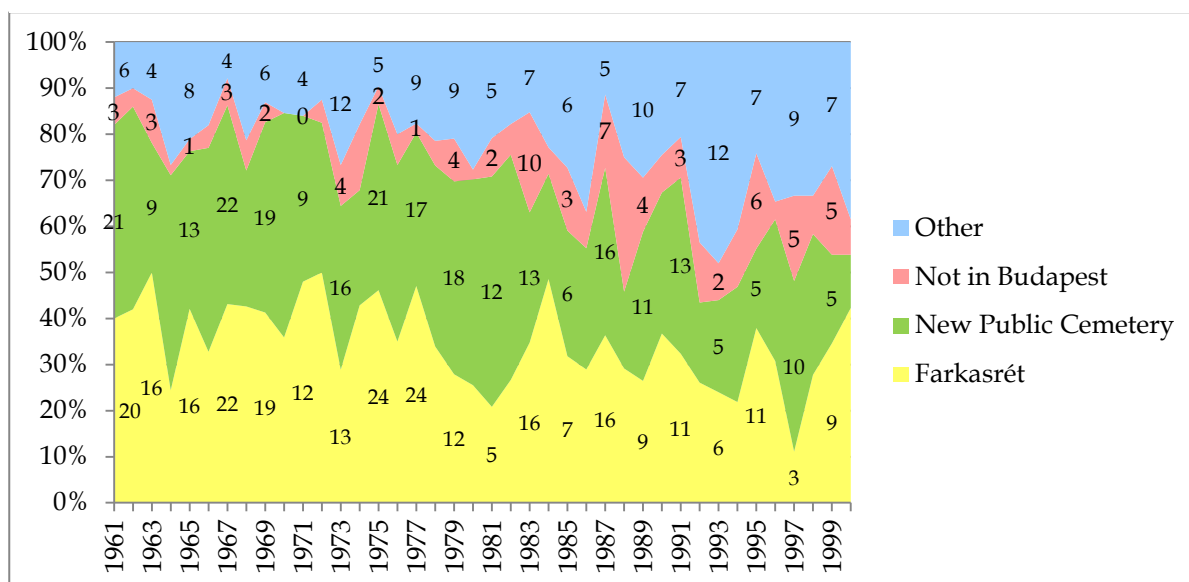
**Figure 6: 1970-2000 Ratio of cremations mentioned in obituaries / 1970-2000 National ratio of cremations**  
Source: Davies-Mates 2005



The choice of the cemetery is influenced by a number of factors: place of birth, death, residence, cemetery regulations, religion, social position and price. Figure 7 shows how funeral locations have changed throughout the years. The cumulated percentage of the two largest cemeteries – New Public Cemetery and Farkasréti – is in decline. This is in accordance

with the new “public opening” of Kerepesi cemetery, as well as with a move from central cemeteries to the outskirts of the city, where funerals are cheaper. The growing number of alternative locations also indicates that after the regime change, the choice of cemetery is more prone to express aspects of the deceased’s life or values. Csömör, a small cemetery near Budapest is a modern urn-cemetery where a number of alternative funerals take place. While Kerepesi is now open to the public, the high prices of burial there indicate a higher social status. The Kozma street cemetery is once again called the Jewish cemetery. Section 300 and 301 in the New Public Cemetery is reserved for heroes of the 1956 revolution. These examples show that location carries meanings and that the growing variation of location choices indicates that there is a tendency to communicate these meanings through the choice of cemetery.

**Figure 7: 1961-2000 Cemetery distribution in obituaries**



Religious elements of funerals are first mentioned in 1988, there are 37 such mentions in total. They belong to three large groups. First, requiem masses held in honor of the deceased are mentioned in a number of cases. Second, it is often explained that the funeral will take place

according to the rituals of a certain Church (Roman Catholic, Calvinistic, Lutheran, Jewish). Third, the mentioning of the urn being placed within a church first appears in the 1990s.

#### **4.3. Identity, biography and social membership in obituaries**

In the obituaries two types of data constitute one's core identity: one's name and one's – personal or professional – role. The analysis of female names gives us insights about the social position of women in general. Female names also contain additional information about their marital status – while no such indication is present in men's names. Female name bearing types have changed over the years. Bearing the husband's name only means that even the woman's first name disappears from the identification: when encountering a “Kovács Tamásné” (Mrs. Tamás Kovács) we only learn her husband's name. Although this version was relatively widespread, it has been slowly disappearing with the ages. One form of compromise is a combination of the husband's name and the woman's first name: “Kovács Tamásné Katalin”. Keeping the birth name is becoming a common practice for two reasons: the diminishing number of marriages and the changing name bearing habits.

9 men and 16 women bear nicknames in the sample. These may also contain informative elements other than letting us know how the close friends and family called the deceased. Consider the following example:

The mourning family (...) is sad to announce that Jenő Obendorfer  
(Chappy) passed away among tragic circumstances. (...) (19 June 1973)

Jenő Obendorfer (1905-1977) was a musician and a jazz drummer. In the 1920s he played in Arthur Briggs's band. In the 1940s he led one of the most popular Hungarian big bands. In the 1960s he was allowed to play in Hungarian restaurants. Many features of his career were marked by his opposing the ideologies and cultural politics of the communist state. The United States as the nemesis of the Soviet Union, was considered an unacceptable reference

point, as was the decadent “jazz music” (Maróthy 1953). Although none of these biographical details appear in the obituary, the American-sounding nickname is a clear reference to a group of achievements in Obendorfer’s life.

The ‘Hungarianisation’ of certain ethnic surnames took place in waves in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, first at the turn of the century and then after World War II. All in all, 17 people have their original, Jewish names mentioned in the obituaries, 5 of whom are women (a ratio which fits their overall proportion in the sample). It is interesting to note that half of these – 9 – are mentioned in the 1970s, while after 1980 these original versions only appear twice. The original name is not carried through generations and disappears with the death of the original name’s bearer.

One’s roles belong to two relatively distinct fields: family and profession. Political and civic positions are mentioned very rarely.<sup>3</sup> Familial roles are mentioned in 55% of the cases. This illustrates that family membership is the primary position within one’s social network. Professional roles are mentioned in 895 cases. These professional roles give us insights regarding the particular groups the deceased belonged to. The identity of the person remembered and commemorated also indicates the relative positions of certain professions or groups. People who belong to groups with higher status and prestige have higher “obituary chances” while other groups are underrepresented in the sample.

The comparison between nationally available data (KSH) and the one appearing in the obituaries is given in Table 7. While comparable data is not available for 2000, a number of conclusions can be drawn. We see that obituary publishing in *Népszabadság* is an urban practice; no agricultural laborers or peasants appear among the deceased. The representation of non-agricultural independents (small trades and small industry) is approximately equal to

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<sup>3</sup> I discuss political positions together with political titles and achievements in a later section.

their national proportion. Skilled workers are underrepresented in the sample and their ratio decreases over the years. A large majority of the deceased referred to belonged to the elite and intellectual group, and this ratio grows throughout the years. Those with more social power and higher social status have better chances to appear in obituaries.

**Table 7: Distribution of occupational groups in obituaries (1960, 1970, 1990) / National distribution of occupational groups**

Source: KSH

	<b>Elite &amp; Intellectuals (%)</b>		<b>Skilled workers (%)</b>		<b>Non-agricultural independents (%)</b>		<b>Non-skilled / Agricult. workers (%)</b>	
	National	Sample	National	Sample	National	Sample	National	Sample
<b>1970</b>	25.8	83.4	19.5	8.8	1.6	4.0	53.1	0
<b>1980</b>	30.3	88.1	23.2	5.6	1.5	3.2	44.9	0
<b>1990</b>	33.4	90.8	25.7	2.3	4.2	4.1	36.7	0

Table 8 gives a detailed breakdown of the composition of the sample. As for the distribution of different groups we see that the elite and intellectual groups become more significant over the years, while other professions lose their representation. We also see that the number of literate intellectuals – the academic and cultural elite, teachers –grows after 1990, while skilled workers virtually disappear from the list. This shows a definite connection with the changing prestige of different professions.

The findings in general are in accordance with the mobility and prestige patterns described in the introduction. While the 1960s can be described by the centrality of political capital and the elevation of factory workers as the archetypical communist heroes, in the 1970s, the importance of skills and expertise starts to grow. The 1980s can be described with the re-emergence of the middle class. Prestige-research from the 1980s shows that intellectual professions enjoy the greatest popularity and respect (Kulcsár 1985). In the 1990s, the importance of symbolic and cultural capital grows.

**Table 8: 1961-2000 Occupation distribution in obituaries**

		1961-1970	1971-1980	1981-1990	1991-2000
<b>elite</b>	<b>29.7%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>24.8%</b>	<b>33.2%</b>	<b>42.7%</b>
political elite	0.6%	0.0%	0.4%	0.9%	1.1%
military elite	3.5%	1.2%	2.4%	6.0%	5.0%
leading cadres (ceos)	5.6%	4.8%	4.0%	7.4%	6.7%
administrative - public office leaders	3.6%	2.0%	4.0%	5.1%	3.3%
academic elite	6.5%	4.0%	4.8%	5.5%	13.3%
cultural elite	10.1%	10.0%	9.2%	8.3%	13.3%
<b>intellectuals</b>	<b>59.3%</b>	<b>61.4%</b>	<b>63.3%</b>	<b>57.6%</b>	<b>52.8%</b>
political middle leaders	1.0%	1.6%	0.4%	1.4%	0.6%
military middle leaders	2.7%	0.8%	2.8%	4.1%	3.3%
cadres	5.3%	3.2%	5.2%	9.2%	3.3%
administrative - public office middle leaders	9.1%	6.0%	10.0%	10.6%	10.0%
financial experts	4.4%	6.4%	4.4%	2.3%	3.9%
technical intellectuals	9.5%	12.9%	10.8%	6.5%	6.7%
agricultural intellectuals	0.9%	0.8%	0.8%	0.9%	1.1%
physicians	10.8%	15.7%	10.8%	9.7%	5.6%
lawyers	2.8%	4.8%	3.6%	1.8%	0.0%
teachers	13.0%	9.2%	14.5%	11.1%	18.3%
<b>other</b>	<b>10.9%</b>	<b>16.4%</b>	<b>11.6%</b>	<b>6.1%</b>	<b>4.5%</b>
tourism - catering	1.3%	1.2%	2.0%	1.8%	0.0%
trade	1.2%	2.4%	0.8%	0.9%	0.6%
small industry	3.4%	4.0%	3.2%	4.1%	1.7%
skilled workers	5.0%	8.8%	5.6%	2.3%	2.2%
	<b>100.0%</b>				

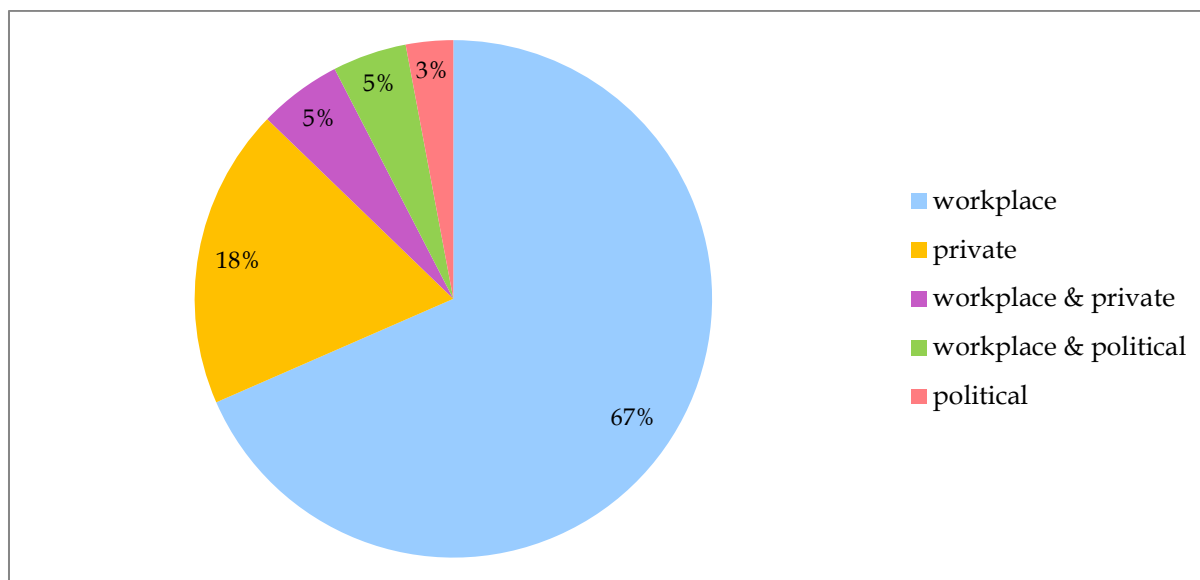
These findings clearly show that instead of being “the great leveller”, inequality continues after death. This social inequality appears in all aspects of a person’s death starting from where and how the individual dies, the funeral and the commemoration he or she receives. As Bauman puts it (1992:53), with different commemoration chances some members of society are more immortal than others. When stating that obituaries are the “Social Register of the middle class”, Gerbner (1980:66) even names the social group with the best “obituary chances”. It has to be noted however that obituaries are not simply the constructs or

representations of a social order but are themselves constructive: they also present forces shaping values (Geertz 1973: 94-8). However, to state that obituaries and the identities they refer to simply reflect and shape values of a given society would be a misconception. The representation of identities is shaped by a number of interconnected factors. First, it is formed by social reality: social roles can not be created out of thin air, they have to somehow reflect the reality lived by the individual. Second, it is indeed affected by – and affects – the prestige of certain professions. Third, it reflects the readership of obituaries as well: agricultural workers and peasants are missing from these obituaries not because they are outcasts of the system but because rural media of commemoration takes a very different shape. Finally, justification of the existing social order also plays an important part in their formation. As Fowler describes (2007:18), obituaries don't offer theodicies (justifications of God) but “sociodicy” (justifications of society). Thus, when skilled workers appear in the obituaries in the 1960s, it is not caused by their growing social prestige – in fact, according to research by Kemény (1972) and Belényi (2000), contrary to what the ideology claimed, skilled workers didn't experience an upward mobility in the social structure – but because they represent the archetypical heroes of the age.

Connected to the roles are one's achievements. When examining the areas in which an individual's achievements take place, three interconnected domains take shape: that of the private sphere, the workplace and the political sphere. Figure 8 describes the distribution of achievements within these domains. Most life achievements mentioned in the obituaries are work-related, 18% of them are personal. An illustration of gender differences may be discerned by the fact that 19% of female obituaries contain information related to private roles of the deceased – opposed to only 8% of male obituaries. One way to theorize about these interconnected spheres is to posit that each of them signifies one aspect of the social membership of the deceased. Each sphere has its own larger narrative – a family narrative, an

organizational narrative, a political narrative. As these larger narratives are helpful in establishing the frameworks of the individual's biography, they are repeated and reinforced through the texts.

**Figure 8: Distribution of achievements within domains**



I have also analyzed how many positions of the deceased are mentioned in the obituaries. The average number of positions held by the person and mentioned is 1.28. This number doesn't significantly change over time; however, the internal structure goes through changes. While from the 1960s until the 1980s, it is the "width" of a career that influences it (workplace positions, political positions, other positions held at the same time), during the 1990s it is its "length" (listing of previous workplaces). Consider the following examples, the first from 1974, the second from 1993:

The Committee of the University of Forestry and Wood Industry together with the grieving family sadly announces that dr. László Tamás college professor, deputy rector, candidate of technical sciences, owner of the silver degree of the Work Merit and Excellent worker of forestry and agriculture died at the age of 43, 27 May, after



a long, grave illness. With his excellent teaching-educating work, academic achievements and personal behavior he set an example for all of us. (...) (9 June 1974)

We announce it with a broken heart that Károly Fodor, pensioner of MÁV, who finished high school in 1934 in Könyves Kálmán Secondary School in Újpest, soccer player of Tripolisz-Turul TE in Angyalföld, passed away at the age of 79. (...) (20 June 1993)

While in the first example we see a gradation of achievements that prove the excellence of a person in a static biography, in the second one – even if not in a chronological order – we are informed about important periods from an individual’s life. The question of whether a life is depicted as a progress – as proposed by Bourdieu’s notion of the “biographical illusion” (1986) – or in a static form can only partially be answered. When biographies describe lives in motion they comply to what Huntington and Metcalf referred to as “arcs”: “through brassy youth to fruitful middle years, and then decline gently toward death that is acceptable as well as inevitable” (1979:205). But most often the depiction of life within the obituaries resembles a snapshot taken at the peak of one’s career, rather than the actual story of the person.

The passing of time is not only depicted in the obituaries by the age of a person but by other frames of reference, or timescapes (Adam 1990). Three such frames appear in the obituaries: the length of a marriage, the amount of time one spent at the workplace, and the length of one’s affiliation with the communist party. Table 9 gives an impressionistic list of examples regarding these references. While all three columns point to the same direction, that the endurance of one’s relationships is an achievement, references to political affiliation point to something more as well. Those who emphasize that their relationship with the party or the “movement” preceded 1945 also stress the bravery needed to be a communist during years

and regimes when it was a forbidden, risky undertaking. While loyalty and stability are emphasized in these temporal references, a few examples also stress the importance of pioneering in a field: “the first Hungarian female lawyer”, “the first president of the Pioneer Association”, “the founder of the first Hungarian private medical practice.”

**Table 9: “Timescapes” in obituaries**

Private sphere	Workplace	Political sphere
in the 20 <sup>th</sup> year of our marriage	old loyal colleague	the party’s old warrior
in the 50 <sup>th</sup> year of our happy marriage and family life	loyal servant of book trade for 62 years	old warrior of the workers’ movement
in the 60 <sup>th</sup> year of our happy marriage	loyal director of our institute for decades	veteran from 1919
after decades of being happily married	employee of the ventilation department for almost 30 years	member of the party since 1926
	worked 43 years at our company	fighter of the workers’ movement since 1919
		member of the party since 1931

Characteristics are adjectives used as attributives to describe a person. Such attributives appear in 16% of the obituaries. Table 10 lists these adjectives. In the left column, attributives in passive form are listed – in the right column, active attributives are shown. A look at the table clearly shows that the deceased is more likely to be described in a passive voice – reflecting what the bereaved feel or felt about them – instead of an active one.

**Table 10: Adjectives used to describe the deceased**

PASSIVE		ACTIVE	
loved (deeply loved, much loved, adored)	127		
		dear	100
		good (best)	26
unforgettable	21		
		excellent (outstanding)	13
esteemed (honored)	11		
		faithful	6
		loving	5
my/our everything / respected	3-3		
		self-sacrificing	3
		kind, tireless, exemplary, caring	2-2
irreplaceable, apple of our eye, our precious	1-1		
		conscientious, devoted, heart of gold, ready to sacrifice, humanist, special, small, unselfish, life and sport-loving, wonderful	1-1

Some characteristics are reserved for private appreciation, especially the most affective ones (“heart of gold”, “apple of our eye”, “my everything”). Some are written by the workplace (“exemplary”, “outstanding”, “tireless”). Some traits, as faithfulness for example, are appreciated both in the private and in the public sphere. An especially detailed and very evocative obituary was written by a widow who lost his wife:

With man-tears I silently cry and inform the relatives that my much loved, warm-hearted wife, Mrs. Sándor Lénárd, born Etelka Müllner, an old-time kindergarten teacher with a golden diploma<sup>4</sup> fell asleep

<sup>4</sup> A golden diploma is an award given to teachers celebrating their 50th graduation anniversary.

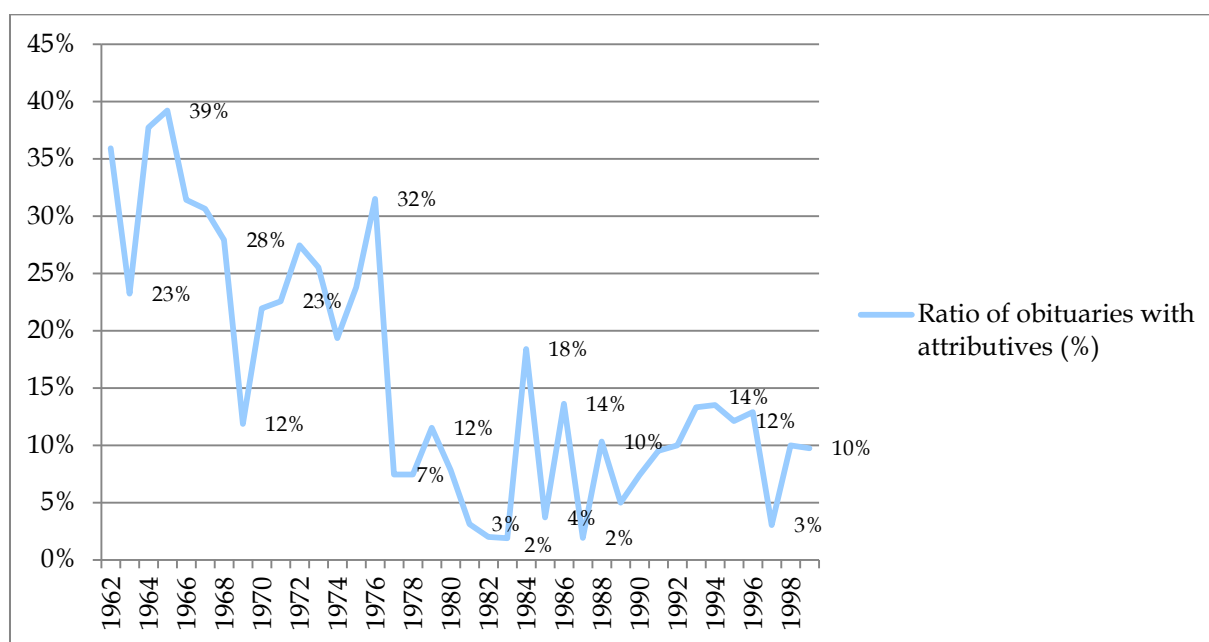
on her hospital bed after a grave illness at the age of 77' in the 52<sup>nd</sup> year of our marriage. I not only lost a loving spouse, a selfless co-warrior, a faithful friend in her but the purpose and the meaning of my life as well. As long as I live, I mourn her. (...) (4 June 1974)

This example is rare in a number of ways: it is poetic, it shows expressive mourning, it gives an affective description of the deceased and it is very honest in depicting the pain of the mourner. It is also interesting from a gender-perspective: men are expected to show less emotions and more constraint during mourning, and while contradicting this expectation, it also reflects on it: “man-tears” are different from ordinary ones, since they are “silent”.

The number of attributives in the obituaries varies by gender: 20% of women are described by adjectives while only 12% of men are. Given that most of these attributives describe feelings towards rather than characteristics of the deceased, it is reasonable to conclude that the memory of women appears with more emotion and that of men appears with more objectivity.

The number of attributives changes significantly through time (see Figure 9): personal traits or feelings expressed about the loved one greatly diminish at the end of the 1970s and since then approximately every 10<sup>th</sup> obituary contains such a description of the deceased.

**Figure 9: 1961-2000 Ratio of obituaries with attributives (%)**



These findings are in accordance with the results of Long's research in two ways. First, he also observed how the portrayal of the deceased is characterized with a passive voice: instead of portraying them as actively shaping, participating in their own lives, they are depicted as passive objects of emotions (Long 1987:991-992). Second, Long also finds that over time, the description of individual characteristics, personal traits diminishes, while information "that is routinely compiled in records", jobs, professions, occupations increases. This he considers to evidence the fact that our relation towards death is becoming routinized and standardized (1987:972). My findings can only be interpreted as ambivalent about these issues. While the description of personal traits decreases over time, biographical information about the deceased – as we will see – gains more space within the obituary. While this biographical data is indeed more objective than the use of attributives, it would be a misinterpretation of the results to call them impersonal. Another way to conceptualize this change is to apply Goffman's notion of the moral career (1961) to obituaries: a moral career arises from the interplay between the internal and the external identities of a person. Obituaries function successfully as sociodicy of the deceased when a number of external resources are put in use

to validate one's biography. Thus I find that the decrease of traits should be examined together with the increase of biographical details where institutional connections and networks add to its validity.

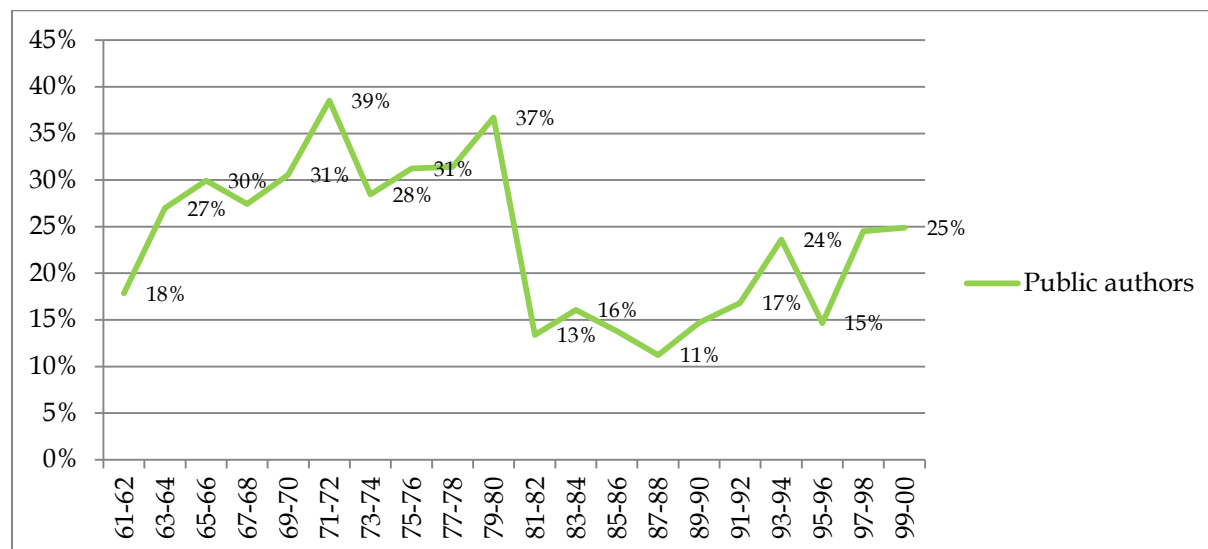
One way to analyze the relationship between identity and social membership is by looking at the authors of the obituaries. Who delivers the obituary reveals how the deceased was connected to society (Kastenbaum 2002:620), which memberships of the deceased were significant – thus an analysis of authorship reveals the nature of social bonds and networks in a given society.

Authorship is mentioned in 71% of the cases. This number does not show significant variation through time or by gender. However, the age of the deceased and authorship are connected. In the obituaries of those who died at a young age (0-29 years), authorship is mentioned in 84% of the cases – this number is 76% for those who died in their middle ages (30-59 years) and 71% for those who died relatively old (60-99 years). This result shows that one's social embeddedness changes throughout the life course – a disengagement from society, a “social death” might precede the biological one. The distinction between “biological” and “social” death refers to the fact that “social death” occurs when the deceased ceases to be an active agent in others' lives. Social death might precede biological death (Sudnow 1967), where disengagement happens step-by-step, starting from retirement, accelerated by the deterioration of one's health, a withdrawal precedes biological death.

One would expect authorship to change significantly through time. Figure 10 shows how the proportion of public authors – that is organizationally related, non-family ones – has changed in the past decades in the sample. While there was a definite decrease, it preceded the regime change and appeared in the beginning of the 1980s. After 1990, a slow increase can be observed. In his research, Gary L. Long also tried to test his hypothesis that organizationally

related content would grow within obituaries over the years – unsuccessfully (1987:964). Similarly, these data neither prove nor falsify such a hypothesis.

**Figure 10: 1961-2000 Public authors of obituaries**



#### 4.4. Remembering lives in a political context: Social memory and the Kádár-regime

As I explained in the Introduction, the Kádár-regime is often depicted as depoliticized in contrast with its predecessor, the totalitarian Rákosi-regime. During my analysis, I amassed the different authors into larger variables to see how much politics interfered in such a private matter as announcing the death of someone. However, it needs to be noted that the omnipresence of the state-party resists the creation of such mutually exclusive variables. Table 11 shows the distribution of different authors. The octopus-nature of the party is clear here: it is present in workplace related contents (“the party organization of Csepel Factory”), in local authorities (local Socialist Party zone), in pseudo-military organizations (Workers’ Militia), in private friendships (comrades), in civic organizations (Antifascists), even in education (Socialist Party College). This finding makes one question the validity of the term “depoliticization” that is widely used (Rakowska-Harmstone 1984, Körösényi 1999, Valuch 2005) to describe the Kádár-era. While the nature of political discourse certainly shifted from

ideological to pragmatist, the communist party was present at most levels and spheres of society.

**Table 11: Authors of obituaries**

<b>Authors of obituaries</b>	
family	1122
workplace	268
workplace mentioning the Communist party	34
friends	30
colleagues	8
local Communist Party zone	6
civic organization	6
Workers' Militia	4
caregiver	4
comrades (political)	3
Hungarian Resistance and Antifascists	3
party committee	2
students	2
comrades (army)	1
Party College	1
neighbors	1
Socialist Party Budapest	1
Hungarian Partisans	1
old classmates	1

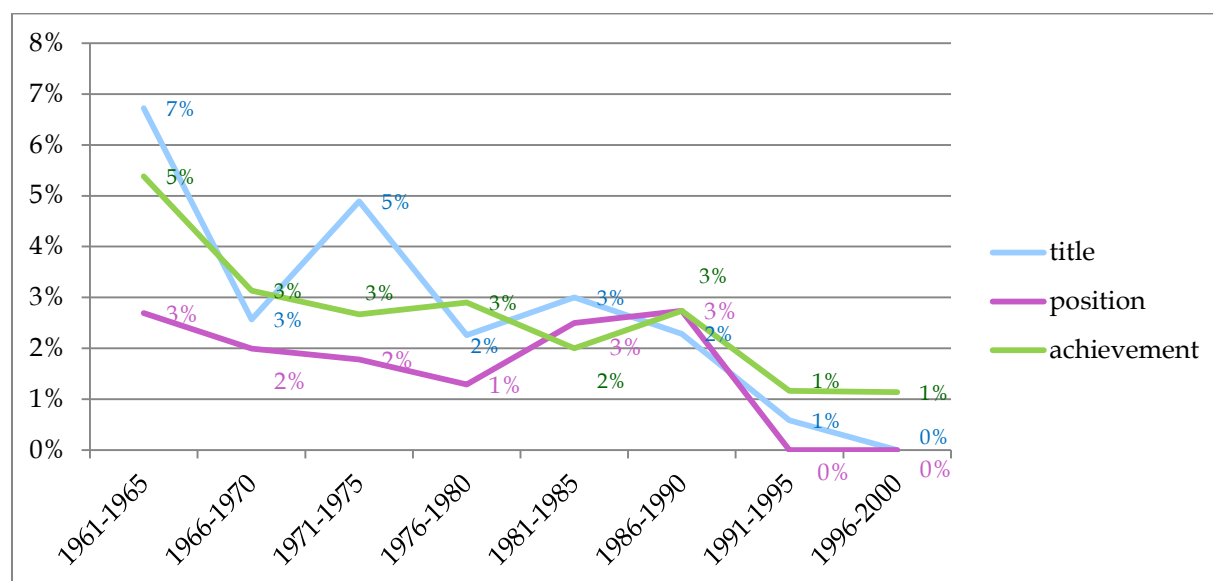
Authorship of obituaries reveals information about how the politically charged issue of migration was handled during the Kádár-era. Throughout the researched time period, both mourners who lived abroad and Hungarians who passed away abroad are mentioned in the obituaries (in 43 cases). This becomes particularly interesting in the light of the fact that communication between Hungarians within the country and abroad was limited, and often prohibited by the state before 1990. Approximately 300,000 people migrated from Hungary



during Communism – only 70,000 of them legally. The 1956 revolution caused the migration of 200,000 people. (Szászi 1993). These numbers indicate that a large proportion of the migrants left for political reasons. This explains the rigor of the communist state in trying to make those who stayed at home cut ties with the migrants. It also explains why public authorship – either organizational or political – and the mentioning of relatives abroad are mutually exclusive. In line with the official position on public discourse proposed by the communist politician, György Aczél – the so-called 3 T-s: an act is either supported [támogat], prohibited [tilt] or tolerated [tűr] (Szabó 1997) – the mentioning of these ties in obituaries was neither publicly supported, nor prohibited but tolerated.

A political title, position or achievement is mentioned in 111 obituaries. This number greatly diminishes after 1990. Only five obituaries after 1990 contain references to a person's political affiliation – three about their roles in communism, two mentioning their 1956 participation. Figure 11 shows how the mentioning of political titles, positions and achievements changes over time.

**Figure 11: 1961-2000 Political titles, positions and achievements**



The most common political positions to be mentioned are membership in the Workers' Militia, being a party secretary or a party member. There are a number of ways to emphasize one's political loyalty. In the following obituary we see party membership, workers' union membership, awards, political activities mentioned in one sentence. Some of the references within the text contain further meaning. For example, 1922 and 1911 are not only mentioned because they prove that the deceased has been a party member for decades – but also as proofs of bravery. Furthermore, in an attempt to protect the phrase “revolution”, the Kádár-regime termed the events of 1956 “counter-revolution”, thus a “revolutionary activity” in communist terminology was one that aimed to put down the uprising:

It is with deep regret that we inform all those who knew and respected him, that Ignác Mérő passed away 21 May, at the age of 86. Owner of the Socialist Fatherland Order of Merit, party member since 1922, Vasas Workers' Union member since 1911. He received numerous honors for his revolutionary activities. (...) (3 June 1980)

Obituaries containing political achievements are very different after 1990 in style as well. Tamás Lipták participated in both the 1956 revolution and in the underground movement afterwards. For these activities he was imprisoned and was released after three years. He migrated to London and decided not to move back to Hungary after 1990. However it was during his visit to Budapest that he passed away. Even though the references to his participation in the revolution – the honors and his burial place – are clear, his exact role is not made manifest:

His daughter and his comrades announce that Tamás Lipták mathematician and owner of the 1956 medallion suddenly passed away in Budapest at the age of 68. His funeral will take place at 11

am, 11 June, at Section 300, New Public Cemetery. Zsuzsanna Lipták.

(5 June 1988)

As I discussed in the introduction, a number of political references made reading between the lines necessary. The obituary of Márton Horváth appearing in 1987 provides a special example of this. Márton Horváth (1906-1987) became a member of the then illegal Hungarian Party of Communists (KMP) in 1931, soon after this he was arrested and imprisoned for five years for organizing workers' strikes. After his release from prison he lived in hiding, propagating communist leaflets. From 1941 he became the editor of the then illegal *Szabad Nép*. He spent two years in prison again between 1942 and 1944. From 1945 he held numerous positions in the communist regime: editor of *Szabad Nép*, director of the Party Propaganda Committee, member of the Political Committee of the party. In 1956 however, he drifted towards Imre Nagy, which made him an outcast afterwards. He was demoted and until his retirement served as the director of a literary museum. All this is present in his obituary in a condensed and coded version. We see that he was a communist veteran, not just a member but a leader of the illegal communist parties, which should make him a hero of the regime. However the second part of the sentence indicates that his life changed direction and he ended his career in a non-political, relatively insignificant position. The fact that he is not buried in Kerepesi cemetery where his fellow communist veterans are, also points to the fact that the party cut ties with him:

7 June, at the age of 81 Márton Horváth, one of the leaders of KMP, MKP and MDP, editor of *Szabad Nép* already during the illegal years, retired director of Petőfi Literary Museum passed away. His sendoff following his cremation will take place at 9 am, 9 July, at Farkasréti Cemetery. (27 June 1987)

In the above examples we see how the terms for describing biographies change as the political structure changes (Long 1987:988) and how higher level political narratives both provide materials and set constraints for the construction of personal life stories (Kastenbaum 2002:386).

In addition to obituaries informing about the death of a person, a number of texts in the 1990s report the reburial of a loved one. Although the aforementioned work of Verdery on reburials (1999) discusses the movement of bodies that belong to significant personalities, her argument that the corporeality of these bodies makes them important means in localizing a claim gives meaning to the reburials relevant to my study as well. György Fazekas (1914-1984) was a journalist who worked with Imre Nagy during the 56-revolution. Together with Nagy, he was interned to Snagov in 1956 and was sentenced to 10 years in prison afterwards. He was released in 1961 and passed away in 1984. His obituary reads:

We place György Fazekas and his wife Mrs. György Fazekas, dr.  
Éva Kálmán – according to their last wishes – in a common grave.  
György Fazekas passed away in 1984, his spouse 6 June 1996. Their  
sendoff following their cremation will take place 11 am 20 June in  
Section 300 of the New Public Cemetery. (15 June 1996)

The body of Fazekas was moved from its original resting place to Section 300 in the New Public Cemetery which was appointed for the heroes of the 1956 revolution. This move also reframes the life of the deceased, now in relation to a higher cause and achievement.

As described in the literature review, Aleida and Jan Assmann proposed a differentiation between communicative and cultural memory (2006). In order to analyze how a conflict between these two appears in the obituaries and what possible strategies were chosen to handle this conflict, I offer a sample of some obituaries below. The typology used here is

heavily influenced by – but does not directly follow – Éva Kovács's listing of different biographical narrative strategies (Kovács 2010). As explained earlier, biographical background is drawn from the Hungarian Biographical Lexicon (Kenyeres 1994).

A common strategy in harmonizing communicative and cultural memories is the author's attempt to repeat the common narrative in the biographical frame. Its success often depends on the biographical turning points of the deceased. It appears that those who have successfully adjusted to the communist regime – regardless of their personal losses – can frame their biography within the larger metanarrative. Consider the following example:

József Pártos, the retired department-head of the Filmarchive, CEO of the Motion Picture Distribution Company (Mokép) passed away. He is survived by his widow and family. (..). (3 June 1966)

József Pártos started his career at the end of World War I at Star Film Factory and later managed a number of private film theaters. After the communist takeover he became the first CEO of the Motion Picture Distribution Company. Attributes that are well-known about Pártos – his capitalist success, his technician skills, his bourgeois career – are not mentioned in the obituary: by fitting him in the organizational hierarchy of state institutions Pártos and his biography successfully adjust to the official power and its discourse.

A special case of the above repetition is when the personal biography almost disappears from the obituary and only the metanarrative remains. Starting his career at the communist military intelligence, Gyula Kórusz was a state security officer from the end of the 1950s. The medal he received was founded in 1958 especially to honor those who took active role in the fight against the 1956 revolution.

Gyula Kórusz, retired police lieutenant colonel, the owner of the Worker-Peasant Power Medal passed away suddenly at the age of 58.

His funeral, accompanied by military honors will take place on 12 Jun, 3 pm in the Újpest Megyer cemetery. The bereaved. (8 June 1979)

Kórusz was a loyal and active party and state officer whose biography sheds a light on what achievements are publicly celebrated and recognized in the 1960s: the agencies serving the state terror are highly regarded. This obituary also shows that the often-mentioned “56-taboo” needs modification, the revolution appears in references far from being dissident, such as this obituary and is not totally erased from memory.

When there appears to be no chance to successfully harmonize the communicative and the collective memory, a number of narrative strategies still remain. One of these is “passive forgetting” (Kovács 2010), the omission of biographical events that are in open conflict with the cultural memory of the time. Emma Mercedes Nagyloznai (1898-1976) was a nun who entered the congregate in 1919, after the dissolution of her convent forced by the communist regime she worked in Zsámbék as a caregiver.

Emma Mercedes Nagyloznai, a former teacher in the Zsámbék Teacher Training Institute died on 20 June. (...)” (24 June 1976)

Religious references are omitted from the obituary as they refer to an affiliation that is no longer present and often pursued by the state.

An extreme case of silence is when it is not a particular part of a person’s biography that goes missing, but any reference to the deceased’s life is gone. This is especially common in obituaries where the deceased had a prominent political and intellectual role in the political regimes preceding communism – a fact that can’t be successfully erased from the biographies. Margit Bethlen was the widow of former prime minister (1921-1931) István Bethlen and András Bethlen was their son. As outcasts of the system, they were stripped of their

possessions, titles and resettled to the countryside in 1950 and András worked as a physical laborer until his death. As in real life, in the obituaries they are stripped of their titles of nobility. It is clear why as symbols of the antithesis of the communist system their public – or even personal – recognition is not allowed to appear in the obituary:

Mrs. István Bethlen, born Margit Bethlen at the age of 88, on 7 June  
and her son, András Bethlen at the age of 68, on 13 June passed away.  
(...)” (28 June 1970)

Both the examples of Nagyloznai and Bethlen show that omissions from obituaries driven by a collective amnesia are not random: what is missing are elements from one’s life that are in stark contrast with the values of the state. However, the two obituaries are remarkably different in a sense: while the first one contains no further latent information, the obituary of Mrs. Bethlen recalls a whole era through the simple act of mentioning István Bethlen’s name. Pronouncing a name publicly that is erased from official memory often proved to be a political act in itself during communism.<sup>5</sup>

In some cases the harmonization of memories can be achieved through minor alterations of the biography. These distortions are not actual falsifications: they downplay some features of the deceased’s life, while emphasize others. Sámuel Schnitta (1893-1968) started his career in catering in 1908. After studying in Paris he had a successful career managing prominent hotels and restaurants visited by elite and bourgeois guests, such as the Ritz Hotel in

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<sup>5</sup> When a coded poem about Imre Nagy by Gáspár Nagy accidentally slipped the attention of authorities and was published in 1984, consequences for the poet were grave. The last three lines of the poem end with the letters – wrote in capital letters – NI: “egyszer majd el kell temetNI/ és nekünk nem szabad feledNI/ a gyilkosokat néven nevezNI” (one day he’ll have to be buried/ and we mustn’t forget/ and call the murderers by their names). While –ni marks the infinitive of a verb in Hungarian, it is also the initials of Nagy Imre – a reference strictly prohibited at the time.

Budapest. After World War II he attempted to re-establish the New York Café to its original grandeur, but failed to do so. He retired in 1958.

The employees and management of Hungária Hotel Restaurant and Company sadly inform you that our beloved colleague Sámuel Schnitta, retired head of department passed away.(...) (14 June 1968)

Schnitta's life is altered in the obituary, he is reframed as a member of the new establishment ("head of department") instead of bourgeois restaurateur from the past. References to the grandeur, the café-house culture that epitomized an era, are omitted.

Although in her aforementioned typology Kovács mentions retrospective idealization and nostalgia as a means of dealing with the conflict between communicative and cultural memories in biographies – this strategy is mostly missing from the obituaries. What we do find is – often obscure – references to achievements gained in previous eras or characteristics not in harmony with the values of the communist regime. István Dénes (1889-1963) started his career in politics in the 1920s. He reorganized his party – the Hungarian, later Independent Peasant Party – numerous times in the 1930s before joining the Hungarian National Socialist Party which he left in 1941. After World War II he joined the Independent Smallholders' Party and became member of the parliament before the communist takeover was finalized. He was arrested under fabricated charges by the communist State Protection Authority (ÁVH) and was released from prison during the 1956 revolution.

The funeral of Dr. István Dénes, retired lawyer, former member of the parliament will take place on 20 July 20 1 pm at the Farkasrétí cemetery. (19 June, 1963)

Dénes's political career is referenced in the obituary though it is also clear that it took place in the past, namely in a previous political regime.



A narrative strategy that is understandably very uncommon within the obituaries is to ignore the discrepancies between official and unofficial memories. In these obituaries the authors speak freely of values and achievements of the deceased that go openly against the communist narrative.

It is with profound deep sorrow that we announce that Vilmos Nagybaczoni Nagy, former defense minister, retired colonel passed away at the age of 92. (...) (24 June 1976)

Born into a gentry family, Vilmos Nagybaczoni Nagy had an upward military career starting in the 1920s, at the top of which he became defense minister in 1942. Although the regime appointing him was a German-ally conservative one, he took several measures to improve the condition of forced laborers, staunchly opposed the deportation of Hungarian Jews. He resigned in 1943. Following the eventual takeover of power by the Nazis he was imprisoned in 1944. After the end of World War II and following the communist takeover he was deprived of his home and pension salary and worked as a physical laborer. At the same time however he was recognized as Righteous Among the Nations by the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem. The position Nagybaczoni held in the previous regime might have made him an outcast but the manner in which he held it makes his position more ambiguous.

Finally, the least common strategy is to hint at or mention the conflict between communicative and cultural memory. This only happens in cases where this conflict is already widely and publicly known. Born into deep poverty, István Sinka (1897-1969) himself was a shepherd at a young age. His poems started appearing in the 1920s, often in racist journals. He was a fierce opponent of the 1945 socialist takeover which led to his marginalization in the literary life. He was under a publication ban until 1961. He received a posthumous Kossuth Prize in 1990.

Poet István Sinka died on 17 June in the evening. In accordance with his wishes he was quietly buried by the family on 24 June in the Farkasréti cemetery. Thanks to all, who stood by him during his struggling life, grave suffering and share our grief. Istvánné Sinka, Magda Szín. (29 June 1969)

While the conflict is hinted at in the obituary, it is not openly discussed, making alternative interpretations of the text possible, a more permissive reading of Sinka's life might equate his suffering with deep poverty, a dissident, knowing readership can attach a bitter meaning to it: his opposition to communists and his publication ban which broke his career.

When I posit the obituaries as reflecting the memory politics of the era, the overall picture is ambiguous: while open verbalization of taboo-issues is barred from public discussion, numerous references that can be decoded by the readers are allowed. This fluidity, in my view, is the opposite of what Schwartz referred to as the past's limitations on the present (1982:395-396). During the Kádár-era it was the present realities – the Soviet troops in every Hungarian town, the 200,000 migrants who left the country, Kádár's rise to power itself – that made a total rewriting of the past, erasing junctures from it, impossible.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results in my analysis show how the obituary as a genre evolved in the researched era. The obituaries are very static, highly standardized texts that show little structural variation. Their primary aim is to contain essential information. This makes them a close relative of other news pieces and advertisements. With regard to changes that took place: the number of obituaries decreased, which might signify the changing readership of *Népszabadság* or a change in the genre's position. The ratio of life achievements within the obituary grows. A plausible explanation for this is the changing function of the text.

Secondly, the findings indicate how death-related practices and expressions have changed in the past decades. The puritan expression of death does not change during the years, very few religious references appear after 1990. I argue that the instead of signifying a death-taboo, metaphorical expressions of death show a secular, demystified but not tabooed relationship towards death. I also argue that the almost exclusively euphemistic expressions of death-causes indicate not a stigmatizing but a facilitating function. I found that an idea of a “good death” appears in a two-fold manner: the way in which the dying person is expected to behave before death and the timely manner of death. Expressions of grief are standardized in the texts, which indicates a suppression of mourning. With regard to funeral habits I found that funerals are not getting more private, while cremations are becoming the norm, caused by a complex web of reasons. The growing variation of funeral location choices indicates that there is a tendency to communicate meanings through these choices.

Thirdly, the influence of social context on how an identity is portrayed in the obituaries was also analyzed. I found that inequality continues after death, and obituary chances are influenced by one's social embeddedness, gender, social status and occupation. I found that identity in obituaries consists of one's name and role. While family roles are the primary

positions in one's social network, followed by occupational roles, references about political and civic roles are rarely emphasized in the texts. The prestige of different positions is mirrored in obituaries: elite and intellectual groups become more significant over the years. With regard to one's achievements, they take place in three domains: private, workplace and political. Timescapes are also framed by these domains. I found that the depiction of one's life is not longitudinal but static and that the deceased is more likely to be described in passive voice than his active traits. Over time the depiction of personal traits diminishes.

Finally, I examined how the politics of memory are reflected in the obituaries. I found that during communism, the communist party was present at most levels and spheres of society in the texts. I also found that the politically charged issue of migration is tolerated in the obituaries. A number of narrative strategies were used in the obituaries to harmonize communicative and cultural memory. The mentioning of political achievements disappears after 1990. In the last ten years of the researched era, reburials were used to localize political claims. In general, higher level political narratives both provided materials and set constraints for the construction of personal life stories, the terms for describing biographies changed with the changes of the political structure.

The communist project that took place in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that ultimately failed by the end of it went hand in hand with the metaproject to create the ideal socialist person. How this project was reflected in society and how it came to an end is seen through these obituaries. Existing death-taboos were played out against the backdrop of political taboos at a higher level in Hungarian society. Just as Baudrillard argues (1993), the repression of death from society can never be successful, the political attempts towards the distortion of social memory couldn't achieve total amnesia, references to a past that the power wanted to hide were constant throughout the obituaries.

The thesis contributes to the sociology of death in a number of ways. To my knowledge there haven't been sociological attempts to use Hungarian obituaries as sources to examine death-related social theories. On another level, it also contributes to the discussion about the memory of the Communist past in Hungary. Memory and especially the memory of Communism are of special importance in Eastern Europe. A systematic attempt to examine the connections between biography, society and political change in this context might lead to a better understanding of how memory politics affect and are affected by memory practices.

While this thesis focused on longitudinal trends to draw conclusions from it, future research would benefit from comparative analysis for a number of reasons. Such comparative analysis, whether it's between different media of commemoration, obituary genres or countries, would help establish new evidence related to the theories described in this thesis. Furthermore, a process-focused research that follows through the stages of death-related practices would shed light on how these activities form a complex process. Finally, an analysis of new media of mourning would add novel dimensions to the sociology of death.

## APPENDIX

Table 2: The annual and gender breakdown of the sample

year	number of obituaries	number of male obituaries	number of female obituaries
1961	63	44	19
1962	64	48	16
1963	43	31	12
1964	53	34	19
1965	51	36	15
1966	70	32	38
1967	62	41	21
1968	68	39	29
1969	59	43	16
1970	41	16	25
1971	31	18	13
1972	52	29	23
1973	47	28	19
1974	32	20	12
1975	63	43	20
1976	73	38	35
1977	67	41	26
1978	67	42	25
1979	52	31	21
1980	51	33	18
1981	32	20	12
1982	50	28	20
1983	53	33	20
1984	38	29	9
1985	27	15	12
1986	44	28	16
1987	52	29	23
1988	29	20	9
1989	40	28	12
1990	54	33	21
1991	42	20	22
1992	30	22	8
1993	30	17	13
1994	37	23	14
1995	33	21	12
1996	31	14	17
1997	33	23	10
1998	40	28	12
1999	41	25	16
2000	31	21	10
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1876</b>	<b>1191</b>	<b>685</b>

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