

INTRODUCTION

József Kakas, one of the hosts of the authors in Átány, related that as a schoolboy he often loitered around the village on summer evenings with his friends. They went to the church and talked as follows: We know that Hungary is in the center of the world, Átány in the center of Hungary, the church is standing in the very center of the village. Thus we stand in the center of the world. They observed that the sky is highest above the Átány church, sloping in a circle all around: this must in fact be the center of the world!

— Edit Fél, *Proper Peasants* (1969)

The often-used expression “minority policy” must in the near future be clearly defined in all of Europe. In Hungary we are getting closer to finally giving meaning to these words.

— Jakob Bleyer, *Neues Wiener Journal*, 5 January 1929

I visited the southern Hungarian village of Máriakéménd for the first time in the winter of 2006. I was there—on the advice of former members of the community now living in Germany—to meet with two men who could tell me about the way the German minority in Hungary lived before, during, and after the Second World War. (The village had been a German, that is, Swabian village before 1945.) When I arrived in the small community of approximately five hundred inhabitants, it was a chilly March morning and both Ádám Rogner and József Schleicher were already waiting at the mayor’s office. They were very eager to talk to me. Perhaps they were captivated by the idea that someone from the faraway United States was interested in their past, or perhaps they could hardly wait to tell their stories again, which seemed more likely.

We met in a conference room next to the mayor’s office, where an enormous rectangular table was waiting for us, surrounded by many empty chairs. Ádám and József sat on one side toward the middle and I on the other side. They both were nicely dressed: József in a colorful cardigan and Ádám with a gray-and-black sweater. At the time of our meeting they were in their early seventies, fit as fiddles, and very energetic.

I was prepared with questions about village and German life between the two world wars: How did rural German speakers understand their Germanness in relation to their German-speaking and non-German-speaking neighbors, as well as in terms of their relationship with Germany and with the Hungarian state? What did being German in Hungary mean at different times? I wanted to know how rural dwellers approached ethnic identity in early twentieth-century Central Europe. But we immediately plunged into a haphazard conversation that touched on a variety of topics. For example, *Ádám* described his journey in 1947, after he and his family had been expelled from Hungary for no reason except that they were Germans, to a camp near Dresden. *József* told me that his mother had been taken as a forced laborer to the Soviet Union in December 1944, hurt her shoulder when she fell off a truck, and was eventually returned to Hungary. (Upon her homecoming in 1949, she was the only family member left in the village, all others having been sent away.) I had to keep asking for dates in order to clarify the chronology, as *József* and *Ádám* often spoke without referring to time or at least some landmark events. Both of them set out with the intention to speak High German, yet elements of the local dialect inevitably seeped in.

From the seemingly often chaotic dialogue, a main topic emerged: what happened in the years immediately following the Second World War. Of course, these were the stories that the majority of people wanted to hear and also the ones that affected *Ádám's* and *József's* later lives the most. In 1944–45, at a time when many German-speaking and other Hungarians fled westward to avoid the approaching Soviet army, *Ádám's* and *József's* mothers and grandmothers (the fathers were away at war) had chosen to remain in their homes. But after two years of living in the new Hungary, their families, like most of the inhabitants of *Máriakéménd* and about half of all Hungarian German speakers, were transported to occupied Germany. Both *Ádám's* and *József's* families ended up in the Soviet zone. Unlike most German expellees, however, their families furtively returned to Hungary illegally, crossing borders on foot and evading police and soldiers. *József*, his grandmother, and his sister were captured upon their first attempt, put in jail for four weeks (*Andrássy út 60*, the location of the Hungarian secret police at the time, recently turned into a museum called the House of Terror), and returned to the Hungarian-Austrian border. The second time they successfully arrived back in their home village of *Máriakéménd*.



FIGURE 1.1. Young men and women at a dance in Máriakéménd, Baranya county. Photo courtesy of Elsa Koch.

Their stories strictly adhered to facts—when they were expelled and how they returned—but I managed to broach a few other issues as well. I did get them to talk a little about life in a “more peaceful and simple” prewar village, which they viewed as 100 percent German—without giving too much thought as to what “German” meant at the time or even today. *Ádám* also recalled his family’s back-breaking struggle to save enough money to buy back their original home—Hungarians expelled from Slovakia had been placed in the houses once owned by Germans. All the while, the unvoiced substance of our whole conversation was that the village of *Máriakéménd* (as an example of many Swabian villages across Hungary, as well as many rural communities in Central and Eastern Europe) occupied a central role in the lives of the people who lived there. So much so that *Ádám* and *József* did not hesitate to endanger their lives in order to return to the place where their ancestors had settled a little more than two hundred years earlier, notwithstanding that they had been forcibly removed as “Germans” from a “non-German state.”

Back in their home village by the late 1940s, being German had become an almost entirely private affair. Publicly self-ascribing as German was taboo, and membership in an imagined community of Germans had been discredited, especially for a minority population that now found itself in one of the new people’s democracies of Eastern Europe. How and to what extent did this situation affect the lives of German speakers in Hungary? And how did they get to this point? If they defined themselves (and others defined them) as Germans, what did (and does) that mean? And did that understanding of being German undergo changes from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century—a century during which homogenized, standardized, urbanized, and secular nation-states became commonplace? I went in quest of what it meant to be German for the rural German speakers of Hungary—to produce a case study in how ethnic and national categories acquired and modified their meaning. This book presents what I discovered.

HUNGARIAN GERMANS

Historians frequently integrate the history of the German minority in Hungary into German nationalist history.¹ German speakers in Hungary are considered components of a larger Germandom, with a clear ethnic relationship to the “mother country.” All too often German speakers in

Hungary (like all Germans abroad) are portrayed with reference to the twentieth century either as fascists (Hitler's fifth column), who therefore deserved to be expelled from Hungary and the new nation-states of Eastern Europe after the Second World War, or as pawns who received unfair treatment at the hands of local officials and the Allied Powers.² These extreme positions partly stem from moral and ethical questions connected to both German involvement in the war and German suffering after the war, which in this sense has rendered their history a sensitive topic for serious scholarship.³

When these German speakers appear in Hungarian nationalist history (or in general European history), they are often presented as one of several distinct groups (usually referred to in this context as nationalities).⁴ The nationality story is on the one hand one of competition: struggles for self-liberation from a different nationality's or a nation's domination, the purpose of which is to obtain freedom to live as Germans, for example. On the other hand, there are observers, such as the composer Béla Bartók, who offer a peaceful image of coexistence between the various nationalities. "Peasants are entirely free of hate against other nationalities, and have always been," Bartók wrote. "They live together peacefully, each speaking their own language, following their own traditions, and finding it entirely natural that their neighbor of a different mother tongue does the same."⁵ Both of these perspectives, however, rely on the nationalist assumption that "Germans" and similar groups are homogeneous, bounded, and clearly distinguishable from other such groups, and neither perspective is therefore helpful when trying to comprehend how people understood their belonging to an entity that is essentially a social construct.

The traditional historiography of Central Europe since the late nineteenth century also supports the notion of a region with divergent and competing ethnic groups: the Habsburg monarchy was a multinational state—a mosaic of peoples or a prison of peoples—and the First World War was the ultimate conflict between these peoples. In the customary narrative, the dismantling of the monarchy is the logical destiny for an archaic multinational state.⁶

Newer scholarship has challenged this story, most recently by offering portrayals of national indifference in the region. Pieter Judson, Tara Zahra, and Jeremy King, among others, have successfully argued that the history of Central and Eastern Europe was not only about acquiring national consciousness or about inevitable struggles between nations and nationalities.⁷

It was also about what was not recorded: “national indifference,” often associated with bilingualism, “national hermaphrodites,” “side switchers,” and “amphibians.”⁸ Zahra’s study about the history of nationalist activism concerning children demonstrates that “nationalist battles over children in the Bohemian Lands did not typically pit Czechs against Germans in a world of national polarization”; instead, “conflicts raged over who was Czech and who was German in a world of national ambiguity.”⁹ Zahra and others have changed the narrative: they assert that, instead of national difference and conflict, indifference “constitutes a new form of agency for citizens in a world of competing nationalist movements and nationalizing states.”¹⁰ Forms of identity are defined not only from the top down but just as much from the bottom up, and despite the fact that the new focus on “national indifference” has been criticized for restricting the interpretation to either “national” or “non-national” modes of identification, the addition of “national indifference” as a category of analysis challenges scholars to think in new and innovative ways about ethnicity, nationalism, and identity.¹¹

The Germanness of rural German speakers in twentieth-century Hungary, however, was characterized by aspects beyond the dichotomy of national or indifference to being national. I am arguing that, like many residents of Central and Eastern Europe, the German speakers of Hungary understood their identity as “German” even before the twentieth century, but what that meant varied according to time and perspective; it did not always represent a “national” identity. The competition did not take place between national and non-national forms of identity but over what categories such as “German” meant. My subject therefore is not just the categories themselves but the cognitive process of understanding those categories’ significance for a rural population.

When I first approached this topic, I borrowed the civic-ethnic model that scholars beginning with Hans Kohn have used to describe variations in national identity in Western and Eastern Europe, with areas farther east described in ethnic terms only, without the Western sensibilities of civic loyalty.¹² But what I discovered could not be presented as a dual identity (or dual loyalty) consisting of a German ethnic identity and a Hungarian civic identity, no matter how good that sounded, since doing so would oversimplify the fact that all personal identities are complex representations of categories that are both distinct and overlapping. More contemporary studies on hybridity, especially some recent literature on borderlands, seemed more useful.¹³ Hungarian Germans could conceivably be seen

as possessing a hybrid identity mixing elements of Hungarianness and Germanness. But this would imply that there were “pure” components of ethnic or national identities that mixed together to form a hybrid identity—“the myth of pure wholes whose intersection generates intermixture,” as Pamela Ballinger so aptly puts it in her critique of the concept of hybridity.¹⁴ The hybrid model does prove useful in understanding why people make certain choices, yet it does not satisfactorily explain the entire gamut of complex behavior that I found.

In many ways Gustav Gratz, a Hungarian-German politician and diplomat, had already articulated this same problem in 1938, even though he did not use the expression “hybridity.” When people referred to the Hungarian Germans as a “people with two souls,” Gratz countered,

Outside of our borders it is often inconceivable how it is possible for the Hungarian German to integrate his loyalty to his Volk with his loyalty to his fatherland so impeccably, that the two deeply felt obligations never contradict each other. Those who live in an environment where the concepts of belonging are identical with state and Volk see this as ambivalence and thus describe Hungarian Germandom ironically as a “people with two souls.” Yet, no one should be shaken by this in his loyal attitude toward Volk and state, which is congruent with hundreds of years of Hungarian-German tradition. As it is not impossible to love one’s father and one’s mother the same way, and to regard it as a heartfelt necessity to loyally perform one’s duty to both, it is likewise not only possible, but even one’s obligation to be equally true and devoted to one’s Volk and to one’s fatherland. . . . The less those abroad understand these circumstances and the consequent mindset of the Hungarian Germans, however, the more valid the latter’s demand that they not be reproached for their unique attitude regarding the relationship between Volk and state and that it be their prerogative to find the correct path that follows from their unusual situation and perception.¹⁵

The German speakers of Hungary were, according to Gratz, one people with undivided minds—a people who lived in harmony with their loyalty to the German *Volk* (understood as the German motherland) and to the Hungarian fatherland. Gratz realized what many contemporary nationalistic thinkers, as well as more modern scholars, did not: Hungarian Germans did not fit into the narrowly defined categories of either “German” or “Hungarian.” They were their own people; their consciousness was not

split into two separate souls. But even this more nuanced perspective on their world ignores the fact that Hungarian Germans, just like all similar groups defined by such terms, are not an actual group but rather a representation of arenas teeming with competing interests—junctures where negotiations are constantly taking place over the meaning of such categories as “German.”

As I was trying to understand the relationships between different constituencies vying for control of the meaning of categories like “German,” much of my research was guided by Rogers Brubaker’s proposed triadic nexus for the study of nationness. His nexus, which places the nationalizing state, the external homeland, and the national minority in a competitive political field, was a useful tool as I thought about how to explain the various participants in the negotiations, but it became clear early on that the triadic nexus leaves out the people—the individuals—who either defined themselves or were defined by others as, in this particular case, Germans. Brubaker’s “national minority” is not so much about the people, specifically the rural dwellers, who are the subjects of my research as it is about the abstract concept. The further I delved into the subject, the more I realized that there were additional members to be considered in the negotiations.

I came to the conclusion that German speakers in Hungary, similar to all peoples in Central and Eastern Europe, were struggling, perhaps not always consciously, to comprehend the designations that defined them as Germans (and also as Hungarians or as peasants, for example), as well as striving to participate in the defining process itself. They both actively and passively engaged in imparting meaning to their identity. The focus therefore should not be on nationality conflicts (or peaceful coexistence) between peoples—or on national differentiation or national indifference—but rather on the process of giving meaning to categories. This perspective reveals the agency that each person had and has to comprehend and define his or her identity and his or her sense of belonging. By not treating Germans as a real group—and instead problematizing the category of “German”—it becomes evident that people understood “German” in multiple ways. This realization is essential for any valid explanation as to how the meaning changed throughout the long twentieth century. As Prasenjit Duara has argued, “the self is constituted neither primordially nor monolithically but within a network of changing and often conflicting representations.”⁶

CATEGORIES

Even though the central characters in this book are the half-million German speakers of inner Hungary from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century, the underlying subject is the act of categorizing and the process of choosing an identity that affects all people in our modern world. I start from the premise that nations, minorities, and any such groups are not “real” in an organic (a priori) sense but that they function as real groups in social practice. They are variables, not constants. It is the nationalists and those who fall into their trap who treat such groups as internally homogeneous and externally bounded and portray such entities as the main actors in history. In the chapters that follow, all groups are treated not as things in the world but as perspectives on the world.¹⁷ I am telling the story of Hungarian Germans, but I am really narrating the contest to give meaning to “being German.”

Scholars and nonscholars alike use categories to define identities because categories provide structure for societies’ mental images. As George Lakoff argues, “without the ability to categorize, we could not function at all, either in the physical world or in our social and intellectual lives.”¹⁸ But each category is imbued with multiple meanings. Brubaker contends that we often rely on official (or top-down) categorization, which rarely portrays the understanding of ordinary people:

Studies of official categorization practices generally argue or imply that the ways in which states and other organizations count, classify, and identify their subjects, citizens, and clients have profound consequences for the self-understanding of the classified. This is no doubt often the case, but the connection between official categories and popular self-understandings is seldom demonstrated in detail. And the literature on classification and categorization in everyday life shows that the categories used by ordinary people in everyday interaction often differ substantially from official categories. The categorized are themselves chronic categorizers; the categories they deploy to make sense of themselves and others need not match those employed by states, no matter how powerful.¹⁹

In order to comprehend official and everyday categorizations in their interconnectedness, as well as the individuals doing the categorizing, we need to decipher the negotiations that took place on the everyday level among

the rural German speakers and between them and other, more official constituencies over the meaning of categories and how those negotiations provided identity to individual people.

THE IDEA OF TANGIBLE BELONGING

The narrative in the following chapters begins in 1867 with the Compromise Agreement—the *Ausgleich*—that reconceptualized the Austrian Empire as two halves, and it ends with the first minority legislation in democratic Hungary, in 1993. By covering the long twentieth century of Central European history—a century often associated with the Second World War—I can present the story of how the meaning of being German in Hungary has changed over time. The German speakers may have always considered themselves German, but the significance of that expression has always been in negotiation.

The question I pose is not the typical one. Instead of asking when or how the nation was constructed or imagined, I want to know what it meant to be “German.” Did being German signify belonging to a nation, a *Volk*, a minority, a family, a village? By inverting the question, I am able to engage with the rural dwellers (the German speakers of Hungary) and their perception of Germanness, as well as to better decipher how rural German speakers understood their identity as Germans or as something else. What did and do these categories represent?

This book is therefore not about “peasants into Germans”—a linear path that led premodern people to become national or led early forms of identity to become racial.²⁰ At first glance the story could be described as a metamorphosis of German-speaking Hungarians into *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans), but what was taking place was not a transformation; it was not about gaining national consciousness. Ideas concerning belonging were continually being negotiated. A changed context might have altered the terms of that negotiation, but while it encouraged some people to redefine their understanding of being German in a certain way, it influenced others to defend a different interpretation. It is this struggle over being German that underlies the narrative in the chapters that follow.

The main thesis of this book is that the majority of German speakers in Hungary had—and maintained well into the twentieth century—a local, *tangible* understanding of being German, even while confronted with numerous alternative ideas offering much more abstract forms of Germanness. Other scholars have emphasized local and regional identities in

Central Europe, often in contrast with more national ones.²¹ However, at least in the case of the Hungarian Germans, that local identity was not antithetical to being German; on the contrary, it was German. “German” referred to a tangible belonging in this case, denoting a mental construct that is derived from the tactile environment of an individual: objects, activities, and beings that are experienced through the various senses of vision, sound, smell, touch, and so forth. This identity, however, should not be thought of as more real than abstract ideas of national belonging based on views of large groups of individuals and vast expanses of land that one cannot personally explore. I am still referring to products of the mind, although they are closely related to the immediate environment.²²

Tangible belonging also implies thinking in terms of a *center* (a vertical or hierarchical organization of the world) compared to thinking in terms of *borders* (a horizontal organization).²³ When people describe themselves as “looking out” from the center, they frequently characterize themselves as subjects of a local landlord, as villagers, as rural dwellers, as residents of a particular community, or even as inhabitants of a specific house.²⁴ Their identity is centered in a place, and their relationship with others is understood in relationship with that place—that center. In contrast, thinking with borders (even if only cultural and not physical borders) “looking in” usually implies membership in a larger, more anonymous entity and draws much clearer distinctions between those inside the borders and those beyond them. Focus on a center often implies physical, tangible connections, whereas thinking in terms of borders implies a move toward more abstraction. Abstract perspectives are associated with what Benedict Anderson refers to as the time when people began to “think the nation,” although in this case it is how they “think German,” at least how they think German in a new way.²⁵

“Tangible belonging,” as I have conceived the term, is not a return to the “cultural stuff” that Fredrik Barth hoped to steer us away from in his introduction to the 1969 collection *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*.²⁶ Instead, my use of the term refers more to how people understand the relationship between themselves and what they see and experience—how they understand the place in which they live. In thinking about this, I was most influenced by the story of József Kakas, a boy in Átány, who remembers when as a child he stood in the village church and thought that he and his friends must be in the center of the world, since in their minds the church was in the center of the village, the village in the center of the country, and the country in the center of the world.²⁷ Anna Stallenberger, in a letter to

the German ethnographer Alfred Cammann, also seems to be referring to the same notion when she quotes a poem about a father who tells his son that their homeland is everything that “the eye can see”: the mountains, the valleys, the rivers, and the vineyards.²⁸

Forms of tangible and centered belonging are perhaps most associated with the premodern world—a world with reduced mobility (compared to today)—in which fewer players competed to control identity. This association creates the danger of interpreting the kind of self-understanding that I am describing here as an anachronistic identity that persisted in the modern world.²⁹ Yet a dyadic approach that opposes premodern (traditional) and modern attitudes is problematic in itself, since it implies mutually exclusive opposites and a teleological view of history. Tangible (centered) belonging was not simply a remnant of the premodern past; it existed and also thrived in the modern world (a more secular, literate, economically and politically liberal, industrial world). Terms such as premodern, modern, and traditional are not used here to emphasize “progress,” a linear development, or to compare forms of modernity, but rather these terms assist the reader in orienting changes across time, as well as constants across time.³⁰ I try to avoid giving these designators of historical periods qualitative meanings. As will become obvious in the conclusion of this book, some sense of tangible belonging is even present today.

Negotiations between tangible (centered), abstract (bordered), and other forms of identity were and are ongoing; as events and processes repeatedly reframe the discussion (or at least encourage something new), the competition over the meaning of categories such as “German” intensifies.³¹ Perhaps one of the most significant structural and cultural transformations during the twentieth century was the rise of modern, homogenizing societies (and nation-states). Scholars of nationalism such as Benedict Anderson, E. J. Hobsbawm, and Ernest Gellner argued—decades ago—that novel forms of communication and social conditions (beginning around the time of the French Revolution) caused new forms of national identity (and nationalism) to occur. Eugen Weber, in *Peasants into Frenchmen*, describes the impersonal factors of modernization that changed people’s relationship with the nation in the late nineteenth century.³² Kate Brown, in a very sophisticated biography of “no place,” highlights how local, rural, culturally complex communities were upset and then destroyed by modern states. She places a great deal of emphasis on the homogenizing consequences of modernity. Historians such as Keely Stauter-Halsted do not necessarily stress the impersonal power of

the modern world but instead demonstrate how rural elites embraced more national identities (increasingly prominent in the modern era) as a vehicle for social and political change.

It is hardly disputable that modernity established conditions that encouraged standardization, thereby championing identities defined by ever larger, more homogeneous groups. I also agree that individuals (not just elites) chose these broader identities in order to enjoy social mobility. Yet the transition to modernity did not immediately result in less culturally complex societies. Instead, the addition of other possible (in this case, mainly more abstract) ideas concerning belonging led to various identity crises, as well as competition for control of the categories that were used to describe different forms of belonging. One such struggle took place over what it meant to be German.

Confrontations between different ways of understanding categories like German or Hungarian were common throughout the twentieth century.³³ German-speaking villagers in Hungary navigated their lives and their sense of identity between the local, phenomenal world they inhabited and the growing impersonal influences brought to the villages by contact with various representatives of the Hungarian state, Germany, and the Hungarian-German leadership in Budapest. The villagers' tangible understanding of Germanness was now in competition with various other forms of an abstract, imagined sense of Germany and Hungary (or Germandom and Hungariandom)—entities understood by some as the German speakers' motherland or fatherland, respectively.

The changes associated with the advent of the modern (more mobile, more closely connected) world intensified the competition over the meaning of all categories, and especially between tangible (centered) belonging and various newer abstract (often bordered) perspectives. The competition or negotiations culminated in the interwar period, as the dominant form of thinking across Europe emphasized internally homogeneous and externally bounded nations, ethnic groups, and races. During this period, tangible belonging did not disappear; it was weakened. Not until the end of the Second World War (at least for the German speakers of Hungary) were the terms of the contest radically altered and the tangible, local identity essentially eliminated, when half the German population was expelled from their homes and villages to an unknown and alien Germany. (For the Germans who remained, being German became taboo.)

The Hungarian Germans illustrate the new competition that developed in many places regarding the meaning of such categories, as the



FIGURE 1.2. Winter pilgrimage, Máriakéménd, Baranya county. Photo courtesy of Ottó Hoffmann.

transformation of modernity took place. This competition is one between cognitive positions—positions concerning how people understood being German—what Brubaker so aptly refers to as “perspectives on the world.”³⁴ This work may be the story of Hungarian Germans, but in its key aspects it is also the history of most people in twentieth-century Central and Eastern Europe. The transition affected virtually everyone; identities were defined anew and in multifarious ways. The act of identification was really a process of negotiation between individuals (and imagined groups) concerning different ideas regarding belonging. And for many rural people, particularly the German speakers of Hungary, tangible belonging endured and struggled against many new, more abstract forms of belonging.

LOGISTICS

Telling this story—the story of the German speakers in rural Hungary—requires an innovative approach to sources, since the protagonists themselves left us very few documents. There are numerous printed sources from the

perspective of the Hungarian government—the national government and local county, district, and community officials—and from the Hungarian-German leadership. There is also material from Reich German organizations and individuals who visited and studied the Swabian villages. These more official sources I read with a critical eye in order to determine how the local population reacted to various ideas and concepts brought to them from outside the local community. I also consulted a number of church logbooks, in which the parish priests—in closer contact with the peasants and artisans—present different, more local views. (These are essentially journals written by the parish priests chronicling activities in the communities. They vary in length and detail.) In addition, I interviewed numerous elderly Hungarian Germans, both in Hungary and in Germany. These varied sources allow me to at least partially re-create the world in which the struggle over “being German” occurred during the twentieth century.

The narrative in the chapters that follow is constructed in multiple layers. Each chapter begins with an ethnographic discussion that introduces particular sources (both written and oral) and suggests the main theme for the time period under investigation (the rural world for the pre-1918 period, cultural contact for the post-First World War era, minority making for the 1920s, and so on). The subsections that follow serve as snapshots of different layers of understanding that highlight how various individuals and groups (the Hungarian state, the Hungarian-German leadership, the German “mother” country, and the different rural linguistic groups) not only understood the meaning of Germanness vis-à-vis the German speakers of Hungary but also competed for control over what it meant to be German. (If a subsection concentrates on outside influences, such as the Hungarian state, for example, it ends with a discussion of how those outside views affected rural German speakers and begot their escalating identity crisis.) The narrative is therefore not driven by straightforward cause-and-effect relationships but by an episodal structure that encourages the reader to experience the various viewpoints simultaneously.

I seek to understand how the rural German speakers “thought German”—what “being German” meant for them—at different times. In order to be honest to the endeavor, the first person frequently appears in the text, as do time shifts from past to present when appropriate. The book, in many ways, reflects my conversation with the sources. I cannot avoid being part of the story, as I am the one newly interpreting the documents and piecing them together to re-create an image of the past, introducing my version of order in the midst of chaos. I try to let various voices speak for

themselves, but they always speak through me. In this way, I have become an ethnographer, searching for Germans but trying to let the Hungarian Germans tell me what “German” meant for them and how they put their understanding of “being German” into practice. “German” is treated more as a “category of practice” rather than a “category of analysis,” as I try to decipher the competing meanings of the expression during the twentieth century. My position as an American scholar, speaking both German and Hungarian, traveling frequently between the United States and Europe, makes me critical of rigid ethnic and national categories, which in many ways continue to inform our discussions of identity, especially in the United States. In this book, I—the historian-become-ethnographer—describe the world that has come to life through my research, my notes, my conversations, and my thoughts. No narrative is completely objective: this is my attempt to tell the history of the German speakers in Hungary.