

Discursive Exposures of Exclusion through the Figure of the Traitor

Nora Tyeklar

nora.tyeklar@maine.edu

Visiting Assistant Professor of Social Science, University of Maine at Augusta

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/00009-0002-3527-9964>

Nora Tyeklar is a linguistic anthropologist who holds a PhD in Anthropology from the University of Texas at Austin. Her research uses ethnographic methods to explore how discourse, narrative, and performance shape experiences of migration, exclusion, and social movements. She focuses on the expressive and political dimensions of language, with particular attention to the poetics of voice, place, and belonging. As a Visiting Assistant Professor of Social Science at the University of Maine at Augusta, she teaches courses in anthropology and works on initiatives concerning access to higher education.



Critical
Romani Studies

Abstract

In this article, I present a historical conceptualization of the Hungarian-language term *hazaáruló* / traitor while contextualizing it within the emigration of Roma from Hungary to Canada and their subsequent return from Canada. I discuss how speakers emplace Roma in Hungarian society through the figure of the *hazaáruló* / traitor, a term often employed in political debates to delegitimize opponents and also directed at Roma who returned from Canada, both by Roma and non-Roma. In tracing the concept historically, I take into account its legal definition and usage as codified in the Hungarian Criminal Code and contexts in which, for example, rulers operationalized calls of treason as a linguistic device for disarming a political opponent (Cornwall 2015). Then, I describe a prominent contemporary example of the discursive usage of the term *hazaáruló* / traitor in the case of the Roma from the town of Zámoly who fled Hungary to seek asylum in Strasbourg, France. Finally, I include relevant findings from ethnographic fieldwork during which Romani families frequently recounted instances of being named a *hazaáruló* / traitor for having migrated to Canada. In my analysis, I contend that the very act of Roma from Hungary seeking refuge were public exposures of the normalized relations of exclusion.

Keywords

- Exclusion
- Forced return
- Racializing discourse
- Refugees
- Roma
- Whiteness

Introduction

In this article, I consider the figure of the *hazaáruló* / traitor and offer a historical conceptualization of the term while contextualizing it within the emigration of Roma from Hungary. I focus on the discursive ways in which local and national actors use this term to exclude and marginalize Romani communities. The study aims to provide a historical conceptualization of the term *hazaáruló* / traitor by tracing its legal and political uses in Hungary, particularly in moments of regime change, war, and political upheaval. Additionally, I investigate how the label of *hazaáruló* / traitor has been applied in recent times to Roma who emigrated to Canada seeking refuge and were later forced to return due to unsuccessful refugee claims.

First, I situate the case of Romani migration within broader European discourses on refugees and migration. I examine how anti-refugee rhetoric in Hungary, particularly during the 2015 European “refugee crisis,”^[1] intersected with existing anti-Roma discourses and reinforced exclusionary national narratives. The Hungarian government’s framing of refugees as threats to national security and Christian identity resonated with longstanding depictions of Roma as internal outsiders, linking the treatment of Romani returnees with the broader politics of migration control. Furthermore, I consider how these racializing discourses have shaped European migration policies, including the differential treatment of Romani refugees from Ukraine following the 2022 Russian invasion. I also highlight how the *hazaáruló* / traitor label intersects with public health narratives, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Romani communities were scapegoated as health threats, further entrenching their racialization and exclusion from national belonging.

I then expand this analysis by exploring the historical development and legal codification of the term *hazaáruló* / traitor and outline its function in political rhetoric and governance. I analyze how Hungarian rulers, political figures, and legal frameworks have used accusations of treason to consolidate power, discipline dissenters, and define the boundaries of national belonging. This section draws on historical legal texts and political discourse to establish the broader ideological function of treason in Hungary. Next, I introduce the case of Romani asylum seekers from Zámoly, a significant contemporary example of the term’s application in political and public discourse. Through this case study, I examine how the term *hazaáruló* / traitor was used in parliamentary debates and media narratives to delegitimize both Romani asylum seekers and their non-Romani allies who advocated for their rights. This section situates the contemporary usage of the term within a broader framework of racializing discourses and nationalist politics.

1 In much of Europe, governments have treated the large movement of people as an “illegal migrant” issue rather than people fleeing war. Some critics claim that the real refugee crisis is Fortress Europe’s inability and unwillingness to develop a humanitarian resettlement plan and the racist backlash refugees encounter across Europe (Fotiadis 2016). I place the phrase *refugee crisis* within quotation marks to highlight this and to indicate that the use of such a term places the burden of war on those fleeing it rather than on those powerful global actors who (1) participated (at various levels and stages) in the provocation, spread, and escalation of the Syrian war; and (2) have the capacity to offer protection via resettlement to those people who have been displaced by it.

I then present ethnographic findings from my fieldwork with Romani families who migrated to Canada and were subsequently forced to return to Hungary due to unsuccessful refugee claims. During my research, I conducted in-depth interviews and participant observation in rural Hungarian cities and towns where returnee Romani families faced exclusion, hostility, and economic hardship. Many returnees recounted being labeled *hazaáruló* / traitor by both non-Roma and Roma who had remained in Hungary, revealing the paradoxical nature of their exclusion. While they were marked as outsiders before leaving, their return further solidified their marginal status, as their departure and refugee claims were framed as betrayals of the nation.

Through this analysis, I argue that the figure of the *hazaáruló* / traitor operates as a racializing discourse that not only aims to discipline Romani individuals but also exposes the broader structures of exclusion and discrimination they face. By labeling Romani returnees as traitors, local and national actors reinforce the precarious position of Romani citizens within Hungarian society and highlight the contradictions in their legal and social belonging. Ultimately, this article contributes to scholarship on racialized migration, political discourse, and the intersection of nationalism and exclusion and demonstrates how accusations of treason serve as a tool for maintaining social hierarchies and reinforcing racialized notions of citizenship. By integrating historical analysis with contemporary case studies and ethnographic insights, I illustrate how the *hazaáruló* / traitor label functions as a racializing discourse shaping the lived experiences of Romani returnees and their “reintegration”^[2] struggles.

1. Roma as Refugee

Throughout its history, Hungary has been a crucial transit zone and a site for occupations (for example, Ottomans). It has hosted a cyclical succession of invasions that reworked the contours of the countryside and the make-up of its population (for example, Tatars), borne the weight of enlightened absolutisms that outlawed certain ways of speaking and forced assimilation (under Habsburg rule), stirred with revolutions that tried but failed (1848 and 1956), and struggled with forty years of communism and devastating wars. The Treaty of Trianon, in particular, stripped Hungary of nearly three-quarters of its territory and more than half its population, leaving about a third of all Hungarians outside its new, re-established borders. During the Second World War, Hungary’s Jewish and Romani populations were deported and sent to concentration camps. Today, Hungary lies at a crossroads between East and West and shares borders with seven countries. Perhaps more importantly in the context of Europe’s 2015 “refugee crisis,” it sat at the southern edge of the European Union (EU), positioning it as a strategic passageway between Serbia and Austria and making it one of the main entry points into the EU Schengen Area.^[3]

2 I choose to put the term “reintegrate” in quotation marks because here I prefer the term refamiliarization to describe what happens during a forced remigration since as Sarah Turnbull (2018) points out, “The notion of ‘reintegration’... incorrectly assumes that these informants, and migrants, more generally, are ‘integrated’ to begin with” (45). That is, it is for the very reason that efforts to integrate non-Roma and Roma have failed that such forced migrations become necessary in the first place.

3 The Schengen Area was expanded with Bulgaria and Romania joining fully at the beginning of 2025, making Hungary’s southern border no longer the most southern edge of the Schengen Area.

During the summer of 2015, Europe experienced hundreds of thousands^[4] of refugees and migrants moving into and through its territories from conflict and war zones in the Middle East and Africa by crossing the Mediterranean Sea or by land via the Balkans. Syrian refugees were joined by Afghans, Bangladeshis, Eritreans, Iraqis, Kurds, Libyans, and Pakistanis. In mid-June 2015, the Hungarian government announced plans to build a razor-wire fence along its border with Serbia (Dunai 2015). Employing contractors and soldiers, the construction of the fence began on 13 July. During this time, the Hungarian government continued to openly resist taking in more migrants and refugees. In early September, a record number of people, almost 6,000, arrived in Hungary as its fence neared completion (Fry 2015). Soon the first stage of construction was done. With the erection of the 103-mile, 13-foot-high razor-wire section of fence along the border with Serbia was sealed, and Hungary declared a state of emergency. On 14 September, new laws came into effect making it a criminal offense punishable with several years of prison to cross into Hungary without permission or to damage the fence (amendment to section 353/A of the Hungarian Criminal Code). Anyone assisting refugees or harboring them also faced prison time if caught. On 18 September, the construction of a second stage of fence began along Croatia's border with Hungary.

During the movement of refugees and migrants across Hungary's borders and into Hungary's territory, Hungarian politicians regularly depicted them as threats to Hungary's, and Europe's, Christian identity and to the Hungarian nation itself. This latest outsider-as-threat discourse is related to and resonates of Hungary's historical role as an occupied, invaded, and traversed territory. Discourses othering and scapegoating Roma continued to circulate throughout this period, and concurrent discourses reproducing anti-refugee sentiments became highly visible. In the summer of 2016 when I arrived in Hungary to begin my fieldwork, the Hungarian government, led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and a supermajority *Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség* / *Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance* parliament, had recently unveiled its latest billboard campaign that would become iconic of the *Fidesz* government's response to the large number of refugees and migrants attempting to cross into Hungary. Ahead of the national referendum the Hungarian government was planning in October 2016, they had produced a landscape of blue billboards that blanketed the country with state messaging that warned citizens of the menace of the "*migráns* / migrant" figure. The Hungarian government had decided to hold a referendum on whether to accept the European Union's plan for relocating migrants throughout EU countries via a quota system despite the fact that as an EU member state Hungary was obligated to abide by it. By the time the billboards appeared, the anti-migrant rhetoric had become a normalized phenomenon in Hungary and the word *migráns* / migrant had taken on a negative, bordering on pejorative, connotation.

Hungarian political discourse continuously redefines the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, whether for Romani citizens or foreign refugees (Kallius, Monterescu, and Rajaram 2016). Similar to political

4 The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the organization mandated to register, support, and protect refugees, has said that "the number of people driven from their homes by conflict and crisis has topped 50 million for the first time since World War II, with Syrians hardest hit" (UNHCR 2014). In fact, people fleeing Syria since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in March 2011 constitute the largest human displacement globally. At the writing of this article, according to the website of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), the total number of people displaced outside of Syria's borders stands at 6.6 million in addition to 6.7 million internally displaced people. According to the Pew Research Center, by the end of 2016 approximately 650,000 Syrians had applied for asylum in the European Union (Connor 2017).

discourse regarding migrants, political parties and other powerful groups in Hungary have used discourses, rallies, social exclusion, intimidation, and violence often to scapegoat its Romani minority as threats to its national unity. Historically, Roma, Europe's largest ethnic minority, have been one of the most marginalized and persecuted ethnic groups in the world. Since the earliest appearance of the ancestors of Roma in Europe 700 years ago after migrating from India, countries have enslaved, deported, and assimilated them by force. Efforts to integrate Roma into Hungarian society have been largely unsuccessful as most continue to live in dire poverty, face discrimination in acquiring housing, experience a disproportionately high unemployment rate compared with the general population, and struggle to get access to equitable educational opportunities. Alongside the 2008 global economic downturn, there was another escalation in violent attacks and intimidation against Roma and the resurgence of extremist groups with explicit anti-Roma agendas across Europe. Moreover, people in positions of power used racializing discourses that perpetuated stereotypes about Roma, working to further marginalize them.

Over the course of the arrival of refugees and migrants at Hungary's borders, anti-refugee and anti-Roma discourses began to merge in the public speeches and texts of members of the Hungarian government shaping the "refugee crisis" narrative. That is, the burden of "inheriting" and "having to live with" (Fábíán 2015) approximately half a million Roma who are portrayed as impossible to integrate was being publicly linked in and likened to objections about fulfilling refugee resettlement quotas due to similar concerns over integrating refugees into a national "we" (European Roma Rights Center [ERRC] 2015). Underlying these objections is the deeply ingrained stereotype of the Roma as eternal wanderers – a people who are rootless by nature and therefore incapable of belonging. This framing not only reinforces their perceived incompatibility with the nation-state but also serves to justify their exclusion by denying them claims to national identity, homeland, or territory (Fiałkowska, Garapich, and Mirga-Wójtowicz 2019). In Eastern European contexts, Romani migration is framed not as a legitimate response to structural discrimination but as a transgressive act that justifies their exclusion from national belonging. Herein lies the paradox of Romani mobility: although legally sanctioned within the EU, it is socially and politically constructed as deviant (Yıldız and De Genova 2017) and thus reinforces their marginalization within nation-states and across Europe.

Anti-Roma racism has shaped European migration policies with legal and discursive strategies (Piemontese and Maestri 2023) operating in tandem to discipline Romani migration and maintain the precarious social position of Roma, including the treatment of Romani refugees from Ukraine since the 2022 Russian invasion. While non-Romani Ukrainians received broad humanitarian support, Roma faced discrimination at border crossings and within refugee aid systems (Mirga-Wójtowicz, Talewicz, and Kołaczek 2022; Shmidt and Nadya Jaworsky 2022; Iyer 2023; Eredics 2024), which echoed long-standing exclusionary practices across Europe. "The marginalization of Roma refugees from Ukraine reflects broader trends in racialized governance across Europe, where selective inclusion reinforces structural inequalities" (Eredics 2024, 4). This pattern emerges in the forced return of Hungarian Roma from Canada, where they were dismissed as "bogus refugees" (Diop 2015) despite fleeing racial violence. In both cases, Romani mobility is criminalized or delegitimized and reinforces their precarious status. The label *hazaáruló* / traitor has historically been used to discipline dissenters in Hungary and was similarly applied to Romani returnees, marking them as both internal and external outsiders. This process intersects with public health narratives, as seen during COVID-19, when Romani communities

were scapegoated as health threats, further entrenching their racialization and exclusion (Holt 2020; Korunovska and Jovanovic 2020; Lee 2020; Matache and Bhabha 2020; Mihalache 2020; Rorke and Lee 2020). In this article, I show that the discursive framing of Romani returnees as traitors and undeserving refugees exposes how migration control, nationalism, and racial exclusion operate together to maintain Romani marginalization within and beyond Hungary. To fully grasp the power of this label, it is essential to examine the historical roots of *hazaáruló* / traitor and how it has been used as a political tool to delegitimize and exclude certain groups. In the following section, I trace the legal, political, and rhetorical evolution of the term in Hungary by highlighting its role in shaping national belonging and exclusion over time.

2. Origins of the Figure of the *Hazaáruló*

In Hungarian, the word *hazaáruló* translates as traitor. *Hazaáruló* is a compound word made up of the free morphemes *haza* (homeland) and *áruló* (betrayer). Moreover, the term *áruló* is the noun form of the transitive, imperfective verb *árul*, which means to sell, but specifically, spending time trying to sell. That is, the sale has not yet been completed nor has it been successful. *Hazaárulás* (treason) is properly a legal term, too, and its definition and consequences are encapsulated in the current Hungarian Criminal Code in Section 258, paragraphs 1–3. In this legal definition of treason, the actor who commits treason is a citizen of Hungary and can commit it in three ways via contact with a foreign entity by threatening Hungary’s autonomy, land, and law. The sentences are then detailed for each of the three degrees of a treasonous act.

Historically in Hungary, there have been numerous revolutions, interruptions, and occupations that took place during the years leading up to the First World War, during the politically tumultuous interwar period, in the aftermath of the Second World War, and following the defeated 1956 Revolution. Although a Hungarian Criminal Code has been in place since the rule of Hungary’s first king, Saint Istvan, those who seized power after or over the course of each war, revolution, and conflict with Hungary’s neighboring states were the ones who usually charged others with treason. In fact, under such circumstances, those newly in power often interpreted dissent as treason. The term *hazaáruló* / traitor, therefore, not only has a legal definition and usage, but those in power have also been, and still are, using it discursively to publicly name their political opponents or the losers of revolution or war as such. In describing how rulers operationalized treason in the late stages of the Habsburg monarchy,^[5] Mark Cornwall (2015) writes:

[t]reason, of course, is historically ubiquitous and the ultimate political crime. It always involves some kind of power struggle, a perceived challenge to existing authority, or a threat to an established political community that may endanger state security. The cry of ‘treason’ or ‘traitor’ has consistently been invoked over the centuries as a linguistic device with which

5 The Kingdom of Hungary came under Habsburg rule in 1526 that lasted until 1867 after which it became a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1918 when it broke up after the First World War.

to disarm a political opponent, a way of publicly branding some disloyalty to a cause or community. But more concretely, the concept of treason was and is embedded in most states' criminal codes, constituting there 'the heaviest and most cumbersome weapon in the fight for political power' (114–115).

Ultimately, the treason trials of the twentieth century in the Habsburg empire were public show trials based on a struggle for control and power. Judges and jurists demonized accused traitors publicly since in "cases of treason the struggle for power is interpreted in moral terms: allegedly, the moral universe of the community, the collective, has been violated by one of their own who has become a traitor" (Cornwall 2015, 115). In fact, Cornwall (2019) identifies within the Habsburg monarchy "the types of treason that could be mapped on to the criminal code in order to pursue a successful prosecution and conviction" (8) with there being three in the late Habsburg era: the assassin (that is, an attack on the monarch), the socialist or anarchist (that is, an attempt to violently change the form of government), and the nationalist (that is, the stirring of unrest in order to break off from the empire).

After the Second World War, Mátyás Rákosi, a Hungarian communist politician who aspired to Joseph Stalin's model of governance, took power, oversaw the imprisonment and deaths of thousands of Hungarians, and put on show trials conducted by newly formed People's Tribunals in Budapest, sentencing to death the convicted. In fact, the language used in one high-profile Stalinist show trial described the traitors as the "scum of society" who had turned to treason "because of their cowardly and vacillating characters" (Cornwall 2015, 115–116). Despite Rákosi's intent to use show trials and accusations of high treason by the secret police (Ötvös 2014) to serve the Communist take-over, a transitional government brought the People's Tribunals into existence at the end of 1944 through Decree No. 81/1945. M. E. of the Transitional National Government, with subsequent legislation in the forms of laws passed in 1946 and 1947 to regulate the process of "bringing to justice the people that had given the orders under the former regime" (Pető 2020, 3). Nevertheless, the "justice" tribunal judges meted out during these trials was manipulated via bribes and threats as the verdicts and punishments that judges handed down were not always consistent with the crimes committed. After the failed anti-Soviet Revolution of 1956, a new law re-established such People's Tribunals for the purpose of punishing those people who had been responsible for and participated in the uprising (Pető 2020). After the revolution, the Soviets installed János Kádár to lead Hungary, and he began his tenure in power, as did Rákosi, with a political purge during which his government imprisoned and executed those who had participated in the revolution. Show trials in post-Second World War Hungary were a fundamental part of politics (Ötvös 2014) and during Rákosi's reign Kádár himself had been falsely accused of being a spy for Miklós Horthy's police and was then tried, convicted, and sentenced prior to coming to power. After Stalin's death in 1954, the then leader of the one-party socialist state, Imre Nagy, released Kádár from prison. From the failed revolution until the fall of Communism in 1989, Kádár was the leader of Hungary. This period in Hungarian history was marked by one of the highest standards of living in Eastern Europe. During this time, the show trials that had marked the turbulent war, interwar, and post-war years became altogether obsolete. In the twentieth century prior to the fall of communism, those who took over employed the term *hazaáruló* / traitor to morally censure those who had participated in quelling dissent or revolt under the previous regime.

3. The Case of Zámoly and the Traitor as Anti-progress

A prominent contemporary example of the discursive usage of the term *hazaáruló* / traitor was in the case of Roma from the town of Zámoly who fled Hungary to seek asylum in Strasbourg, France in July 2000 (Hell and Törzsök 2001; Hell 2002). The series of events leading up to Romani families from Zámoly seeking asylum in France began in the fall of 1997 when a storm damaged the roof and walls of a house to such an extent that the local government declared it life-threatening and therefore uninhabitable. The municipality moved the families who occupied the house to the theatre hall of the town's cultural center. While the families lived in the cultural center until July 1998, the mayor of Zámoly ordered the demolition of their home, and because the families were unable to pay the electricity, gas, and water fees in the cultural center, the utilities were all shut off (albeit the water only temporarily after complaints were filed). During this period, residents from surrounding municipalities who had gone to the town to socialize attacked the families living in the cultural center. Around this same time, politicians across the country and in Parliament had been using an overtly anti-Roma discourse. Zámoly residents collected signatures on a petition demanding that the local government expel the Roma families from the cultural center. Eventually, with the assistance of the National Roma Council and the Roma Civil Rights Foundation, construction began on new houses for the families living in the cultural center and the National Roma Council provided the families temporary housing in wooden houses on the Romani settlement until construction could begin on their permanent housing.

In the late summer of 1999, after several young men from a nearby town entered the settlement in Zámoly where many Roma lived, a fight broke out between these men and local Romani residents. While fleeing, one of the men suffered a serious head injury from an alleged attack and died in the hospital the following day. Consequently, non-Roma from around the country called in death threats against Roma in Zámoly. A few went so far as to burn down a house in which Roma lived. The perpetrators were never found. In the following months, these actions escalated with more politicians making public, overtly anti-Roma comments to the media. By the spring of 2000, the promised permanent housing had still not been completed, so Romani families from Zámoly moved to Budapest and from there to Csór into the barns and sheds on the property of József Krasznai, at the time the vice-chairman of the Roma Parliament, chairman of the Fejér County Independent Roma Organization, chairman of the Székesfehérvár Roma self-government, and also the eldest son in the Krasznai family affected by the events in Zámoly. Around this time, unidentified offenders vandalized Krasznai's home with a swastika and other racist texts. It was after such increasingly violent acts that the affected Romani families from Zámoly made the decision to flee Hungary and seek asylum in a Western European nation. Meanwhile, Katalin Katz, a professor of social work, was conducting research on the Roma Holocaust in Hungary and met Holocaust survivors from Zámoly. Hearing of their situation, she offered József Krasznai USD 4,000 to help him escape. Katz traveled with the group that embarked on the trip to Strasbourg, France. The group was comprised of about fifty Roma individuals from Zámoly, and the French government eventually granted them asylum status in March 2001.

The day after the Hungarian media reported on the successful asylum applications, thirty-eight Hungarian intellectuals wrote an open letter to the Prime Minister of France Lionel Jospin thanking

him for granting asylum to Roma from Zámoly. The undersigned intellectuals included such people as Ágnes Daróczi (news writer and activist), Péter Eszterházy (writer), Aladár Horváth (then president of the Roma Civil Rights Foundation), Miklós Jancsó (film director), István Kemény (sociologist), Angéla Kóczé (then director of the Human Rights Education Program of the ERRC), and Tamás Miklós Gáspár (philosopher) (Origo 2001). Shortly after the letter's publication, Loránt Hegedűs, a Calvinist priest, the vice-president of the *Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja (MIÉP)* / Hungarian Justice and Life Party, and a far-right parliamentary representative, in his speech to Parliament used the term *hazaárulók* / traitors when referencing the letters written by the intellectuals. My translation of part of his speech where he names the intellectuals *hazaárulók* / traitors is below:

After so many kicks [to the Hungarian nation], it could not come as a surprise to the nation that a group of 40 ultraliberal, so-called intellectuals – who all had the urge to deliver another kick – thanked the French nation and the French prime minister for accepting a group that presumably beat to death a young Hungarian man from Csákvár. We cannot call them traitors only because they have never identified with the Hungarian people, their fate, history, culture or life. We must declare that among them a minority wants to take hostage the country's largest stigmatized minority in order to live out their lowly, anti-Hungarian instincts: using their Israeli comrades, grossly violating the Constitution of the Republic of Hungary via ethnic and racial incitement (Kováts 2002, 151).

Hegedűs's comments are a political maneuver to make illegitimate the act of solidarity expressed by Hungarian intellectuals. Though he ultimately names them traitors, he begins by remarking how they are not worthy of such a label “because they have never identified with the Hungarian people, their fate, history, culture or life.” Yet, the undersigned are precisely those figures in Hungarian society who have made significant contributions to Hungarian history, culture, and society. Despite denying them the traitor label, he nonetheless goes on to describe them as such by accusing them of “grossly violating the Constitution of the Republic of Hungary,” just the criminal infraction that makes one a traitor, and essentially equating it with “racial incitement” against non-Romani Hungarians, which is what a number of Roma have been charged with in more recent frictions with the far-right. Hegedűs goes as far as invoking a long-standing trope of antisemitism when he suggests that “Israeli comrades” assisted in divided loyalties in Hungary, not only by inciting physical violence against a non-Romani Hungarian man but also showing gratitude for France's acceptance of a group from “the country's largest stigmatized minority.” In his speech, it is possible that Hegedűs was referencing the definition of traitor that Endre Ady, one of Hungary's most revered poets who was writing around the turn of the twentieth century, conceptualized in 1905:

Aki ellensége a haladásnak, a jobbra törésnek, az emberi szellem feltétlen szabadságának, hazaáruló, ha örökösen nem tesz is egyebet, mint a nemzeti himnuszt énekl.

He who is the enemy of progress, of better pursuits, of the unconditional freedom of the human spirit, is a traitor, if he does nothing forever but sing the national anthem.

If we consider Ady's concept of traitor with Hegedűs's comments, the intellectuals then become characterized as “enemies of progress” through which they are traitors. It was during the early 2000s

that Hungary was being considered a candidate for membership in the European Union. Events such as Roma fleeing from Hungary to seek asylum in France, and France granting their asylum requests, compounded with Hungarian intellectuals publicly acknowledging the course of events through an open thank you letter to the French prime minister for protecting Hungarian citizens, did not depict Hungary in a favorable way and could potentially risk their accession to the EU. At the time, Hungarian leaders and the public considered accession to the EU a significant sign of progress and so, according to Hegedűs, the intellectuals had potentially become an obstacle, if not enemies, to such progress.

Instances of politicians publicly naming their opposition as traitors is not uncommon in current parliamentary debate and in the media. In recent years, politicians such as Máté Kocsis, president of the Fidesz party faction in the European Parliament (EP), during a 2018 press conference named those EP representatives who voted in favor of the Sargentini Report^[6] traitors (Haszán 2018); László Kövér, speaker of the Hungarian Parliament since 2010, regularly labels opposition party members traitors (Haszán 2018); and Tímea Szabó, a parliamentary representative for the liberal Dialogue for Hungary Party, named Prime Minister Viktor Orbán a traitor during her remarks in Parliament in May 2021 (Czinkóczi 2021). These are just a few examples, but there are many more. Again, the politicians using the term were not using it in its legal sense but were wielding the term discursively to delegitimize the political maneuvers of politicians who they perceived as standing in the way of the realization of their agenda or were attempting to shed light on worrisome issues such as those named in the Sargentini Report that would tarnish Hungary's image before the European Parliament. If we consider such public remarks in light of Ady's conceptualization of "traitor," each politician was naming their target as enemies to the agenda they perceived as progress.

4. Exposures of Normalized Relations of Exclusion

During my fieldwork, Romani families would recount instances of being named a *hazaáruló* / traitor for having moved to Canada. Especially in the rural areas of the country, in small towns and villages where most of the townspeople knew each other well, it became public local knowledge as to who had departed for Canada. Upon their return, Romani families frequently encountered the hostile discursive acts of being labeled traitors. Such usage of the term is paradoxical in the sense that it was being used as a slur against Roma, yet one must be a citizen to commit treason. So, Roma only become "citizens" insofar as they have "betrayed" Hungary, but it is precisely their lack of protections as citizens that motivates their refugee claims in the first place. As such, I contend that the very act of Roma from Hungary seeking refuge is a form of indirect resistance in response to racializing discourses conducting Roma lives. The claims of refuge Roma submit in Canada or other countries are acts that ultimately expose the everyday inimical conditions Roma must face and survive every day. Thus, Hungary risks being publicly reduced to a "sending" nation for refugees according to those non-Roma (and Roma) who encounter former

6 The Sargentini Report authored by Member of the European Parliament Judith Sargentini investigated whether Article 7 Proceedings should be triggered against Hungary due to an "existence of a clear risk of a serious breach by Hungary of the values on which the Union is founded" (European Parliament 2018). The report enumerates concerns about freedom of expression, academic independence, the protection of minorities, and the fairness of the judicial system.

refugee claimants returning to Hungary and at whom they direct the traitor pejorative. I include here another usage of the word *hazaárulás* / treason. It is an excerpt from the poem “Numero XXXVII” written in 1986 by Romani poet Attila Balogh, which Aladár Horváth included on the final page of his 2021 study on the city of Miskolc. Horváth provides a historical overview of the segregating practices that the city of Miskolc enacted against its Romani residents. He describes in detail how the Roma Civil Rights Movement originated from organizing to resist the planned eviction of Romani residents to inadequate housing on the outskirts of the city. Below are the original Hungarian and my translation of the excerpt from Balogh’s poem:

– bennem már csak a hazaárulás
szépül,
szívem sarkához
épül,
ragyog az
emigráció,
jaj, de
jó.

– within me now only treason
is attractive
into the corner of my heart
it builds,
emigration
it shines
oh, how
good.

In this brief excerpt, Balogh connects *hazaárulás* / treason with *emigráció* / emigration as the single, secret thing in his heart that grows and shines. The implication is that this so-called “treason,” that is, emigration – departure from his homeland – is the only thing that “shines” and is a possible “good” now in his life. Balogh transforms the negative connotations associated with treason to a more optimistic one. Because this treason-emigration coupling builds in the corner of his heart, well inside of him (symbolically internalizing it), it suggests the complexities involved in leaving one’s home. He ends the excerpt with “jaj, de / jó” / “oh, how good,” which leaves the reader with a resigned tone. I interpret this brief verse as commentary on the good that emigration has the potential to bring (“it shines”) and the ties that bind one to their country complicate this because leaving would be a so-called betrayal. Balogh’s poem diverges from the previous usages of *hazaáruló* and *hazaárulás* I have included so far in my analysis since it is not included in the poem as an utterance used in speech to accuse. Rather, the verse gives insight on how feelings of treason develop in someone and how they dwell on them. Horváth’s inclusion of this excerpt at the end of his study is evocative because it points to the feelings that the treason-emigration coupling generates in, for example, someone about to be evicted. The placement of the excerpt in his study also calls up the conceptual history of the term *hazaáruló* / traitor included so far in my analysis and the ways in which it has been invoked by monarchs, tribunal judges, politicians, and locals in town. Loyalty to one’s nation is breached if one’s actions take the form of dissent or opposition to the prevailing political order. This is what it means to be a traitor in public life in Hungary. In the case of Roma, to be a traitor meant to expose normalized relations of exclusion.

In the following sections, I describe the circumstances of two families’ return from Canada back to Hungary after their refugee claims were rejected. They fled both from towns where men dressed in black military garb marched down their streets and from everyday microaggressions of hostile neighbors and locals. Each of the families struggled financially, in finding work, securing housing,

and with stigmatization, all of which are common experiences for deportees regardless of their specific forced return-migration trajectories (Khosravi 2018). The *hazaáruló* / traitor term took on significance in my fieldwork when I learned that locals used it pejoratively against Roma who had returned from Canada. I discuss the usage of the term in this context and analyze the ways in which Roma at whom it was directed respond.

5. Methodology: A Discourse-centered Approach

Before I turn to my analysis of my ethnographic findings, I will briefly describe the fieldwork I did and methodology I used for this study. I conducted fieldwork for this research for 21 months from September 2016 through May 2018. I was in Hungary at an opportune time as issues for Roma and refugees were prominent in the Hungarian national press. Northeastern Hungary serves as the primary field site and backdrop for this study. I chose the northeastern region of Hungary as my field site for the fact that a large proportion of refugee claims submitted by Hungarian citizens in Canada originate from this region (OSCE 2016). According to a recent World Bank report (2016), this area is also one of the most economically depressed regions of the country. The high poverty rate in the region is due to insufficient infrastructure, limited economic activity, and an unskilled workforce.

During the 21 months living with a Romani community, attending community events, volunteering in a high school, interviewing, meeting with community leaders, and talking with many community members of all ages, I collected observational data, interview data, data on meetings and on spontaneous conversations, and narratives of removal. I spent most of my time conducting research at the office of a local Roma self-government, visiting Romani families' homes, and at a local Romani-majority high school.

My methodology for this study primarily consisted of a discourse-centered approach to participant-observation analysis at families' homes and informal interviews with Romani families and individuals who had returned from Canada after submitting refugee claims and community members who had not traveled to Canada but often had some indirect connection to Canada. I spent a great deal of time actively listening to what they wanted to share with me about their lives and experiences. I developed a collection of narratives that were spontaneously and repeatedly told by family members as they sought to rejoin the communities they had once left behind. The narratives have proven to be a way to access how my interlocutors make sense of what happened to them, as well as how they perform counter-conduct, or their indirect confrontations for creating "new forms of conducting themselves" (Yılmaz 2021, 208). I conducted participant observation and recorded interviews with three main families, two of whom lived in different villages in rural areas and one of whom lived in an urban area. In the next section, I examine how the term *hazaáruló* / traitor emerges as a racializing discourse, shaping the lived experiences of returned Roma in northeastern rural Hungary and reinforcing their exclusion within the very communities they once called home. To ensure their confidentiality and privacy, I have taken care not to disclose any distinguishing features of the people with whom I interacted and the places where they lived and worked.

6. Traitor as a Form of Racializing Discourse

The afternoon walk I took through the small town of Tiszaháza in which Béla and his family have lived for generations and the short car trip to the neighborhood on the periphery of the town where Béla grew up offers a glimpse at the processes of a forced return. It makes legible how forms of evictability (Van Baar 2016; Kóczé 2018; Kóczé and Van Baar 2020) emerge in the lives of people who do not choose to migrate or return, how slowly or quickly they must deliberately attune themselves to their new worlds, in spite of the still familiar noises and textures and motions of a place they once left. This family's experiences of returning to the small town they had fled undergirds the "feelings of un-belonging" (Kasimir 2018) and the existential precarity that Roma experience in the very spaces to which they have deep social ties. The spatial practice of pushing Romani residents to the edge of a town, evicting them from their homes, or the mere existence of a separate cemetery for Roma evidences some of the exclusions Roma encounter in ordinary life. According to Béla, the way their next-door teacher-neighbor conducted herself in relation to her Romani neighbors produced a pressing, everyday uneasiness for him and his family. Given this context and the political environment from which Roma have fled, such relations among neighbors bears a resemblance to the conduct of some ordinary Hungarians during the Second World War and its aftermath.

Béla and his family left for Canada in the summer of 2011 where they submitted a refugee claim but returned to Hungary near the end of 2012 after their claim was rejected by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB). To this day, Béla is searching for a way back to Canada. When they returned from Canada, their house was repossessed by the National Tax and Customs Office (NAV) because, while the family was gone, they had left the house in the care of Béla's brother who could not afford to pay the electricity and water bills. Since then, every month, they have had to make payments on a house that was once theirs and inspectors visit, take pictures, and assess its upkeep. Shortly after their return, a young non-Romani man had come to their door and warned them to destroy all the original documents they had used as evidence in their refugee claim hearing because, he presaged, if *Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom* / Movement for a Better Hungary – or Jobbik^[7] for short – Hungary's radical right-wing nationalist political party, won in the coming elections and they learned that they had been to Canada, they would have their kids taken away. So, they got rid of all that evidence. Ilona, Béla's wife, asked the young man why they would do this, and he said because they were *hazaárulók* / traitors. She insisted that she was not that. The seizure of their house by an official body and the discursive act of warning Ilona and her family to disappear their Canadian past by naming them *hazaárulók* / traitors both function to isolate them from and within the place to which they have generational and familial ties. Such material and symbolic acts recall the historical-racial schema (Fanon 2008) of Roma. Examples of removal via property seizure and the threat of taking children out of Romani families are numerous throughout the history of Hungary and its territory and recur into the present.

Another family with whom I spent time during my fieldwork experienced being called *hazaáruló* / traitor regularly. Prior to leaving with his family for Canada to submit a refugee claim, Csaba had only worked

7 The word *Jobbik* in Hungarian means "better" and "to the right" or "on the right," essentially a play on words in Hungarian.

in the Public Works Program when he was out of work, otherwise he had been usually employed as a mason by a local businessman. That all changed once they returned. To the local businessman, he had become a *hazaáruló* / traitor and the town of Bükkhelye where they lived would no longer employ them locally. As Csaba made clear, “for those who are not stigmatized like we are and they go up there [to town hall] looking for work they’ll get it immediately after a day or two.” He paused and added, “There are two stigmas for us now.” This is especially apparent when locals label them as *hazaárulók* / traitors, one of the harshest forms of disloyalty someone can commit against their country, in public spaces. “Deportees are a stigmatised group because they are seen as criminal, failed in the migratory project and ‘culturally contaminated’” (Khosravi 2018, 3). Fleeing Hungary and submitting a refugee claim in Canada is one such traitorous act in the eyes of locals provoking Csaba’s family’s departure and thus they are left vulnerable not only to the state, but also ordinary citizens (Khosravi 2018). For example, not only are Csaba and his wife denied work opportunities locally, but the town no longer provides them with a Christmas grocery package. Such packages, along with firewood, are given out to families in need during the holidays and supports them in celebrating the holidays in dignity.

Csaba often described how his movements were limited in town because when he appeared in public spaces locals would taunt him, threaten him, and make it a very unpleasant experience. His “anticipations” of such “inevitable kinds of interpersonal situations in which the gulf between feelings and civilities become particularly foregrounded” (Basso 2009, 134) are the everyday ordeals of language he experienced since his return. As Ellen Basso notes, situations in which one chooses to silence their voice do not always take place because of a recognition of asymmetrical power relations, but as a sensitivity to having “violated some form of coded sociality” (Basso 2009, 134). For Csaba, the coded sociality he and his family violated was having submitted a refugee claim in Canada. Csaba’s choice to silence his voice and limit his movements followed from his sensitivity to having violated this particular coded sociality. The rejection of the refugee claim and their subsequent return only compounded this violation to which locals dialogically responded with cries of *hazaáruló* / traitor at Csaba and his family. “One important consequence of inadvertent violations or dramatic and sudden changes in the performance of coded sociality... is a kind of deep embarrassment [i.e., shame] and withdrawal” (Basso 2009, 134). He described how his corporeal comportment had shifted since “before” they left and “now.” Shame “is organized around a retraining and a reteaching of bodies” (Schaefer 2020, 6), and for Csaba this is manifested in his cautious movements around town and in reducing his facial communication as he notes in one of our interviews: “*azelőtt jártam felüttött fejjel most leüttött fejjel* / before this I went with my head up now my head is down.” The shame he is made to feel in public by locals is expressed in how he enters any space in town outside of his home.

Csaba’s was doubly a body-not-at-home in its world, as he was kept from co-habiting spaces in town with a corporeal intimacy for being Roma and for being a former refugee claimant who almost became a refugee but did not. As I noted earlier, in another interview, Csaba had voiced that he and his family were now doubly stigmatized – once for being Roma and twice for having fled to Canada. An equivalence between being out-of-place due to their ethnicity and being out-of-place geographically intersects in the hostile discursive construction of *hazaáruló* / traitor as it is used by locals to further exclude Roma who returned to Hungary due to unsuccessful refugee claims. That is, if they had not left for Canada and been forced to return to Hungary, but stayed in Bükkhelye and endured what others who could not flee

and had little choice but to endure, at least there would only be one stigma. Such a racialized usage of *hazaáruló* / traitor as that employed by locals at Csaba and his family is constitutive of covert racializing discourses that attempt to control where the doubly stigmatized do or do not belong. When he is named *hazaáruló* / traitor even Canada is not supposed to be a “space for action” (Ahmed 2006) for Csaba and his family, thus extending their deportability (Van Baar 2016; Kóczé 2018; Kóczé and Van Baar 2020) in their return and refamiliarization with Bükkhelye. For Csaba, this added loss exacerbated his inability to move without hesitation. The disjuncture of deportation (De Genova 2018) has bodily effects on how returned families move through familiar spaces. Neither he nor his wife Kati could partake in ritualized communication that would make the anxiety-producing event of being called a *hazaáruló* / traitor more manageable as the taunting precluded greeting and departure speech. Moreover, publicly both Csaba and Kati “[became] responsible for their own abnegation due to the necessity of viewing the world as existing through experiences of inequalities, of which [they were] the repeated target” (Basso 2009, 134), and so it was only in an intimate space, their home, that they felt at ease in talking with me extensively about their experiences. The space of their home became a space of appearance through narrative action, the performances of indirect resistances around their kitchen table or in the yard while smoking cigarettes and eating sunflower seeds. In the space created through the narrative, speakers questioned the way things took place in the past and interacted in the world surrounding them by not forgetting “all the things that have previously been existentially meaningful to them” (Horst and Lysaker 2021, 71). These things tied them to Bükkhelye. Given this, their remaining-in-place evidences the Arendtian figure of the “refugee as vanguard,” here represented by people who attempted to become refugees but did not. Such narratives intimately connected them to the town, and despite the ordinary hostilities they encountered they remained in place, beginning anew there, (re)making the place they once left.

Whiteness becomes marked in the figure of the *hazaáruló* / traitor when locals labeled Csaba as such, with returned Roma only becoming “citizens” through their “betrayal.” Prior to submitting refugee claims in Canada, it was the lack of protections from the *Magyar Gárda* / Hungarian Guard⁸ that motivated Roma from the town to flee Hungary. Here, I want to circle back to my earlier discussion of the figure of the *hazaáruló* / traitor and specifically revisit the idea that in Hungary today to be a *hazaáruló* / traitor is analogous with being an “enemy of progress.” I combine Bakhtin’s (1981) chronotope concept and Johannes Fabian’s (1983) denial of coevalness to show that the figure of the *hazaáruló* / traitor is a racializing discourse through which whiteness is marked. As noted previously, the term *hazaáruló*

8 The *Magyar Gárda* / Hungarian Guard was fundamentally part and parcel with the Jobbik Party (Gubicza 2008) and became known for their mutual anti-Roma attitudes. The Guard were regularly present at marches, rallies, and other events organized and held by Jobbik. A little over a year after it was formed, the Guard was ordered to disband by the Metropolitan Court of Budapest in December 2008 because its activities were found to be in violation of the human rights of minorities groups guaranteed by the Hungarian constitution. Two other separate courts, including the Supreme Court of Hungary, also ordered the Guard to disband. They appealed both decisions. By the summer of 2009, the Guard officially no longer existed as an organization but took their process of appeals all the way to the European Court of Human Rights, which eventually upheld the ban in 2013 – all the while their threatening presence and activities took shape in other forms. Derivatives of the Guard continued to threaten violence against Romani communities with a number of them adopting dress, tactics, and ideologies akin to that of the banned Guard. Such organizations included *Véderő* / Hungarian National Defence Association, *Betyársereg* / Army of Outlaws, *Nemzeti Őrsereg* / National Garrison, and *Szebb Jövőért Polgárőr Egyesület* / Civil Guard Association for a Better Future, all of whom attended various demonstrations, marches, and housing forums organized by Jobbik following the ban of the Guard.

in Hungarian is a compound word that incorporates “homeland” in its first free morpheme *haza*, thus connoting its connection to space. The second morpheme *áruló* or seller, implies the disconnection from the space of “homeland” through a transaction in which the connection is given away. The equation of *hazaáruló* / traitor with being an “enemy of progress” is a temporal distancing that constructs its referents (the returned Roma of Bükkhelye and Tiszaháza) as subjects with whom time is not and cannot be shared (Fabian 1983). That is, progress here implies that there is a particular linear temporal trajectory that leads to evolution over time, thus anyone who is anti-progress is behind, lagging, static. Taking Fabian’s Typological Time, or the form in which it “is measured, not as time elapsed, nor by reference to points on a (linear) scale, but in terms of socioculturally meaningful events or, more precisely, intervals between such events,” I apply it to the utterance of *hazaáruló* / traitor as a pejorative term used by locals against the returned Roma of Bükkhelye and Tiszaháza. In terms of the *hazaáruló* / traitor, Typological Time underlies the qualifications of progress vs. anti-progress that ultimately makes a comparison on a temporal scale of the returned Roma of Bükkhelye and Tiszaháza to the West as the standard for progress. In other words, the temporal and spatial distancing that constructs its referents in the utterance of *hazaáruló* / traitor is a denial of this particular shared chronotope. This denial was not only achieved rhetorically, but through, for example, the way Csaba self-limited his movements about town. It is once I incorporate the second free morpheme of *hazaáruló* / traitor “*áruló* / betrayer” into my analysis that the term takes on a doubly negative connotation – firstly as anti-progress and ultimately as treason.

Concluding Remarks

The public cry of traitor at former Romani refugee claimants returned from Canada transforms the bodily comportment of those targeted and it makes all the difference in whether one walks with their head up or down, whether they leave their house at all. Over the course of the narratives they performed, the unmarked becomes marked as its material, palpable consequences are discursively constituted and made visible. Both families’ experiences of exclusion in the forms of evictability and deportability (Van Baar 2016; Kóczé 2018; Kóczé and Van Baar 2020) evidence the ways in which practices of dispersal (Van Baar et al. 2021) scatter community members across spaces, making it difficult for the public voices of Roma to endure in a way that they are heard. Despite this, as former Romani refugee claimants who almost became refugees, but did not, narrators demonstrate their political agency in unexpected, dynamic ways in (re)making the places to which they have returned and challenging the exclusionary structures that seek to silence them.

I include here again Mark Cornwall’s (2015) assertion that “[t]he cry of ‘treason’ or ‘traitor’ has consistently been invoked over the centuries as a linguistic device with which to disarm a political opponent, a way of publicly branding some disloyalty to a cause or community” (114). Here, it is the returned Roma of Bükkhelye and Tiszaháza who are being disarmed for their “disloyalty” to the local community to which they never truly belonged because of the racialized tensions between Romani and non-Romani community members even prior to their families’ departure from the towns for Canada. Through this racializing discursive act, locals publicly acknowledged – thus marking it – the consequences of whiteness: refugee claims that threaten to undermine the notion that Hungary is a democratic EU member state and “safe country” for all its citizens. For Romani returnees with whom I completed this research, their “return”

was more often “only another arrival” (Peutz 2006, 225) as they were met with a doubled discrimination (Brosnahan 2016) – a form of discrimination that was both anti-Roma and anti-refugee. This particular anti-refugeeism entangled with anti-Roma racism was one based more so in perceived betrayal than xenophobia. Specifically, Roma who had returned from Canada were labeled traitors – more often by non-Roma, but Roma who had not left and returned did so as well – for having fled Hungary for Canada in the first place thus exposing everyday, normalized relations of exclusion.

This study contributes to critical migration research by highlighting how forced return does not simply mark a geographic relocation but reshapes social belonging, reinforcing exclusion even upon return. It exposes how deportation and forced return operate as racializing mechanisms that extend beyond state borders, shaping community attitudes and reinforcing structural marginalization. These findings have significant implications for policy, particularly in shaping a more nuanced understanding of forced migration and return migration. Policies that assume returnees can simply “reintegrate” into their home communities ignore the persistent stigmatization they face and suggest a need for stronger social support systems for returnees, particularly those who belong to already marginalized groups.

Moreover, this study highlights the power of discourse in shaping national belonging and exclusion. Labels such as traitor serve as tools of social control, shaping the public’s perception of who is deserving of rights and inclusion. This phenomenon is not isolated: the COVID-19 pandemic saw Romani communities across Europe scapegoated and subjected to restrictive measures that deepened their marginalization, while the war in Ukraine has further exposed how racial hierarchies influence the treatment of refugees. Roma fleeing Ukraine have faced systemic discrimination and have been denied access to the same humanitarian support as their non-Roma counterparts. These parallels reveal how racialized exclusions persist across crises, migration regimes, and national contexts. This has broader implications for how states, media, and local communities shape narratives around migration and displacement. A better understanding of these discursive practices can inform efforts to combat xenophobia, anti-refugee sentiment, and racial discrimination in migration policies and public discourse.

Future research should explore similar dynamics among other forcibly returned populations across different national and regional contexts to examine whether and how these discursive patterns hold elsewhere. Additionally, comparative studies of the refamiliarization experiences of different marginalized groups – both Roma and non-Roma – could further illuminate the intersection of racialization, forced migration, and socio-political exclusion. By broadening the scope of inquiry, scholars and policymakers can develop more comprehensive strategies to address the challenges of forced return and critically re-examine the assumptions that underpin migration governance.

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