Chapter Six

“We Ate, We Drank, We Filled Our Stomachs”: Nutrition, Eating, and Dietary Habits

The general characteristics of eating habits

While eating and dietary habits are primarily formed by economic circumstances and social status, the demands or possibilities related to various professions obviously play their own role in defining nutrition. Other than these factors, the influences related to how food was prepared and consumed in previous eras, regional traditions, the cultural background of certain groups or individuals, and the expectations raised in connection with these categories are all aspects that deserve mention. The influence of religious requirements in connection with eating and dietary habits may either be palpable or have faded into the background, as occurred in the era currently under examination. As the social differences exhibited by how and what kind of nourishment is attained can also demonstrate inequalities in financial position among various individuals or groups, the study of food consumption and dietary habits provides the most tangible means of analyzing this topic.

Beginning at the turn of the 1930s to the 1940s and extending all the way to the first decade of the twenty-first century, Hungary’s alimentary history can be broken up into roughly four periods. During the first decade of the wartime years, deprivation was the rule as the destruction of food sources resulted in widespread shortages. As shortages became less common in the second half of the 1940s, eating habits generally signaled a return to tradition. Defined by the “abundant poverty” that came about as a consequence of the Rákosi era’s adherence to a planned economy, the second period began at the start of the 1950s and ended in the late 1960s while additionally introducing smaller adjustments in eating habits. This period also ushered in the first innovations in food preparation techniques. From the end of the 1960s to the middle of the 1980s, the third period brought the
experience of being able to eat one’s fill along with the significant modernization of kitchen equipment and the transformation of eating habits. The fourth period emerged in the second half of the 1980s and extended throughout the era marked by the fall of communism and influences habits even today. It is defined by overeating, increased differentiation, and the overall decrease in attaching a sense of prestige and importance to the social significance of eating.

**From starvation to “goulash communism”**

Wartime unavoidably entails privation, impoverishment, and meaningless sacrifice. The effect World War II had on daily living conditions was increasingly felt as the thirties turned toward the forties. Extending from 1945 to 1950, the initial postwar period saw food shortages followed by the reorganization and stabilization of the food supply and the subsequent gradual improvement in the quality of foodstuffs. Within the given circumstances, fulfilling the slow recovery of the level necessary for meeting minimal eating requirements was all that was possible at the time. The private sector continued to fill a defining role in maintaining the food supply while eating habits and disparities in eating habits did not change notably in comparison to those found before the war. As the number and proportion of individuals lacking provisions or exhibiting malnutrition remained high, it can be stated that differences in income continued to play a defining role in food consumption.

Food shortages were practically a fact of everyday life in postwar Hungary as the conflict had wreaked havoc on the nation’s infrastructure, agriculture, food production, and trade. The extent of how alarming conditions were is best demonstrated by the fact that from 1945 to 1946 public supply struggled with shortages of 45 percent compared to the amount consumed in 1938. Prices quickly soared as a result of the economic shambles in which the country found itself. By the middle of 1945, a loaf of bread cost twenty-five pengős, compared to 0.4 pengős in 1938. White flour was thirty pengős (previously 0.4), the cost of one egg fluctuated between ten and fifteen pengős (0.1 before the war), while the price of a kilogram of lard and bacon was between six hundred and eight hundred pengős, compared to the pre-war cost of 1.6 pengő. In July 1945, the rate of inflation was at

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1 In 1941, 1 USD was the equivalent of 5.06 pengős; by June 1944, the exchange rate for
one percent per month, a number that rose to 18 percent in October, increased to 60 percent by April 1946, and hit 1000 percent by May of that year.²

Throughout the 1945–1946 period of inflation, food prices rocketed. When the pengő depreciated, a period of barter economy ensued in which clothing or food articles counted as the most valuable form of currency. The widespread shortages in food created a secondary market, while the central distribution system created a fairly broad gap that inadvertently contributed to the emergence of “black trade.” It must be mentioned that black market trade did not cause supply shortages, but was rather their consequence, and as such subsequently filled an extremely important role in providing the population with foodstuffs. In October 1946, individuals spent 28.4 percent of their food budget on the black market, a figure that rose to 37.8 percent in December of the same year. In June 1947, this rate was 45.3 percent and fell to 20 percent by August 1947.³ During this same period an average of one-fourth of individuals’ daily calorie intake originated from foodstuffs procured on the black market. International aid formed a similarly significant factor in slowly stabilizing the supply chain. Between January 1946 and August 1947, JOINT (American Joint Distribution Committee) shipped 657 freight cars’ worth of food aid to Hungary. UNRRA, an aid organization for UNESCO, provided a total of 81 million dollars in aid for food supplies, clothing, and medicine.

Rationing became the most important method applied by the central food distribution system and ration cards were issued as a right of citizenship. Maintaining food supplies was attempted by means of legally requiring farmers to turn over a portion of their crops to the state. In December 1945, the previously calculated per capita ration of bread was halved due to food shortages. State-run soup kitchens were opened in an attempt to alleviate the lack of available food. Once the siege of Budapest had ended, twenty state-run soup kitchens operated throughout Budapest; by the summer of 1945, the number of

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1 USD had risen to 33.1 pengős. For more on currency values, see Appendix.


places dispensing food included 124 official and 278 factory kitchens, a system that made it possible for 150,000 people to receive one meal per day. In the small or larger towns located in the countryside, similar methods were applied as a means of helping those in need.

In the interest of improving public supply, beginning in February 1946 a government decree made it mandatory for employers to pay their employees and their family members “in kind,” via food allowances that were calculated based on the number of calories judged necessary for survival. As this attempt did not prove successful, employers were first permitted to exchange this allowance for money, then the officially-calculated calorie values were also drastically reduced. Parallel to the introduction of the forint—the currency that replaced the pengő in an attempt to solve the drastic rate of inflation that arose following World War II—a unified national ration card system was also launched. Its efficacy was significantly diminished by the fact that severe drought conditions led to poor crop yields in 1946, resulting in the inability to ensure a sufficient amount of surplus in food supplies upon which ration cards could be based. Inadequate, deficient nutrition became the norm as the daily values for calorie intake did not reach even half of what they had been before the war. The situation improved with painful slowness: initially raised to 250 grams per person in July 1947, the daily bread ration was later lowered to 200 grams per person in September of that year. Supplementary portions were provided for expectant mothers and those performing hard physical labor or supporting multiple children. Due to yet another disappointing harvest in 1947, two days per week were designated as “corn days,” meaning that ration cards could only be used to obtain corn flour on these days. Compared to its neighboring countries, Romania was the only other nation where the average food allowances for 1947 were as low as the quotas found in Hungary.

Throughout the period of reconstruction that occurred during the early postwar years, a decisive proportion of Hungary’s population did not receive adequate nourishment, a situation that was particularly true in the cities and Budapest. In 1945, the average level of food consumption hovered somewhere below half of what it had

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5 Between 1934 and 1938, the average calorie intake per person was 2,805 kcal.
been before the war. In contrast to prewar years, bread came to play a far more crucial role in daily nutrition: rather than functioning as a supplement to meals, one consequence of widespread shortages was that bread came to represent the main source of daily nourishment. The daily intake of dry legumes meanwhile doubled in comparison to what it had previously been, while the consumption of potatoes and fresh fruit also grew. For the sake of objectivity, it must be stated that these figures from 1947 already indicated that the situation was steadily solidifying in comparison to the conditions experienced between 1945 and 1946.

During the first few months after World War II, access to twenty-five grams of bread and one gram of lard per day actually represented decent provisions. According to the statistics gathered by a survey conducted among five hundred students in Budapest in December 1945, nine-tenths of the survey’s participants ate three times a day. Breakfast was a bowl of soup made of browned breadcrumbs and a single cup of coffee or tea. Lunch consisted either of stewed vegetables with no meat, some type of noodles, or potatoes. Very few students had regular access to meat, eggs, or milk. As a consequence of food shortages, attempts to “stretch” or supplement the ingredients that were available became an increasingly prevalent aspect of daily nutrition that grew widespread virtually independent of social status. Various newspapers and books offered housewives advice on how to provide a varied diet while simultaneously managing to substitute or supplement missing ingredients: “For children sandwiches can also be prepared by chopping a few handfuls of spinach leaves to the fineness of parsley and sprinkling this onto a slice of bread spread with either lard or butter.” On May 13, 1945, the newspaper Kis Újság drew readers’ attention to the following recipe for stewed nettles: “Place leaves removed from the stem into boiling water and cook for five minutes. Be careful not to cook for any longer as this will lessen the number of vitamins. Drain thoroughly and put the nettles through a meat grinder while using a fine plate disc, or push them through a fine sieve. After preparing a light roux . . . stir in the nettles, add sufficient salt or perhaps flavor with ground pepper. Bring to boil and cook thoroughly. The entire family will think they are eating

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7 Asszonyok, no. 3 (1946), 5.
spinach. If available, milk or broth can be added to the roux instead of water, this will only add to the dish. Instead of a roux, sour cream thickened with flour can be used to save lard without compromising on flavor.” It therefore comes as no surprise that food recipes from 1945–1946 predominantly feature meatless dishes, such as a detailed description of how to prepare spinach dumplings, a stew made of boiled eggs, vegetable goulash, or stewed sorrel with mushrooms. Browned breadcrumb soup became one of the era’s most common dishes. Suggested diets featuring meat only became more widespread after 1947.

Food was distributed via the state-maintained ration card system for years, thereby guaranteeing access to the bare minimum of food necessary for survival. By the end of the 1940s the situation stabilized, although, as quickly became apparent, only temporarily. The ration card system came to an end and agricultural production for 1948 approached prewar levels; production of some basic items even surpassed those reached before World War II while the selection of goods found on the free market continued to expand. Overall, the extent of nutrition increased as consumption of sugar, vegetables, fruit, lard, and dairy products rose. Following the stabilization of the economy in 1946, circumstances showed gradual recovery, yet still had not reached the level deemed necessary from a medical viewpoint. According to household statistics, in December 1947 one member of a working-class family living in Budapest received 2,213 calories daily, while the family members of civil servants averaged 1,757 calories per day. An office clerk’s family had access to 2,438 calories a day per person and pensioners received 2,301. At the time, the average daily calorie intake recommended for adult men was 2,400. This figure was raised to 3,000 for those performing physical labor necessitating a moderate level of exertion. A survey made in 1948 regarding the nutrition of 35,000 workers employed in thirty-five Hungarian industrial plants concluded that the calorie content of the lunches served in factory cafeterias was not meeting desired standards as neither the food’s nutritional worth nor the amount of protein it contained was able to surpass the average level of that found during the interwar period.

8 Marczell, “Háztartás-statisztikai felvétel budapesti családokról.”
In the middle of the 1940s, the most important site for daily nutrition was naturally the kitchen. For both working-class city dwellers and peasant-class households, the kitchen was used for food preparation as well as for numerous other daily activities. In lower middle-class households, kitchens were primarily used for cooking and serving meals, while middle-class or upper middle-class households generally used the kitchen for meal preparation alone. As the 1940s crept toward the 1950s, the nationalization of dwellings led to reductions in living space, thereby making it more uncommon to continue the differentiated usage of various living areas. As a result, in many homes the kitchen once again operated as a multifunctional space.

In an average working-class flat (consisting of one room and a kitchen), the following furnishings and equipment were the most important objects found in the kitchen: one table, four to six kitchen chairs, a small, three-legged stool, a taller, four-legged stool used as an additional work surface, a kitchen hutch, a shelf, a mop bucket, and a dustbin. Kitchen ranges or iron cook stoves were more commonly used for cooking, while petroleum or gas stoves were far rarer. Kitchen walls were usually painted from top to bottom as tile was less common. In the smaller part of the flat, a spigot fixed above a wall sink provided water, while water was hauled in buckets from a well located in the building’s courtyard or on the street outside to the larger part of the dwelling. A textile wall-hanging frequently decorated the area around the table. The most essential kitchen equipment found in a two- to four-person household included one 10- or 20-liter pot used for both heating water and washing clothes, one large washbasin, two to three cooking pots either 2- or 3-liters in size, one half-liter small pot, one four-liter pot, one pot for scalding milk, one pot for boiling water, a frying pan, a few pot lids, six plates and six bowls, cutlery, one pitcher for water and one for milk, a few mugs, some covers for dishes, and cooking spoons.

In 1948, the estate inventory made for a middle-class family home located in the city of Debrecen listed more than four hundred items of kitchen equipment. In this two-person household, essentially every type of object needed for running a household as well as for serving guests could be found. As befitted their social status, the more elaborately decorated household implements were stored in a separate, marble-topped sideboard. The tea set for twelve people, the porcelain coffee service for six, the eight stemmed glasses, the spoons for
milk or coffee, the fruit-stand, the porcelain breadbasket, and the set of compote dishes all served the purpose of providing the appropriate backdrop for both daily meals and more festive occasions. Not to be forgotten are the twelve bowls, thirteen plates, thirteen sandwich plates, two pasta bowls, and one compote bowl also contained in the inventory.

Meal preparation was a time-consuming occupation demanding constant preparatory measures such as hauling water from the well, lighting the cookstove fire, and heating water. Most households paid meticulous attention to the kitchen’s level of cleanliness. The kitchen table, for example, was commonly covered with an easily maintained oilcloth. As advice for setting the table and serving meals recommended in 1950: “May your table remain clean and attractive even if you dine at the kitchen table. While a white tablecloth is superfluous for weekdays, there is never a time when a freshly cleaned tabletop is uncalled for: either oilcloth or an inexpensive, colorful tablecloth can be used to cover the table. At the sight of a handsomely set table, your family will take their meals in good spirits.”

The second phase in the history of nutrition during this period began at the beginning of the 1950s and essentially ended at the end of the 1960s. Its beginning was marked by the completion of the nationalization of Hungary’s production and trade in foodstuffs and the subsequent transformation of the supply system. As a consequence of the politics of the time—which forced the push toward industrialization—this sector of light industry was also neglected in favor of developing the nation’s presence in heavy industry. Following the elimination of market mechanisms, developing the infrastructure for food production and trade was disregarded; between 1950 to 1953, Hungary’s food supply turned chaotic, shortages became not only widespread but also sunk to critical depths, and the quality of nutrition subsequently went into decline. In short, the public supply system was teetering on the edge of disaster. People rushed to obtain a significant surplus of whatever product happened to be available. Unless an individual belonged to the caste of political leaders who had access to the central supply or could “shop” in separate stores, procuring the most necessary foodstuffs for maintaining minimal survival became the most essential aspect of everyday life throughout every social class. Hours were spent standing in front of stores in

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10 Mária Keresztesné Pataki, A dolgozó nő háztartása (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1950).
the hope that some basic provisions could be obtained. The number of malnourished individuals rose as food shortages brought about a macabre, peculiarly relative form of social equality regarding nutrition. While the situation temporarily improved (to a certain extent) following a change in politics in June 1953, malnutrition remained a specter of everyday life along with the either chronic or seasonal food shortages Hungarian society underwent during this period.

Unsurprisingly, in the first half of the 1950s nutritional and eating habits were primarily defined by the lack of foodstuffs. Rather than easing tensions, the system of compulsory delivery increased them: in 1952, the commandeering of agricultural produce (known informally as the padlássöprés, “attic sweeping”) left more than 800,000 peasant families with less grain than what was necessary to meet their daily bread ration per head. Nor could the diet of working-class families be called varied: each family member consumed on average a little over 250 grams of bread per day. Meat was eaten at most once or twice a week while dishes made of potatoes or noodles filled the menu during the rest of the week. Other than bread with lard, bacon and inexpensive butcher products—such as sausage made of horsemeat—were eaten for breakfast and dinner. For a change of pace, bread with jam or bread with a hard piece of factory-produced solidified “mixed fruit gel” could be chosen instead. According to various statistics and figures regarding household nutrition, the food consumed by an average working-class Hungarian family was still far below what a family from the same social class had had access to in the final decades of the 1930s, whether viewed from the point of view of value in calories, variety, or the ingredients used.

In 1951, the most popular magazine geared toward female readers, Nők Lapja, offered strikingly few recipes for meat dishes in its weekly column suggesting dietary advice; extensive usage of vegetables was urged instead. As far as the main course was concerned, dishes including meat only appeared in Sunday dinner menus. At the beginning of the 1950s, cuts of fresh meat were frequently replaced with “fillers,” such as fried bologna, which either accompanied stewed vegetables or was stuffed with vegetables and served alongside rice or potatoes. Recipes demanding inexpensive meat or meat substitutes were in wide demand among housewives at the time: out of necessity, dishes like vegetable “meatloaf,” a kind of bologna-like manufactured “wurst” dipped in batter and fried, or bologna fried with onions in a paprika sauce became commonplace.
The extent to which the era’s popular provider of household tips—titled the *Household of a Working Woman*—ignored the realities of the time is best demonstrated by the following description:

Monotony is not the same as frugality. Anyone who takes just a little bit of time to think over the question of what to cook will never prepare the same dish—not even every two weeks! Why, even a popular, seasonal dish like *lecsó* [a traditional pepper and tomato stew] can be served a variety of ways: on one occasion barley can be added to it, another time it can accompany a pasta such as egg barley, or it can be made with sausage once, then with smoked meat at a later time. Nor does meat broth, a dish on the menu year-round, have to be served with just thin-cut noodles. Semolina noodles or breadcrumb dumplings are also welcome possibilities, not to mention thick-cut egg noodles! Additions to stewed vegetables could be fried potatoes, semolina croquettes, fried bread, fried bologna, boiled sausage, or potato croquettes.¹¹

The handbook’s author also expressed the opinion that it was no longer necessary for households to accumulate supplies because “shops await customers from the early morning hours to late evening.”¹² No specific mention, of course, was made of what products readers could actually find—or not—on shop shelves; similarly ignored was the fact that the buying power of an average paycheck was steadily decreasing during the first half of the 1950s while food prices rose significantly between 1950 and 1954.

As a reflection of the new spirit of the times, this type of publication also emphasized the importance of family and community as advice was provided regarding how to use meals to turn political anniversaries into a family celebration:

Most families meet at least once a day at the table, the place where family members can express their love for one another and experience the daily joy of spending time together. Let’s center the family gathering around the one we are celebrating, the one having an anniversary that day. Let’s prepare his or her favorite food for dinner, not neglecting to include some sort of sweet or noodles. . . . First and foremost, let’s celebrate our biggest national holiday, the day of our liberation, April 4, and let’s celebrate the world’s workers on May 1! We must turn our national holidays and notable anniversaries into intimate, family celebrations. A dinner prepared with greater care than

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¹² Ibid.
usual, a supper held before the celebratory day, the donning of festive apparel by the entire family, and the attention paid to the table’s appearance are all factors in bringing our people’s great holidays closer to each and every member of the family.\textsuperscript{13}

However, in spite of the official directives regarding holidays and the “household tips” disseminated in popular magazines at the time, in reality very few families made the customs listed above into actual habits.

Household advice columns also made a point of following the latest political changes:

Today the nation is the workers’. Our standard of living is rising steadily. We are obviously living better and easier than before. Our improved lifestyle is best seen in our improved nutrition. While these improvements in nourishment will continue to indicate the increased standard of living for a time, as Minister of State Ernő Gerő has stated, it is true that later on a certain saturation point will be reached and the growing standard of living will become more and more evident in the area of clothing and culture instead. The Five-Year Plan will open our future to vast vistas, the like of which were never seen before.\textsuperscript{14}

In his or her everyday life, the average Hungarian either did not experience this, or was in fact enduring the exact opposite. The publication’s author additionally urged applying the planned economy system’s approach to household tasks and naturally provided tips on how to use the “Stakhanov work method” for the purpose of reducing time spent on meal preparation. According to this author, the ideal housewife, “Mrs. Szabó,” first carefully lists each and every ingredient that needs to be purchased on a piece of drawing paper tacked to the kitchen cabinet and then tracks what foodstuff has been consumed in order to avoid any surprises as she creates the weekly meal plan.\textsuperscript{15}

In the beginning of the 1950s, the projected estimates regarding per capita food consumption fluctuated considerably and, in fact, showed an overall reduction. Beginning in 1954, food consumption

\textsuperscript{13} Mária Pataki Keresztesné, \textit{A dolgozó nő háztartása} (Budapest: Athenaeum Kiadó, 1950), 44.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15} Pataki, \textit{A dolgozó nő háztartása}, 39.
slowly began to rise. The population’s widespread experience of starvation or near-starvation led to continued interest in procuring the kinds of high-calorie goods that subsequently not only maintained an important role in daily nutrition at the time, but also remained a part of diets during the next decade as well. Until the middle of the twentieth century, a significant proportion of those belonging to the peasant class consumed poor-quality foodstuffs and lived on diets that were lacking from a variety of perspectives, as their weekly diets overwhelmingly consisted of bread, flour, potatoes, and legumes. In these reduced circumstances, self-sufficiency presented the main opportunity for survival while tradition also continued to define dietary habits. The primary objective for certain households or smallholdings was to produce a year’s worth of food that would be sufficient for the entire family. The most important foodstuffs consisted of wheat, lard, cured bacon, meat, other grains used to prepare mushes, and vegetables. Throughout the 1950s, the most essential item made of grain was overwhelmingly bread, which was prepared and baked at home. In general, four loaves of bread—weighing five kilograms each—were baked once a week. Within the circumstances created by a shortage economy and the requirement of delivering a fixed quota of agricultural produce to the state, keeping the family fed demanded supreme effort. It is no wonder that the drastic reductions brought about by the quota system rendered it extremely difficult for most peasant families to maintain any level of self-sufficiency.16

The income conditions and reduced opportunities for gaining access to foodstuffs further impelled village dwellers to produce the goods necessary for meeting their own nutritional needs, a situation which held true throughout the two decades following the end of World War II. During the first decade after the war and until the middle of the 1960s, the

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eating habits of peasant families followed the patterns and customs dictated by tradition. Still present in the 1950s, Hungary’s historical peasant class led a lifestyle organized around the changing demands of various farm tasks; nutritional habits therefore conformed to farming’s seasonal rhythm. While peasant families generally ate only twice a day in winter, during the summer season it was common to eat four or even five times a day. In the weeks preceding spring planting, not only did the number of daily meals rise to three, the amount of food also became more plentiful in order to prepare families for the work ahead. It therefore follows that foods rich in calories and nutrients were added to their diet during seasons when the most physical labor was demanded, such as when crops were being harvested. In autumn the number of meals once again fell to three per day and the amount of food was also reduced, unless, of course, the grape harvest was underway.

It must not be forgotten that “food and drink serve not only the purpose of sustaining life and imparting strength for the performance of labor but are also a source of enjoyment. It is for this reason that among all the better or worse dishes available a differentiation is made between those which provide a greater or lesser sense of pleasure.”17 In peasant households the custom of family members eating from one bowl came to an end in the 1950s as eating from separate plates became widespread and customary at the same time as using forks did. In spite of this change, dietary and eating habits fundamentally remained the same, just as cereals, potatoes, and corn continued to be the most important staples.18 More significant changes only began to occur after the process of collectivization came to an end, as the custom of eating meals three times a day gradually spread throughout peasant households. Alterations in traditional diets were essentially brought about by changes in social structure and lifestyle.

Hygiene obviously plays a role in determining the level of quality exhibited by nutrition: “In 1953, the Harcos [Warrior] collective farm located in Túrkeve stored food staples on the premises of a school and cooked outdoors. Within these circumstances the bare minimum for health requirements could obviously not be fulfilled: the spectacle of

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17 Edit Fél and Tamás Hofer, Arányok és mértékek a paraszti gazdálkodásban (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 1997), 198.
homemade noodles being left to dry on the ground while household animals ate from food placed on the ground could be seen daily.”

Day laborers were still eating outside, seated on the ground in the middle of the 1950s. Meanwhile, food shortages made it increasingly difficult for employers to ensure the kind of provisions that would be sufficiently nutritious and calorie rich to sustain an intense degree of physical labor: “From the point of view of both quantity and quality, the insufficiencies in food supply are having a negative effect on the workers’ work morale and production, as we had numerous opportunities to observe and gather evidence of while inspecting the provisions at, for example, the machine depots in Kám and Tarján, or the state farms in Berettyóújfalu, Sorokmajor, and Biharkereszti.”

In 1956, the household statistics for five thousand families were gathered; among the participating families, the monthly average income per family member was 636 forints. While the lowest income proved to be 339 forints, the income for those in the highest bracket was 1,178 forints a month. In the more impoverished families, the amount spent per month on food was 215 forints per person; wealthier families were able to spend 457 forints. On average, the families observed for the purpose of this survey dedicated the monthly sum of 316 forints per person to food. These differences could naturally be observed in the daily per capita calorie intake as those earning better incomes spent one-and-a-half times more on provisions. Other than the quantity, the contrast in quality is best demonstrated by the fact that mutton and horsemeat, food lower in both price and quality, were consumed at the highest rates in families whose income was lower or below average. Due to dietary habits and the lack of selection, beef was consumed relatively rarely and only in small quantities: poultry and pork were the main staples for meat consumption. It is a sign of the customs as well as the circumstances of the time that—out of the 1,700 working-class and employed families living in Budapest or larger towns in the countryside to participate in the survey—nearly every second family was raising a hog for butchering in 1956, while more than nine-tenths of the peasant families surveyed

20 Ibid.
were doing the same. Among those living in villages in 1956, the type of income-based, nutritional inequality found there was less drastic compared to the disparities city dwellers experienced: in low-income peasant families the sum of 311 forints per month was spent on food, while the wealthiest farming families allocated 371 forints per person for their monthly food budget.

After the 1956 Revolution, a bit more attention was paid to ensuring basic food supplies, but this effort could by no means be declared an absolute success. Other than the anarchical operating approach that typified a planned economy, collectivizing Hungary’s agricultural system contributed to the continuation of shortages due to the significant decline in agricultural production. Regarding the food supply, the situation began to change noticeably in the second half of the 1950s as the overall scarcity of goods was gradually replaced by the temporary or constant lack of certain items that were in demand. Accumulating a household stockpile of staples remained a common household strategy.

Throughout the 1950s, the furnishings and equipment found in the kitchens of urban apartments did not change substantially. In more modern homes the wall surrounding the range, sink, or wall sink was covered in tile while in older buildings these surfaces—including the base of the wall—were protected with a coat of oil paint, thereby creating a surface that was relatively easy to clean and long-lasting. When the means for these types of surface protection were not available, paper, oilcloth, or a canvas wall-hanging was used instead. The kitchen cabinet or its substitute (shelves covered with a curtain), kitchen chairs, a dustbin made of either wood or metal, a woodbin for kindling, a wall shelf, a table, and containers for holding spices numbered among the kitchen’s most important furnishings in the mid-fifties. In most homes a wood-burning or coal-burning range or cookstove was usual; electric, petroleum, or gas-burning cooktops or stoves were rarer. Utilizing ranges naturally required familiarity with the techniques for starting, laying, and banking a fire. Regarding the tools found in a typically equipped household from the mid-1950s, at least one ten-liter pot, a laundry pot, a tub for washing dishes, two- or three-liter pots, one smaller one- to two-liter pot and a larger four- to five-liter pot, a half-liter pot, a saucepan or pot for heating milk, utensils for making tea or coffee, a frying pan, a baking pan, a meat-grinder, potlids, wooden cooking spoons, knives for cutting bread or meat,
cutting boards, at least one set of dishes sufficient for the entire family, teacups, glasses, and measuring utensils were deemed necessary.22

Eating habits had not changed appreciably by the end of the 1950s either, at least not if the data gathered by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office in connection to nourishment is any clear indication of the actual situation. In July and September of 1958 as well as in January and April of 1959, a representative evaluation summarized the habits regarding eating and food consumption displayed by various social strata. Essentially, this assessment surveyed and compared the eating habits of urban households to village households since the families participating in the evaluation were grouped according to whether the head of the household was a worker/employee or performed agricultural work. A disproportionately high number of those living in working-class or white-collar households reported consuming only some form of liquid for breakfast, while in every fifth peasant household the same meal did not contain any type of liquid at all. In both groups, the rate of households where breakfasts combining both liquid and solid food were consumed hovered slightly above 50 percent. Among workers and employees, 41 percent drank milk with coffee for breakfast, a rate that rose to 53 percent in peasant households. While tea constituted the second most common drink in urban households, milk was the second choice for peasant households, even though the habit of drinking tea was gradually spreading throughout rural communities. At the end of the 1950s, calorie-rich foods, such as cured bacon, rendered animal fat, and potatoes, still defined the breakfast habits of farming families. In working-class or employed families, butter, cheese, or other dairy products were equally significant compared to traditional breakfast staples.23

As far as both groups were concerned, the importance of the midday meal was emphasized, mainly due to the fact that it was usually a freshly prepared, hot meal which generally consisted of two courses, either soup and then a meat dish, or stewed vegetables followed by noodles. In urban households, meat or dishes containing meat were served every two days, compared to village households where meat was served every day.22

23 Étrendi szokások a munkás-, alkalmazotti és paraszti háztartásokban, Statisztikai Időszaki Közlemények, no. 34 (Budapest: KSH, 1960).
customarily found its way onto the menu every three days. For main meals, the most common mode of preparation for meat dishes was either pörkölt, meat stewed in a paprika sauce, or vagdalt, a form of minced meat similar to meatloaf. These dishes were frequently accompanied by potatoes or spaetzle dumplings and as such were only consumed on Sundays by rural families, while urban families were more likely to eat these kinds of foods during the week as well. The consumption of vegetable-based dishes was somewhat more customary in working-class and employed families compared to rural households; on average, stewed vegetables were served as the second course every third day of the week. Significant differences were not found in the consumption of noodle dishes as both urban and rural households were likely to eat noodles every fourth day of the week.

The role, importance, and composition of the evening supper revealed a sharp contrast between the two groups. While more than half of working-class or employed families consumed cold food for supper, only one-third ate leftovers from their midday meal and a paltry one-tenth prepared a fresh, hot meal for the evening. In contrast, nearly one-fifth of the observed peasant households cooked a fresh evening meal as almost one-third ate leftovers from the midday meal instead.24 Even as the end of the 1950s approached, how and what farming families ate noticeably followed the rhythm of agricultural seasons; at the height of the season, a cold midday meal followed by a hot supper was more frequent.

In the cases of both groups, the diets and eating habits for those possessing a higher income demonstrated more variety and quantity in comparison to those earning lower incomes. This meant that better situated individuals ate meat or other products available at the butcher’s, butter, and cheese more often, while a high percentage of those living in worse conditions relied instead on less expensive categories of animal fats. During this period as well as later on, poorer families fulfilled their calorie needs with foods like a slice of bread spread with lard and sprinkled with sugar, or aprítós, the name given to a dish that consisted of crumbling bread into tea, milk, milk with coffee, or cocoa. Weekday as well as holiday or Sunday meals revealed significant differences regarding the number of courses and their content. The majority of both urban and rural families prepared midday meals containing three (or at times four) courses of fresh, hot food served in

24 Ibid.
bountiful amounts. The first course for Sunday meals was broth soup followed by either one or a variety of meat dishes and sweets.\textsuperscript{25}

In the beginning of 1961, 525 elementary school students in Budapest were surveyed in connection to their breakfast habits. Out of those asked, 5.5 percent had a cup of plain tea as their only breakfast. A cup of milk was the breakfast for 14.3 percent of the children, while 25 percent had tea and some sort of baked good or a slice of bread with some type of a spread. For 29.3 percent breakfast was milk or a drink containing milk and a baked good or bread with some kind of spread. 21.4 percent of the children had nothing at all for breakfast; 4.5 percent, however, ate some other type of food or leftovers from another meal.\textsuperscript{26} When combined, those who ate nothing or only drank a cup of liquid for breakfast represent more than 40 percent of those surveyed, a fairly high proportion which not only indicates the possibility of malnutrition, but also suggests the continuation of eating habits from earlier periods.

In 1961, the Research Institute for Domestic Trade prepared an evaluation of the food consumption and nutritional habits of those earning wages or salaries.\textsuperscript{27} According to the results, only 68 percent of the participating families prepared a cooked meal daily; 8 percent cooked more rarely, while 24 percent only cooked the Sunday mid-day meal. In Budapest 54 percent of the families cooked daily; in villages two-thirds of the families prepared a meal daily. In small towns four-fifths of the survey participants made a fresh, hot meal daily. Even though a move was made to extend cafeteria food services to the evening meal as well, this attempt did not prove popular. The data collected by the survey reveals that a total of 0.2 percent of the evaluated families regularly had their suppers outside of the home, at either a cafeteria or a restaurant-like place. In Budapest two-thirds of the families cooked a hot meal for supper on a daily basis; in cities located in the countryside one-third of participating families did the same, while half of those living in townships or villages ate a hot meal for supper. On the national level, an average of 52 percent of households generally ate a hot meal for supper and 48 percent had

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{26} For a detailed look at the survey’s data, see Ervin Telegdi and Nóra Vezekényi, “Budapesti iskolás gyermekek délelőtti étkezése,” Népegészségügy, no. 2 (1963): 51–56.

\textsuperscript{27} István Makai, A bérből és fizetésből élő családok néhány élelmiszerfogyasztási szokása, Belkereskedelmi Kutató Intézet Közleményei, no. 53 (Budapest: Belkereskedelmi Kutató Intézet, 1962).
cold suppers. In contrast to its failure regarding the evening meal, workplace cafeterias proved popular places for the midday meal and were increasingly frequented. Compared to the average, this habit occurred with greater intensity among those living in the capital city. From the point of view of employment, the families of employees had the highest rate of using cafeterias. The growth of this service was a general phenomenon in spite of the fact that the food served at these factory cafeterias left much to be desired regarding quality and quantity.

Eating habits were also influenced by the fact that access to gas or electricity was far more common in the capital city or other cities compared to the situation in townships or villages; in cities, preparing a hot meal at the end of the day was therefore an easier process. It must also be mentioned that a wider variety of pre-prepared or

![Figure 63. Workers having lunch in the company canteen of the thermal power plant in Ajka, 1961 (Fortepan, 126462, Sándor Bauer)](image)
frozen foods were available in cities, a powerful factor that contributed to transforming eating habits. In the beginning of the 1960s, the cooking habits of families living in townships or villages was characterized by an adherence to tradition as these areas were also where the highest proportion of people ate hot food for both main meals.

Bread continued to be one of the most important staples in the daily diet; during this period, one-tenth of the surveyed families were still preparing their own bread at home. In Budapest 7 percent of working-class families consumed homemade bread. Only 4 percent of employee families followed the same custom, compared to one-fourth of those living in townships: “The continued existence of this custom confirms the fact that even today, within smaller communities, the continuous supply of bread is not guaranteed everywhere and remains a question to be solved.”28 During the winter of 1960/61, on the national level 53 percent of Hungary’s families butchered a hog at least once during this season. In townships, this number was 69 percent, while 43 percent of urban dwellers chose this means of procuring a sufficient meat supply: “Particularly in 1960, the market price for a live hog reached such a level that butchering at home was actually profitable compared to the price of meat and meat products bought in shops. Similarly, the frequently long-lasting shortages in meat also affected the rise in hog-butchering.”29 One-fourth of the families living in the countryside complained of scarcities in meat, in contrast to one-tenth of families living in Budapest. According to the survey’s conclusions, the preservation of fruits and vegetables at home—canning, in other words—was another habit that continued. Eighty-two percent of the families living in Budapest canned food for winter, while 90 percent of rural families did the same. The paltry selection and low quality of the canned goods produced commercially further encouraged this habit’s continuation. Rural families primarily preserved their own produce or what was left of it, while urban dwellers procured the necessary raw ingredients at farmers’ markets.

Publications offering household tips and advice also reflected the transformations occurring in Hungarian society’s dietary habits. Not surprisingly, these changes were not infrequently presented in a rather idealized manner:

28 Ibid., 12.
29 Ibid. 13.
Repeated daily and manageable in practically every household, the program for evenings at home is the family supper. All members of the family, whether small or large, take their seats round the table and—no matter how simple the food may be—the entire family eats together. Something so intimate, something so very amiable occurs when family members who have spent the day rushing and hurrying about from morning to late afternoon are calmly sitting together at the table and sharing the events of their day while partaking of a peaceful meal. Not only does it create a good atmosphere, but the family supper eaten together also impacts our health as the digestive system is better able to absorb and utilize food that was consumed in tranquil conditions.30

The customs regarding mealtimes underwent major changes beginning in the middle of the 1960s. As a consequence of collectivization, the nutritional habits of rural families gradually began to transform. New household devices, such as refrigerators and gas or electric stoves, first appeared in urban households and—with some delay—eventually played a role in altering the dietary habits of rural families as well. Collectivizing agriculture had a manifold effect both on the habits determining food consumption and the state of public supply in the nation; on the one hand, collectivizing farms meant a decrease in the number of individuals who had the ability to produce enough foodstuffs to meet their own dietary requirements. On the other hand, converting the entire system of production led to the lasting scarcity of certain staples. The year 1963, for example, saw the greatest shortages in meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products. In the words of the official explanation offered at the time, “The low level of agricultural production has not made it possible to satisfy current national demands for certain products of animal origin.”31

The example of the village of Varsány in Nógrád County offers insight into how rural eating habits changed during the 1960s. Only one grocery existed in the community until 1961, when a second, much larger grocery store was opened. Bread was delivered daily to these shops while milk was sold mornings and evenings at the local dairy collection station. In 1971, a confectionery was opened next to the village pub; in 1972 a private entrepreneur was given a permit to sell vegetables in the village. Throughout the decade, the village grocery

30 Mária Pataki, Zsuzsa Kelemen, and Anna Molnár, Korszerű háztartás, kellemes otthon (Budapest: Minerva, 1961), 12.
stores saw a steady increase in traffic, though various types of alcohol composed one-fourth of the purchased products. The food bought at the groceries consisted primarily of those kinds of staples that could only be procured from shops following the cessation of private farming, such as flour. The purchase of dried noodles, jams, and pickled vegetables only rose after household supplies had typically run out. According to Emese Kovács’s observations regarding nutritional customs, advertisements also influenced these changes as many made a point of trying out the products they had seen on their television screens.\textsuperscript{32} If they gained the consumers’ approval, these products became a part of the everyday diet.

Between seven hundred and eight hundred three-kilogram loaves of bread were delivered to Varsány daily; during holidays this amount could exceed one thousand loaves. Other than delivered bread, 460 households in 1960 still baked their own bread regularly and continued to do so until the end of the 1960s. The supply and consumption of milk was largely influenced by the fact that one-fourth of Varsány’s households kept at least one cow and could subsequently meet their own milk needs while also selling the surplus. More milk was drunk in winter rather than in summer as a means of supplementing the nutritional gap created by the scarcity of fresh fruit and vegetables. It must be mentioned that milk was among the staples consumed daily in only one-third of the households, and these typically contained families with small children.

Saturday and Sunday meals continued to maintain their prominent place within the weekly diet, particularly due to the fact that those who worked far away from Varsány during the week returned home on Saturdays, resulting in an increased emphasis being placed on weekend meals.\textsuperscript{33} The food prepared for the Sunday meal defined Monday’s diet as well since Sunday leftovers were habitually eaten the following day. Weekends and holidays also saw a significant growth


\textsuperscript{33} Primarily as a consequence of the state’s aggressive collectivization of privately-owned land, the number of rural men who were forced to seek employment in either nearby or distant cities suddenly expanded at the beginning of the 1960s. These individuals then spent a good portion of their lives far from their families, living in munkásszállások (workers’ dormitories) that were owned by the company where they worked.
in traffic at the village confectionery as more and more households took advantage of the opportunity to order cakes for special events: “During a holiday event, the village’s inhabitants ordered 250 cakes and 1,300 pieces of pastry in advance.”

Alcohol consumption was mostly satisfied by homemade wine or pálinka, a potent type of fruit brandy. On weekends, however, the village pub also saw an increased number of customers: “On Saturday and Sunday an average of 2,400 bottles of beer, 40 liters of pálinka, and 200 liters of wine is consumed. Based on information provided by wives, men spend 200–300 forints at the pub or bar and pay this amount out of the income they bring home.”

Throughout the 1960s, the organized provision of food for children was also established in Varsány: during the local school’s afternoon session, forty children and ten adults took advantage of the school kitchen’s fifty-meal capacity, the menu of which followed the usual alteration of meatless days followed by days when meat was served. Based on observations of their eating habits, it could be seen that Varsány’s children ate only a modest breakfast—or none at all—before leaving for school each morning. For children enrolled in the afternoon session, a breakfast consisting mainly of tea, coffee, cocoa, and a pastry or bread spread with either lard, jam, or butter was also provided. Compared to the others, not receiving breakfast at home therefore meant less of a problem for the afternoon session students. Most of those who did not have a breakfast at home purchased a pastry or sweet at the grocery store.

As far as lunches were concerned, data collected over a six-week period showed that “potatoes were served eight times, prepared in various ways. Boiled noodles flavored with different ingredients appeared on the menu six times while baked noodles were provided five times. Stewed vegetables were served a total of four times. Meat broth was prepared ten times, while stewed vegetables were combined with meat three times. Goulash soup followed by a cream of

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34 Kovács, “A családi háztartásszervezés átalakulása,” 179.
36 Beginning in the 1960s, the Hungarian education system introduced and expanded a system for ensuring afternoon supervision for primary school-aged children. Since lessons usually finished around noon, parents could request that their children be kept in school for the napközi (afternoon session). Teachers would first make sure the students ate lunch at school, then the afternoon was spent playing outside and completing homework assignments for the following day.
wheat porridge was on the menu three times. The meat was always pork. Potato- or flour-based dishes represented two-thirds of the diet; attempts to introduce children to new types of food were only made one-third of the time.”³⁷ For afternoon snacks children primarily received bread with jam, cold cuts, lard, butter and honey, or liverwurst.

According to observations, the transformation of eating habits among Varsány’s households also depended upon whether women remained housewives, found employment within the village, or worked outside of the village. Women who stayed within the home were the most likely to cook on a daily basis. On weekdays, the entire family ate breakfast and supper together; the midday meal depended on how many and which family members were home at noon and consisted of either freshly prepared food or leftovers from the previous day. In Varsány a significant difference between housewives and those women who worked at the collective farm was that the children of the latter group ate at the school cafeteria.

Interestingly enough, the women employed at the collective farm took pains to modernize their households, yet either never or only rarely used the appliances they went to great pains to procure, such as the gas stove. Their families had meals together in the mornings and evenings and usually ate cold dishes. Women who were not doing agricultural work, but were instead employed in the village proved the most open to innovations in their households and eating habits. For the most part, this group of women spent four to six hours per day earning money, which left them with a fair amount of time for running their households. When it came to meal preparation, they frequently turned to pre-prepared foods or canned goods for ingredients. Their families ate cold food for breakfast and dinner and mostly had hot meals for lunch.

The final group of village women consisted of those who were employed outside of the village; the fact that they were paid hourly wages and had to work multiple shifts completely transformed their household and food preparation habits. In these families, cold store-bought foodstuffs were eaten during the week while freshly cooked food was only prepared on weekends or holidays. In the case of workers who commuted to work, it was relatively common for grandparents to take on the task of making sure the family had cooked food

every day.

From the middle of the 1960s, collectivization and its accompanying lifestyle changes—such as the renovation of houses—led to alterations in bread consumption as well. This was mainly true among village dwellers, who gradually stopped baking their own bread in favor of buying it from the local store.\(^\text{38}\) It must be mentioned that labeling a product as “homemade” versus “store-bought” generally indicated a difference in quality, to the benefit of homemade goods. This designation remained current for quite some time as products such as homemade bread, baked goods, or sour cream were synonymous with better quality according to popular thought.

Among those living in villages, collectivization brought about a whole range of transformations that consequently sped up and altered the customs connected to food consumption and nutritional habits. When farms had still been privately owned, those belonging to the peasant class had—virtually without exception—spent money only on goods that depended on some form of industrial processing and therefore could not be produced at home. In the 1960s, the increased spread of large-scale agricultural cooperatives eased the demand for human labor as machines were used instead; the need to increase the intake of calorie-rich foods during certain work-intensive seasons subsequently became less widespread. As the regulations regarding ownership changed, greater value was naturally placed on the role household gardening plots played in providing families with a regular food supply. In peasant households the most significant transformations began to unfold in the second half of the 1960s. At this point, eating three meals a day gradually became a common phenomenon. Cereals, potatoes, and corn remained staple ingredients for food preparation.\(^\text{39}\) The calorie content of the dishes prepared for consumption began to rise toward the end of the 1960s as food became richer and greasier. Better financial circumstances enabled families to eat more amply and more often. These changes were most apparent in the menus and dishes prepared for wedding parties as more traditional peasant foods were slowly exchanged for the type of food more commonly eaten by middle-class families.


The influence religious stipulations continued to have on eating habits during the 1960s is best demonstrated by a micro-analysis conducted in 1967. A survey made among workers at a farm cooperative located in Vajszló, a village found in the Ormánság region, revealed that most families ate some form of meat four times a week. Noodles were consumed twice a week and stewed vegetables once. Three-fourths of the families surveyed ate noodles or stewed vegetables on Fridays and abstained from eating meat. Some form of meat most commonly appeared on family tables on Saturdays and Sundays.40

The results of a research project that examined the eating habits of 230 urban and 246 rural families in Baranya County in 1968, showed an overall improvement in nutrition, an increase in calorie intake, and a higher consumption of sugar, meat, and lard. Other than their financial circumstances, personal preferences and improvisation also had an influence on what certain families ate during the week. Regarding alimentary habits, urban and particularly rural families held fast to maintaining traditions. Out of those surveyed, only slightly more than one-third reported regularly drinking milk or dairy-based beverages; within this category, four-fifths were employed in industry or white-collar work, while only four-tenths of those working in agriculture habitually drank milk.

In both urban and rural households, meat was more frequently finding its way into midday or evening meals as roughly four-tenths of the reported meals contained some type of meat dish. Animal-based, rendered fats (such as pork lard) played a defining role in nutrition; whether in cities or villages, bacon, cracklings, and grease-laden meat stews were often found in diets. In villages, pork lard was used without exception for cooking, a logical choice given that virtually every family butchered its own hog. One-third of urban households, however, were already cooking with vegetable oil, or using a mixture of vegetable oil and lard to prepare meals.

Bread unswervingly remained the predominant “staff of life”: three-fourths of the households in Hungary’s cities reported eating three-quarters of a kilogram of bread per day, while one-fourth consumed between a quarter- and a half-kilogram of bread daily. In villages nearly two-thirds of the families surveyed fell into the latter

category; only one-tenth reported eating at least half of a kilogram of bread per day, while one-fourth consumed less than a quarter of a kilogram daily. It must also be mentioned that the consumption of boiled or baked noodle dishes was more common in rural households.

In reference to the frequency of meals, for the most part the differences that could still be observed at the beginning of the 1960s disappeared by the end of the decade as both urban and rural households generally maintained the habit of eating three meals a day. The part of the day in which families ate their main meal, however, displayed a difference in custom as rural families were more likely to eat their main meal in the evening. Half of village populations prepared a fresh, hot meal for supper, while noontime was when city dwellers cooked and ate fresh food.41 Furthermore, researchers were also able to reach the following conclusions:

We found significant differences between urban and rural households concerning the usage of modern kitchen techniques. In villages, the majority of cooks still use old methods for food preparation, while in cities modern cooking techniques (preparation of casseroles or steamed dishes, cooking and baking with oil, usage of store-bought, frozen, or canned ingredients) are increasingly common. As regards what dishes are eaten most willingly, very little difference can be observed in the tastes of urban and rural households. In both respects, meat dishes were chosen as the most favorite foods, while noodle dishes came in second and stewed vegetables fell into the last category based on frequency. Among meat dishes, fried pork cutlet is the most popular, followed by stuffed cabbage, pörkölt [meat stewed in a paprika sauce] and roasted meat. In villages pörkölt is more highly favored while various kinds of poultry dishes remain overwhelmingly popular in cities. Among soups, the favorites were meat broth, bean soup, and potato soup. Most of those surveyed chose boiled or baked noodle dishes flavored with [sweetened] ground poppy seeds, noodles served with farmer’s cheese, or various kinds of palacsinta [the Hungarian version of crepes].42

Alcohol consumption was more common in rural families: nearly two-thirds of participants reported that they regularly drank alcohol. During this period, wine was favored most by village dwellers as an overwhelming number of rural families tended their own grapevines.

42 Ibid, 267.
Among urban participants, alcohol was primarily consumed in connection with celebrations. At the same time, according to the data collected in this survey, coffee was drunk in two-thirds of urban households while only one-sixth of rural families served coffee regularly.

These changes are—at least partially—observable via the data gathered in a lifestyle research project conducted in Békés County and led by Ágnes Losonczi in 1969. The project examined how frequently twenty-six foodstuffs were consumed, the relationship between consumption and production, and the circumstances surrounding trade infrastructure. By selecting these parameters, the researchers attempted to produce an image of Hungary’s alimentary culture and eating habits. The conclusion was drawn that bacon remained one of the most essential staples due to its high caloric value and the relative ease and inexpensiveness with which it could be independently produced. In the southern areas of Hungary’s Great Plain Region, bacon was eaten daily; even one-third of well-to-do families displayed this habit. Two-thirds of rural families earning an average income did the same, while more than half of low-income families depended on bacon as an essential staple that quickly guaranteed a feeling of fullness, whether eaten for breakfast, lunch, or as the main dish for dinner. In comparison to bacon, cheese, another important food from the perspective of healthy nutritional requirements, only appeared on a daily basis in meals eaten by one-fifth of those families possessing the highest incomes and pursuing white-color professions; in households with the lowest incomes, or in which employment consisted of physical labor, cheese was only rarely available.

Based on her research results, Ágnes Losonczi was able to establish four characteristic nutritional categories. In the first category, labeled “poor and monotonous,” Losonczi grouped one-third of the survey’s participants whose diets were not only fairly monotonous, but also contained poor-quality foodstuffs possessing low values in protein and vitamins. Nearly one-third of participants were grouped into the “poor but varied” category since the striking variety found in their diets also allowed for more abundant fare. Less than one-sixth of participants belonged to the third category, labeled as “adequate and varied,” a group whose nutritional needs were basically satisfactory from the point of view of both quantity and quality. The remaining one-seventh fell into the “abundant, monotonous” category; in this

43 Losonczi, Az életmód az időben, 474.
case, participants experienced no lack of food, but faced issues caused by a diet lacking in variety. One of the most important conclusions reached by this research project was the determination that two-thirds of those surveyed did not have access to adequate nourishment. In the case of inadequate nutrition, economic opportunities obviously played a definitive role, while the situation for those who had access to abundant food sources was still determined by the rules and habits found in the alimentary culture and eating customs of the time.

Losonczi’s research project also examined the composition of main meals in a comparison that looked at weekdays as opposed to the Sunday meal. On weekdays more than two-fifths of surveyed families ate meatless main meals, a circumstance that was only true of every sixteenth family regarding the Sunday meal. One-fourth of families ate one-dish meals on weekdays; a two-course main meal was common among two-fifths of households, while a striking one-third had three or more courses. According to financial status, on weekdays one-fourth of prosperous households consumed main meals consisting of one or two meatless courses, a habit this particular group would have hardly continued on Sundays. Similarly, one-fourth of those enjoying the best financial position were able to consume one or two courses containing meat even on weekdays; this proportion was one-fifth on Sundays. Two-fifths of well-to-do urban households could afford to eat three or four courses containing meat on weekdays, a habit that was common among two-thirds of participants on Sundays. The dietary habits of well-to do, rural families only revealed slight differences in comparison. Low-income families very frequently ate one-dish, meatless meals on weekdays, while only one-fourth of this category could afford two meat courses on Sundays. Approximately half of the participating low-income households served three or four courses containing meat for their Sunday meal. This data demonstrates that the equalization of nutritional differences among various social classes was only just beginning to take effect at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s.

At the end of the 1960s, a relatively wide deviation in the ratio between meatless and meat dishes emerged on the basis of employment: “The level of nutrition is at its lowest level in households where the main breadwinner is retired. After this follows the group labeled

as ‘other types of physical laborers.’ On weekdays 46 percent of this latter group eats one or two types of some sort of a meatless dish for the noon meal, while 49 percent of pensioners do the same. The reverse situation also appears; in cases where various types of meat are customarily served at main meals, these two categories still display the lowest ratio percentage.”

In connection to the Sunday meal, the differences deriving from professional or financial circumstances lessened significantly. The widespread, characteristic behavior pattern underlying this phenomenon was that those who ate poorer quality meals during the week were setting aside sufficient money for serving an abundant meal containing multiple courses of meat dishes on Sunday. Only the very destitute and most unfortunate—those whose marginalized position only rarely ensured a more plentiful meal on Sundays—proved the exception to this custom.

With its abundance and richness of dishes, the Sunday noon meal frequently compensated diners for the less satisfactory quality of weekday meals. At such times fried chicken, pörkölt, fried pork cutlet, roasted or stuffed chicken, roasted pork, beef pörkölt, fried meatballs, and stuffed cabbage were the most commonly served meat dishes, a fact which amply demonstrates that pork and chicken were consumed the most often. Potatoes or some type of boiled noodles had a defining role in accompanying meat while stewed vegetables appeared relatively rarely on the menu:

The limited nutritional circumstances combined with the amount of hard labor demanded of individuals led to a system of customs that tended to maximize all available opportunities. The main essence of a Hungarian worker or peasant’s eating habits is to use as few raw materials or tools as possible in a way that requires as little time as possible. Within (or perhaps in spite of) these criteria, the food also had to trick the appetite into feeling satisfied, be filling and—if at all possible—also be plentiful and rich in calories. Soup, bread, noodles, potatoes, or bacon fit this bill. The kind of cooking and nutritional methods which represent tradition today were the means of providing a feeling of having eaten well within the previously mentioned limitations: meals began with soup so as to fill the stomach while dishes contained strong flavors and bold spices to give the impression that the flavor of even a small amount of food could be easily tasted. The cravings that arose as a result of these limits were fulfilled simply by accomplishing these criteria, thereby investing diners with a sense of plenty.

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46 Ibid, 369.
It therefore follows that this behavior pattern bears close relationship to how public opinion connected hearty, abundant meals to holidays and celebrations. During this period the way celebratory meals were arranged followed previously established traditions: “Celebrations offer the opportunity for hosts to demonstrate—either directly or indirectly—before the entire community the extent of their hospitality, progressiveness (‘modernity’), and affluence, or at the very least the appearance of a certain financial standing.”

Hosting a wedding reception naturally counted as one of the most affluent celebratory meals that could be held; as such, hosts strove to fulfill their guests’ expectations even in the most difficult of times. According to the observations made by Edit Fél and Tamás Hofer in the village of Átány in Heves County, roughly thirty households (totaling 120 people) were included in one wedding reception. Providing sufficient food for this number of guests took either three sheep or one 100-kilogram veal calf, thirty chickens, four hectoliters of wine and eight loaves of bread weighing five to six kilograms each. The reception’s main meal consisted of chicken broth for the soup, mutton pörkölt, a grain dish made with either milk or meat, and a wide selection of cakes and pastries.

The concepts surrounding lifestyle reform which emerged at the end of the 1960s were based on the supposition that kitchens would soon lose their previously dominant role; as women increasingly joined the workplace, far less time would remain for household activities. The construction of new Soviet-type block houses was therefore envisioned in which all provisions and meals—from breakfast to supper—would be centrally ensured. The flats constructed to reflect these lifestyle reforms totaled 30–40 square meters in size and contained only a “kitchenette,” the size and layout of which came close to resembling a ship’s kitchen. It must be mentioned that, according to the original idea, the kitchenette was not intended for larger households, but rather as a sufficient means for mainly young, childless couples, older couples, or single individuals to prepare meals. A kitchenette’s 3–5 square meter area typically contained a double burner gas or electric stove, a sink, built-in cabinets, a storage shelf, and a worktable. Families compensated for their decreased living space by installing built-in kitchen furniture as well. In cities, some block house flats even neglected to include the minimal space required for the usual

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“kitchenette”: a cooking “cabinet” was provided instead for both cooking and reheating food. A cooking plate, sink, and storage shelf was installed inside, thereby making full use of the cabinet’s available space.

In reality, however, most families would not have dreamed of removing daily food preparation from their regular household routines, and kitchens continued to remain one of the most important rooms in the home. Compared to earlier periods, one basic difference was that kitchen activities became heavily mechanized, particularly in urban households. The social changes Hungary was undergoing at the time sped up the transformation of the lifestyle led by certain groups or social classes: new habits and forms of consumption emerged as more services came into demand, especially in the case of appliances and furnishings that simplified household tasks. By the middle of the
1960s, access to electricity was widespread, another factor that enabled the quick adoption of different innovations. At the same time, it must be mentioned that—from the point of view of food preparation techniques and technology—a kind of “delayed reaction” could be observed in the case of urban vs. rural kitchens between the 1960s and 1970s. Peasant households, for example, were still relying on cast-iron cooking ranges at a time when gas-burning or electric stoves had already begun to spread through cities. As traditional village homes were rebuilt, brick ovens first became an increasingly rare sight, then disappeared entirely from kitchens by the 1970s. By the 1960s most urban households kept food cold in an ice-box, while rural families used cellars, wells, or cold water to accomplish this goal. In larger communities, companies dealing in ice production and ice delivery satisfied the demand for ice.

In Hungary, electric refrigerators became more common in greater numbers at the end of the 1950s; this process sped up in the second half of the 1960s and only continued throughout the next part of the decade. In 1960, one refrigerator per one hundred households was the norm; in 1965, this number rose to eight per every hundred. By 1970 thirty-two refrigerators were found in every hundred homes; five years later, there were sixty-eight refrigerators per every hundred homes. Responsible for a remarkable transformation in food storage and consumption, by the middle of the 1970s the refrigerator came to be regarded as an essential household appliance. As it reduced the need to shop as frequently, this quickly popular device altered how families procured foodstuffs: instead of purchasing food daily, shopping was instead done two or three times a week in many communities. Now that they could be kept cool, ingredients that spoiled easily could be stored for longer periods of time. While the connection itself may seem strange, the spread of refrigeration actually aided the mass construction of Soviet-type block houses: since most of the flats in this type of building contained no pantry, food storage was almost always solved by virtue of a refrigerator. Similarly, from autumn to spring the central district systems that supplied block houses with heat led to high average temperatures, another factor in making refrigeration a necessity.

At the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the volume of refrigerators averaged 80–120 liters, a capacity that was 150–220 liters one decade later. These shifts in lifestyle additionally led to the increased demand for refrigerators that also contained freezers, an option that allowed families to store food that had either been purchased or prepared at home on a long-term basis. Since the habit of freezing food was still not widespread, home-canning and food preservation remained popular in spite of the days of labor frequently involved. After procuring the raw ingredients, this task continued with washing, peeling, and cutting the fruit or vegetables, thoroughly cleaning the glass jars, then conserving the prepared jams, fruit compotes, or pickles in a steam bath.

A similar transformation occurred in the case of other forms of kitchen equipment as well. While heavy enamelware or cast-iron pots were the most popular kind of kitchenware used in the mid-1950s, heat-resistant glassware, aluminum, and ceramic crockery gained in popularity by the beginning of the 1960s. In most households, various types of grinders (for walnuts, poppy seeds, coffee, or meat) had already replaced the mortar and pestle; these mechanical grinders were eventually replaced with electric appliances once the first multifunctional kitchen tools appeared at the end of the 1960s. The essential equipment for making homemade noodles consisted of a wooden pastry board and rolling pin. Gradually, fireproof crockery was supplanted first by enameled, then Teflon-coated metal kitchenware. Glass coffee percolators used over spirit lamps were similarly replaced by percolators that could be used on a gas or electric stove. Electric coffee-makers were later used instead of stovetop percolators. Other than exerting a significant influence on how different kinds of food were prepared, these tools generally reduced the amount of time spent on food preparation as well. The increased availability and variety of frozen or preserved foods also made cooking much easier for families.

In the beginning of the 1960s, the kitchen served as the site of food preparation and consumption in most homes. To accommodate larger family events, another room in the flat was turned into a dining room, a step that was necessary either due to the kitchen’s small

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50 As far as the customs regarding food preparation were concerned, in Hungary the habit of making certain foods at home—such as noodles or dried pasta—remained prevalent until the 1980s.
size or the large number of guests. Like in other periods, it was also common at this time for most households to arrange the kitchen in as practical a manner as possible. In many kitchens the kitchen table was therefore placed between the stove and the faucet or sink while the kitchen cabinet was installed on the opposite wall. The most frequently used items and spices were usually stored on shelves located above the table and stove. Separate storage cabinets for dishes, pots, and pans were often used. The pantry’s size and furnishings naturally depended on whether the household was an urban or a rural one. Shelving, poles from which smoked meats were hung, baskets and chests for storing fruits and vegetables, or perhaps a small table comprised the basic equipment found in pantries. Once kitchen cabinets became fashionable, the heavy sideboard—boasting beautiful carving and decorated panes of glass—was switched in favor of furniture that was simpler in form and easier to keep clean and use for storing dishes. After this followed the age of prefabricated, built-in kitchen cabinets.

**The years of “feeling full”**

During the period that stretched from the end of the 1960s to the middle of the 1980s certain products were regularly unavailable for consumption; while the number of inaccessible goods gradually decreased, items such as tropical fruits remained scarce. By this time the shortages were not related to quantity, but rather to quality. As it enabled rural families to furnish their own needs while also creating produce that could be sold at local markets, household farming played a significant role in stabilizing the nation’s food supply chain by filling the gaps created by the increase in demand. For a time, the growth in demand slowed down the recurring phenomenon of rising prices, although it must be mentioned that Hungarian society was not characteristically sensitive to price as far as essential foodstuffs were concerned.

Primarily in cities, the trade network for food products continued to expand dynamically, at least relatively speaking. As of the start of the 1980s, the private sector’s presence in this area strengthened considerably, as demonstrated for example by the remarkable speed with which the number of privately owned, small shops increased.
Being able to find and purchase certain products—such as brand-name alcoholic beverages, chocolates, or tobacco—became a symbol of social status, a habit that can, in the case of some items, still be found in Hungarian society today. While nutritional aims continued to target an increase in amounts, the issue of quality slowly stepped to the forefront. For the most part, the continuous expansion of the kinds and availability of goods became a widespread public expectation that was essentially met by the beginning of the 1980s.

Differences in the eating habits exhibited by urban versus rural populations obviously decreased: throughout the fifty years that followed World War II, this period in Hungary’s recent history saw the lowest number of individuals suffering from malnutrition. From the point of view of quantity, the level of nourishment attained by Hungarian society can therefore be said to have improved. The fact, however, that gaining access to quality foodstuffs remained an only partially resolved issue is best demonstrated by the results of a nutritional assessment conducted in the village of Valkó in Pest County in 1965 and then again in 1974:

In 1974, meat or meat products were regularly consumed, in contrast to 1965, when 55.2 percent of the evaluated families ate meat once a week, 4.9 percent had meat twice a week, and 7.3 percent purchased fresh meat with even more infrequency. According to our family evaluation, 28.5 percent did not drink milk regularly, while only 26.3 percent of the children in the fifth and sixth grades received milk or dairy beverages. In the earlier assessment [in 1965] nobody—not even the children—in 34.6 percent of the surveyed families consumed milk. The shifts in consumption of fruits and vegetables is reflected by the following data collected among second-grade primary students: according to our survey, nobody ate fruit or vegetables daily, while 20 percent of the evaluated children had fruit and vegetables every other day. In 1965, this number was only 5 percent. In 1974, one-third of the children ate fresh fruit or vegetables every other day while one-third did not eat any type of fruit or vegetable at all. . . . In comparison to the high number (32 percent) of those eating cold food for their noonday meal in 1965, only 8 percent

51 Exact numbers regarding malnutrition cannot be provided given the fact that the statistics prepared at the time had to meet state requirements, which meant that this kind of data was not published. Since malnutrition generally goes hand-in-hand with poverty, the numbers and percentages regarding poverty can be taken as a rough indication of the former. In the beginning of the 1980s, even the most optimistic estimations listed five to six percent of Hungary’s population as living in deep poverty.
were found to be doing the same in 1974. In contrast to the 40 percent rate found nine years previously, 75 percent of noon meals were complete and contained food that was satisfactory in quality. In nine years’ time, however, the lack of certain meals has hardly improved: 6 percent of the evaluated children went to school without breakfast, 5 percent did not eat lunch, and 4 percent did not have supper. Out of the surveyed children, one-third were missing one meal once a week, seven missed meals on several days of the week, and four missed two meals on the same day.52

The appearance and relatively dynamic spread of canned or frozen foods contributed greatly to the speed with which nutritional and eating habits changed in Hungary. During the interwar period, neither the demand nor the selection of pre-prepared or preserved foods was widespread. In the 1950s, the volume of production of these goods was three or four times higher than the 16–18 thousand tons consumed before World War II. By the beginning of the 1960s, this number had risen to 140 thousand tons per year. The growing selection and (slow) improvement in quality gradually provided new options compared to home canning, even though “grandma’s homemade compote” naturally continued to maintain a prestigious ranking in eating preferences. Demand for factory-produced foodstuffs also grew as a result of the transformation of the circumstances surrounding employment. Between 1960 and 1975 Hungary’s consumption of canned goods grew three-and-a-half times, from 6.3 kilograms per person to 23.5 kilograms per person. This increase was primarily due to the growth in demand for pre-prepared canned food as public taste continued to prefer fruit that had been preserved at home rather than in a factory.

In Hungary, quick-freezing foods on the industrial level began in 1943; as of 1947 frozen foods were marketed under the brand name of Mirelite. In the early years, mainly fruits and vegetables were preserved using this method, but the selection of frozen foods noticeably broadened by the end of the 1950s. During the first decades following World War II, both the production and the consumption of pre-prepared foods grew dynamically, from 0.2 kilograms of frozen foodstuffs consumed per person per year in 1955 to 3.2 kilograms per person per year in 1975. Other than family households, restaurants, workplace

cafeterias, and other eateries willingly made use of quick-frozen ingredients. To add another aspect to this analysis, 1956 also marked the year when canned baby food was first manufactured in Hungary. By the end of the 1970s, 96 percent of Hungarian families were using some form of canned goods, even if the familiar paradigm remained valid in that urban families consumed more canned goods compared to rural families. Similarly, out of the various professions, peasant families relied the least upon factory-canned food.

As incomes climbed, the demand and consumption of canned food also rose, just as the greatest demand for this kind of foodstuff was typical of households where the women were working for hourly wages. The usage of canned goods fluctuated according to the seasons: far more cans of products containing fruits and vegetables were

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purchased in winter than in summer. For quite some time it was also true that various social classes in Hungary displayed an aversion to goods prepared in industrial canneries due to their poor quality: the preference for homemade preserved foods and the prestige attached to this form of food preparation remained uncontestably high.

Based on the data collected by various surveys, by the end of the 1970s anywhere between two-thirds and three-fourths of Hungarian consumers were using some form of frozen food, though this habit was generally more intensively present among the families of educated professionals or wealthier households located in Budapest. It can therefore be said that the increased demand for preserved foods played a role in the social transformations Hungary underwent during this period; with the relatively quick spread of time-saving household appliances and cooking techniques, individuals found themselves with more free time on their hands and customs and lifestyles subsequently changed. As the 1970s turned to the 1980s, chest freezers became extremely popular in rural households, thereby greatly simplifying the process of preparing, preserving, and storing foodstuffs, particularly in connection to meat and meat products, fruits, and vegetables. Thanks to this technical advance, the role played by smoked meats and home canning became noticeably reduced and could primarily be found in villages and among small-scale farmers. According to nutrition evaluations made during the 1970s:

Food consumption and the cooking techniques attached to this process remain comparatively unbending as only slight alterations can be seen. In spite of this, we can still witness the surrendering of certain “conservative” habits. . . . Most housewives regularly cook for two, three, or four people. . . . As regards the frequency of meal preparation, 52 percent of housewives prepare the noonday meal every day, 29 percent do so only on weekends, and 12 percent only cook a few times during the week. While the custom of cooking the midday meal remains strong, a notable number have switched to cooking on the weekend. The employment status and age of housewives also exerts a high degree of influence: primarily stay-at-home wives (78 percent) cook a hot midday meal, while working women (40 percent) are more likely to leave cooking to the weekends . . . younger generations of housewives do not cook nearly as often as those who are over forty years of age or even older, in which this habit is particularly prevalent. Even so, the proportion of younger women who still cook the main meal is significant, most likely because they also fall within the category of families with young children and thereby usually have fewer means and are therefore more pressed to cook the main
meal daily. The frequency with which supper is cooked displays different habits: 31 percent of housewives prepare a hot evening meal every day of the week, while 28 percent do so only a few days out of the week. 26 percent do not cook supper at all. This distribution is therefore fairly even: cold suppers are slowly gaining in acceptance. Similar to the situation with cooked noonday meals, this tendency is also influenced by employment status and age, even if less so than in the previous case. As can be expected, primarily working women are likely to cook a hot supper a few times per week while those who do not cook at all in the evening are mostly stay-at-home wives. The regularity with which supper was cooked decreased inversely to age: the older the housewife, the rarer it was for supper to be cooked.\textsuperscript{54}

In summary, women’s social status was a defining factor in cooking habits, which also underwent changes.

Beginning at the end of the 1960s, the significant increase in the amount of food that was prepared and consumed represented a noticeably widespread change in the area of food consumption. As the active practice of religious beliefs was repressed, resulting in a process of secularization, the dietary stipulations required by various denominations began to lose their significance. The influence Lent, for example, had on eating habits became far less visible on the whole, even if peasant/village households indisputably clung to religious traditions longer than city dwellers did. A meaningful change in village eating habits could be found in the way that the lines between pre-war social classes were increasingly blurred in reference to eating habits. Generational differences could also be observed as older individuals continued to insist on their traditional diets.

In reference to meals, events that were connected to family celebrations continued to possess a higher significance, a phenomenon that was true virtually independently of the family’s social position. The character and makeup of celebratory meals were not only expected to diverge from that found in weekday habits but also to maintain the function of demonstrating prestige, no matter how precarious the family’s financial situation might have actually been. Hosting a wedding reception continued to mean holding one of the richest forms of meals. As of the 1970s,

A unifying process could be observed in the process of meat preparation. The grease-laden, heavily spiced manner of serving meat in a form of pörkölt, goulash, or baked meat—a style of cooking mainly characteristic of the Great Plains Region in earlier times—came to represent a unified taste. Simultaneously, dishes such as meat fried in batter and fried pork cutlet became more widespread while veal wiener schnitzel remained rare. Meat consumption continued to reach its apex during celebrations and holidays. Depending on the event’s significance, size, and number of guests, anywhere from three to six courses are served for the noon or evening meal, all of which contain meat.\textsuperscript{55}

At the end of the 1970s, Hungary’s population dedicated an average of 30 percent of its living expenses to the purchase of food. While the amount of consumed food maintained its ascent, the ratio of money spent on food decreased according to total consumption. As high-calorie foods played a characteristically predominant role in diets until the middle of the 1950s, the nutritional and consumer habits typically found in more developed countries appeared later in Hungary, during the 1960s. As a result of these changes, by the late 1970s the number of consumed calories was no longer the only important nutritional consideration: quality, flavor, and value were increasingly sought. According to various data, by the mid-1970s the average level of food consumption in Hungary had just about reached its saturation point; meat consumption, for instance, hit the number of seventy-five kilograms per person per year, a figure judged as optimal by international standards. When broken down, it can be seen that pork remained dominant (56 percent), followed by poultry (24 percent) and beef (12 percent). The consumption of fish (3 percent) continued to remain negligible, while a total of 5 percent represented other meats, such as mutton, horse, or rabbit.\textsuperscript{56}

In Hungary the tasks related to food preparation and nutrition represented the housework’s most time-consuming aspects since they were jobs that had to be repeated three to five times a day. According to time balance evaluations, after completing the day at a full-time job, a significant number of women then did the daily shopping and cooking, spending a daily average of thirty minutes on the former


and two hours on the latter. As women increasingly turned to earning hourly wages—a process that took place relatively quickly—the end of the 1960s marked a major transformation in how most families ate. In the majority of families, for instance, the noontime meal increasingly took place outside of the home. In 1975, 55 percent of children and 37 percent of adults regularly had their main meals at school or workplace cafeterias.

The large-scale development of institutionalized food services brought about considerable changes in eating habits. By the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, three million people were taking advantage of the eating opportunities offered by workplaces, schools, or children’s daycare centers. The era’s politics regarding trade viewed institutionalized meals as an issue related to social policies and therefore attempted to use it as a means for balancing out disparities in lifestyle or access to food. This solution was mainly possible due to the fact that the cafeterias maintained by companies and

Figure 66. A store interior in the 1970s. At that time, the food supply was stabilizing, while eating habits were gradually changing. (Fortepan, 170786, István Péterffy)
institutions were generously supported by the state so meal prices remained modest. Since the industrial plants that supplied the hospitality sector were also state funded, the loss in profits they faced for having to sell their products at reduced prices was recuperated. In 1978, an average of 40 percent of those not employed in agriculture ate at workplace cafeterias, compared to the much lower number of 19 percent for agricultural workers. Sixty-one percent (1.2 million individuals) of preschool and school-aged children relied on cafeteria meals.57 While the quality of these mass-produced meals was obviously worse compared to home-cooked food, the relatively low price compensated for what cafeteria food lacked in taste. As a newspaper article from 1985 noted,

No matter what—unless, of course, if it’s because of how bad they are—workplace meals will never be as memorable as a good Sunday family feast at home. Nor is it even possible for them to reach this level as they lack the familiar, personal flavors we grew up eating, not to mention that the quality and the portions are nowhere near what we are used to seeing on the kitchen table. Yet it is still important that these meals exist. Work can’t be done well on an empty stomach. For many, cafeteria meals represent the one hot meal they get per day. . . . At the Ganz-MÁVAG factory the basic menu only costs 12 forints and 10 fillérs. In the company’s five dining halls, two-and-a-half to three thousand people eat lunch daily. While naturally not everyone is satisfied, the workers know that better food can’t be had at this price. “I’m fine with the way it is,” was what the mason István Mizsei told me when I asked about the lunch. “In fact,” he continued, “I take the soup home with me for supper.” “A lot of the time it’s too greasy,” commented his young colleague Géza Fodor, as he shook his head and added, “And not just the lunch, but the tray, too!”58

According to data collected in 1977 by the National Institute of Market Research, dietary habits were influenced by profession, age, income, place of residence, the frequency with which meals were cooked at home, and whether a cafeteria was available and used. At the end of the 1970s, it was most common for individuals with low incomes, agricultural laborers, and those living in small communities to cook at home. White-collar, high-income individuals who lived in Budapest were least likely to prepare meals at home. In most households,


breakfast and other meals were prepared using purchased foodstuffs that supplemented the food services provided by schools and workplaces. Eating purchased ingredients for breakfast was more common among white-collar families, while a significant number of agricultural laborers and urban workers ate food brought from home for breakfast or their ten o’clock break. Among children and adults, the proportion of those who ate breakfast at home hovered around 76 and 77 percent. Children were the most accustomed to eating breakfast regularly, while a higher proportion of adults were likely to begin the day without eating. Out of those under the age of eighteen, ninety percent breakfasted in the morning, while only 82 percent of those over eighteen did the same.

When examined according to profession, those working in agriculture displayed the highest tendency to eat breakfast (93 percent) while only 80 percent of those pursuing white-collar jobs began the day by eating: “Based on income per person, individuals under 18 years of age living in a high-income household eat breakfast the most often; children from low-income families eat breakfast the most rarely.”59 Children preferred a pastry and milk or hot chocolate in the morning while bread was the most popular breakfast staple for adults. Among men living in the countryside, bacon and eggs constituted the most common type of breakfast food. Eating cottage cheese, cheese, kefir, or yogurt for breakfast was most popular among adult women and older men: “Income growth has brought about more selective nutritional habits. A larger percentage of adults with higher incomes are consuming pastries, kalács [a braided sweet bread typically eaten for breakfast], and cold cuts as the children living in better-situated families eat more jam, fruit conserves, and honey compared to those in low-income families.”60 At the end of the 1970s, on average one-third of all adults indulged in the custom of a morning cup of coffee, a habit that was most prevalent in white-collar households. Agricultural workers were likely to drink tea for breakfast while individuals in urban working-class families were especially partial to starting the day with a glass of milk.

In connection to the midday meal, researchers concluded that children most frequently ate at home or in school. Other than this

60 Ibid.
demographic, pensioners and housewives characteristically demonstrated the highest numbers for eating the noon meal at home, a statistic that was particularly true of those living and working in small communities. The majority of employees frequented workplace ceterias; high-income, white-collar individuals regularly ate at restaurants or other eateries. Ninety-two percent of children ate at noon daily compared to 87 percent of adults. Fifty-five percent of men and 67 percent of women consumed hot, freshly prepared midday meals. One-third of men ate at workplace ceterias while only one-fourth of women did the same. Five to six percent of men lunched at restaurants or various eateries compared to only three percent of women who followed suit. Among both men and women those with low incomes were most likely to eat their noon meal at home, at 64 and 83 percent respectively.

A bowl of soup and some type of meat dish was most typically found on noonday menus: noodles or stewed vegetables were habitually consumed by children or those living on low incomes. Cold lunches were most likely among men, especially for those performing physical labor: one-fifth of this demographic ate cold food for lunch multiple times a week. According to Hungarian eating traditions, soup was the necessary first course for the noon meal; four-fifths of both adults and children consumed some type of soup several times a week. For the second course meat dishes were present two-thirds of the time in every age group. This was followed by stewed vegetables, a dish eaten several times a week by slightly more than one-third of children and adults. The fourth most common type of food consisted of noodles which were eaten by one-eighth of adults and one-fifth of children multiple times in a week. The prominent, representative role held by the Sunday noon meal was noticeably widespread throughout Hungarian society—indeed of social status—even at the end of the 1970s. Ninety-seven percent of adults and 98 percent of children always ate a Sunday meal; for those who worked during the week, the Sunday noon meal was more substantial compared to the weekday version. “On Sunday a larger percentage of people are generally more likely to eat lunch and skip supper in comparison to weekday eating habits. Consuming a more abundant meal is mainly characteristic of those who perform physical labor or do not have the time or the means to eat a proper noon meal during the week.”

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61 Ibid.
The majority of adults and children ate supper at home; since this meal increasingly came to represent the only time during the week when families ate together, a relatively high percentage of families prepared hot food for their evening meal. This habit was particularly preferred by men. Among adults more than four-fifths of the men and nearly seven-tenths of the women who were surveyed ate supper on a daily basis at the end of the 1970s, while nine-tenths of children had an evening meal every day. While cold suppers were common among white-collar, high-income participants, the same was quite rare among those performing physical labor. Two-thirds of men and more than half of women and children consumed hot food prepared at home for their evening meal; cold suppers were less prevalent throughout all participating demographic categories:

Since home-cooked food is inexpensive, lower-income families cook more often than others. Seventy percent of adults with low incomes and 71 percent of the children living in low-income families regularly eat hot suppers. The same can be said of only 62 percent of adults earning medium wages while a mere 58 percent of high-income adults cooked supper at home and 49 percent of the children living in medium- to high-wage families ate home-cooked evening meals. . . . Adults consumed meat dishes for supper while children tended to choose lighter foods (milk, dairy products) with the greatest regularity. This was particularly true of families with higher incomes. Among adults, the effect of income was mostly evident in the frequency with which cold suppers were eaten as only 22 percent of individuals earning low incomes ate cold food for supper several times a week compared to 28 percent among those with medium incomes and 33 percent of high-income individuals. In comparison, only 28 percent of non-agricultural, physical laborers and 15 percent of agricultural workers displayed the same tendency.62

Out of all the meals consumed daily, children consumed the largest quantities at noon and the least during suppertime. In the case of adults, breakfast was rarely abundant and—on weekdays—the most food was consumed during the midday meal. For physical laborers, nearly the same amount of food was eaten for lunch and supper during the week.

At the end of the 1970s, eating and preparing meals at home still played a definitive role in Hungarian households; 64 percent of families cooked fresh food daily while 11 percent prepared meals five or

62 Ibid.
six times during a given week. When examined by region, two-thirds of urban and more than four-fifths of rural families cooked on a daily basis. Based on employment, preparing food every day was typical of 78 percent of working-class, 90 percent of peasant, and 53 percent of white-collar families. In areas where the production of some food-stuffs was possible, the ratio regarding the regular preparation of meals at home was larger.

Young adults frequented restaurants and other eateries the most while pensioners were the least likely to take advantage of this type of service. When distributed according to employment, the data reveals that white-collar professionals went to restaurants the most while those working within the household or in agriculture ate at restaurants very rarely; if they went to a restaurant at all, it was usually only due to a significant occasion or family event. For the poor, eating at a restaurant was not only impossible, it was the least of their worries compared to the difficulties they experienced in merely acquiring a sufficient amount of food per day. Several sociographies written during this period can allow us to gain a picture of what malnutrition “looked like” during everyday life in the 1970s in Hungary. In her analysis of the lifestyle of Budapest’s working-class families that was published in 1975, Ottilia Solt emphasized the fact that,

very often the children are hungry. It is most frequently the children between the ages of ten and fourteen who are the hungriest as they are bigger and still growing but cannot earn any money of their own. When we were recording their diet, we also asked what they would spend ten forints on if they had it. One-third of those under the age of ten and two-thirds of those over ten replied that they would immediately eat as much as they could of foods like bologna, sausage, salami, or chocolate milk. . . . We recorded and analyzed the dietary data for a total of forty-six low-income children. Out of the forty-six, sixteen did not eat anything throughout the day other than at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. A further three did not receive one of these three main meals. Seven children ate just a plain slice of bread, or bread with lard and a cup of tea for breakfast. During the day a slice of plain bread was all they ate. Sixteen children had a bowl of soup—with no noodles or vegetables in it—a bowl of stewed vegetables with no meat, or a slice of bread with lard for the noon meal. Fifteen children ate a slice of bread, a bowl of stewed vegetables (with no meat), bread with lard, or nothing at all for supper.63

Consuming high-calorie foods was the customary solution for appeasing hunger pangs: “Characteristically, the only dietary element present in the diets of all classes of low-income individuals that did not fall below normal levels was that of fats. Regarding all other categories of the important food groups, the dietary amounts consumed by low-income earners were not just below the norm, but actually far below what was found in other economic groups. . . . Living in an unfavorable financial situation [in 1979 the maximum monthly income averaged 1,600 forints per person] primarily manifested itself in the low consumption of foodstuffs containing animal protein, vitamins, and minerals.”

For an examination of the changes that occurred in the circumstances determining rural dietary habits, Annamária Lammel’s research regarding the village of Atkár provides an essential overview. The poorest families (whose backgrounds were mainly agrarian proletariat) usually ate meat, dishes containing meat, or meat-based products once a week. The most common dishes in this category were dumpling soup, weather loach (a kind of bottom-feeding fish found in meadow ponds) served in oil, bean soup, boiled corn with milk, bread with lard, bread and jam, and bread with sugar. On Sundays they ate soup made of dried meat and pörkölt. In peasant families with minimal (less than roughly three hectares) or small holdings, meat was consumed once or twice a week, while Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays were generally kept meatless. Meat dishes most often contained pork or chicken, while milk and eggs also appeared more regularly at mealtimes in comparison to the most impoverished families. On meatless days potato soup, noodles with cheese curd or cabbage, bean soup, stewed beans, or dishes made of clabbered milk were eaten for lunch or supper; bacon, onions, and bread were the most common breakfast foods. Both peasant families possessing average circumstances (previously known as the middle peasantry) and wealthier farming families maintained the custom of three meatless days per week, but their daily meals were more varied as their meat supply was ensured by the butchering of more and larger hogs. These

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families regularly drank milk, had access to coffee, and ate eggs. Other than holiday or Sunday meals, eating did not hold any particular prestige, which explains why there was not much of a difference between the dishes and foods consumed by the various social classes of village families.

On holidays, however, eating became an organic part of the other customs and rituals that were otherwise entailed. Compared to weekday meals, different foods were subsequently prepared: “Within the context of customs, nutrition performs a symbolic function. During the holidays, if anyone cannot provide his or her family with the food that bears this type of ‘symbolic’ value, then the village’s inhabitants—or even members of the person’s own circle—will not feel that person is ‘one of them.’ This is why the poorest families will still find ways to procure the mandatory food, even if only in the smallest of quantities.” In the middle of the century, foods bearing this symbolic value included the Easter ham or kalács, a traditional braided yeast bread. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the foods served at weddings still reflected tradition. At a wedding in Atkár, the “menu” consisted of a broth soup served with homemade noodles, blood sausage, boiled beef with pickled vegetables, bread, chicken stewed in paprika sauce, stuffed cabbage, roasted chicken, and a variety of cakes and pastries. The abundance of food being served and the quantity of pastries that had been brought to the wedding reflected the family’s social status.

After land was collectivized, changes in the social strata naturally led to alterations in nutritional and cooking habits. The prevalence of store-bought ingredients, for instance, steadily rose in proportion to home-produced foodstuffs. Regarding quality and basic ingredients, Atkár’s inhabitants increasingly followed urban dietary trends, even though numerous aspects related to composition, preparation, and consumption obviously continued to bear the stamp of local customs. By the end of the 1970s, it was not social status as much as it was age and generational influences that defined eating habits in Atkár. Elderly people, for example, clung to tradition and therefore maintained the custom of meatless days and consuming either no or only very minimal amounts of store-bought ingredients, cold cuts, cheese, or dairy products. They continued to raise their own animals as a source of meat; young people, however, mainly followed family customs rather than looking to village traditions as their model and

therefore grew more open to innovation. Out of the customary three meatless days, younger generations regularly abstained from eating meat on Fridays alone. They prepared hot food for supper and also ate great quantities of soup. On weekdays, meals were hurried and family members ate separately, not together. Among children, a bowl of milk with bread crumbled into it was a popular dish for breakfast or supper. Virtually without exception, the Sunday meal consisted of several courses containing meat followed by cakes or pastries.

In villages new types of foodstuffs either did not or only rarely appeared. Until the 1980s, it was more typical for those foods to disappear that had once been widely popular but symbolized—from a certain perspective—times when food had been scarce. These included barley, millet, cornmeal mush, and corn flour. In both cities and villages some “customs,” however, continued to be a part of everyday life in spite of the changing circumstances Hungarian society was undergoing. An example of this would be the “traditional hog butchering,” a custom that remained widespread to the end of the 1980s. In the 1970s and 1980s even the comparatively small kitchens found in urban homes were transformed into workspaces for processing a butchered hog. If this was not possible, village relatives who regularly butchered their own pigs provided the space and means. With the quick spread of refrigeration and freezing, how the meat was processed began to change; far less meat was set aside for the smokehouse as freezers began to replace this technique in meat preservation.

As the quantity of food consumed per person increased, society welcomed the general feeling of being able to eat enough that a state of “fullness” could be reached. Eating more led to certain negative physical effects as well, such as the growing number and percentage of overweight individuals. By the end of the 1970s, three hundred-thousand diabetics had been diagnosed; according to the medical literature, an estimated three million individuals were judged as obese. As another result of this emerging epidemic, the demand for low-fat, low-calorie diet foods gradually began to ripple throughout ever-widening circles of society. The potential demand for this type of product, however, could only be partially satisfied by the food and catering industry of the time.

Between 1960 and 1977 the average number of calories consumed in Hungary rose from 2,938 kcal to 3,189 kcal per person; by the mid-
dle of the 1970s, this previously dynamic spurt in food consumption had slowed. In spite of this decrease, over-eating became a basic issue related to nutrition and health. A study done by the Research Institute of Internal Trade in 1975 concluded that the individuals earning the lowest incomes were consuming on average 10 to 15 percent less than the recommended daily intake of 2,650 calories per person while those earning the highest incomes were eating at least 27 to 32 percent more than the prescribed calorie intake.67

Nutritional studies conducted at the time also drew attention to the fact that not only adults were struggling with how to adapt to the relative abundancy of foodstuffs:

What children are fed also raises a lot of issues. . . . In spite of all the system’s improvements, institutionally organized meals for children still contain more fat and carbohydrates than is optimal, most likely due to the fairly narrow budget. School cafeterias or the eateries paid to cater meals for children are providing less protein and fewer vitamins than necessary. At the same time, a large proportion of children do not like stewed vegetables and therefore leave them on the plate. In many families, morning and evening meals follow tradition and the children consequently do not receive a sufficient amount of nutrients. (For instance, tea and bread and butter is served for breakfast rather than yogurt, cheese, or cold cuts.) To complicate matters further, the many sweets and sugary drinks children are given just fill their bodies with empty calories.68

It must not be forgotten that food consumption entails far more than the need to maintain physical survival: expectations related to culture and enjoyment are also tacitly expressed by whatever form eating habits may take. Mealtimes are further influenced by what choice of ingredients may be available or the family’s customs and habits. A variety of analyses point to the fact that “in nature nutritional habits remained rather conservative in Hungary. Even today, meat is almost exclusively conceived as being pork; some families never eat fish, for example. Other customs that stubbornly remain is the thickening of vegetable stews with flour, the consumption of too much bread, and the over-usage of lard. The excessive usage of sugar can also be linked

to traditional tastes, as evinced, for example, in the habit of adding a heavy layer of powdered sugar to pastries before serving. 69 By the end of the 1970s, the average amount of daily calories consumed per person was enough to supply sufficient energy for a person performing moderately difficult physical labor.

**Abundance and shortages after the fall of the Iron Curtain**

By the beginning of the 1980s, the social habits associated with eating had mostly lost any sense of being mandatory. 70 The appearance and widespread popularity of foreign-based fast food chains further influenced nutritional habits in Hungary. Once again, the quality of foodstuffs was primarily determined by the amount of income available for purchasing food. Parallel to this trend, the views related to healthy eating habits slowly began to gain more acceptance. Consuming meals at home continued to maintain an overwhelming role in food consumption, as indicated by the fact that four-fifths of the individuals surveyed in 1993 mostly had their meals at home. This large proportion obviously owed much to the decrease in workplace dining halls brought about by the closing of state-run factories. The number of those who ate three or more times a day also fell: in 1993, 54 percent of all survey participants ate only three times a day compared to the 26.4 percent who ate anywhere between three to five times daily. A further 19.4 percent admitted to eating once or maybe twice a day. As far as caloric value is concerned, this data indicates that one-fifth of Hungary’s population did not have access to adequate nutrition at the beginning of the 1990s. Irregular and insufficient eating habits were strikingly high among those relying on social welfare or possessing a low level of professional training or education. 71 The in-

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69 Ibid.

70 While the National Institute of Foodstuffs and Nutritional Sciences conducted a nationwide examination of the nutritional status for Hungary’s population between 1985 and 1988, only the biological and physiological aspects of this study proved to be conclusive. As a result of this factor, the collected data cannot be used to analyze the history of lifestyle or other historical issues. For a comparative analysis of alimentary history in Central and Eastern Europe during the post-socialist period, see Melissa L. Caldwell, ed., *Food and Everyday Life in the Postsocialist World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

71 Béla Falussy et al., “A lakosság táplálkozási szokásai: Kutatási beszámoló; Az
crease in prices for foodstuffs combined with the decrease in income that occurred between 1987 and 1993 added to the millions of individuals within these social classes whose daily lives centered around the struggle to attain the basic staples necessary for survival.

In the course of her research conducted in the community of Cserépfalu at the beginning of the 1990s, Anikó Báti examined the eating habits displayed by three generations of individuals. According to her categorization, the first generation had started a family between 1945 and 1965, the second between 1965 and 1985, and the third followed suit after 1985. Based on her observations, the oldest generation’s diet was less varied. Eating only two meals per day was also common in this group and traditional dishes dominated the menu. Cold food (toasted bread, bacon, milk, and dairy products) were most commonly eaten for breakfast and supper. On weekdays the noon meal usually consisted of two courses featuring soup, noodles, or stewed vegetables as the consumption of meat or meat dishes was rarer. Food preservation was most frequently achieved via canning or smoking. The second generation’s habits demonstrated a mixture of tradition and innovation. In other words, while tradition still played a dominant role in formulating their dietary habits, various technological innovations (gas stoves, refrigerators, or other appliances) exerted an equally important influence. Meat consumption rose dramatically in this category. Members of the third generation, however, adjusted their diets to meet the expectations of a more hurried lifestyle. With the exception of holidays, tradition was less important to them and they

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were remarkably open to anything new. As a result, they were more accepting of eating patterns that were urban in origin or belonged to healthier diets. On weekdays the family ate only supper together, a meal that was promoted to representing the family’s main meal.

Not completely independent of prices, the decrease in food consumption was also brought about by the partial transformation of consumer habits. One of the most characteristic aspects of this period was the explosive increase in variety, a factor that could be seen as being somewhat relative, yet still led to a state of genuine excess in certain cases. As far as quality was concerned, financial circumstances dictated the rapid differentiation of food consumption. Regarding the structure of consumption, between 1987 and 1993 a decline was seen in the purchase of “luxury” items such as alcohol, high-priced meat products, or richer types of meat dishes. The consumption of bacon, cracklings, or more filling yeast breads and pastries rose to a small or medium extent while the increase in stewed vegetables, boiled noodles, one-pot potato dishes, fried bread, bread (served either plain or spread with lard or butter), and tea rose dramatically.

These adjustments in consumption amply demonstrate the transformation in financial circumstances that occurred at this time as a growing number of social classes found themselves sinking into poverty.73 Based on the survey, 1993 saw an increase in the habit of eating plain bread, bread with some sort of a spread, or sandwiches in the mornings and evenings; with the addition of a drink, breakfast and supper thereby came to represent the main meal for many individuals. The daily consumption of milk and dairy products decreased as dishes containing inexpensive or medium-priced cuts of meat appeared at noon. Consuming a simple bowl of meatless, stewed vegetables or what would have ordinarily just been a side dish accompanying meat became more common as baked or boiled noodle dishes once more dominated daily diets. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s it can also be said that the general trend in eating habits displayed the disintegration and impoverishment of Hungary’s eating traditions, followed by the relative homogenization of a previously rich variety of regional cooking customs.

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