

# A Stay in Mateszalka

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Emptiness and loneliness. Vacant streets with dull concrete and suggestively lifeless buildings vaguely resembling something of Central/Eastern European architecture. I had no expectations of Mateszalka outside of what I was told to expect: quiet and empty.

My first visit to Mateszalka, an incredibly small town in northeastern Hungary, took place in the winter of 2018. Robert Nemes, in the introduction to his book *Another Hungary*, describes Mateszalka as “an amorphous ‘no place’ [that] rarely fixed the attention or stirred the emotions of outsiders” (4). My boyfriend at the time, Andrew, was Hungarian-American and lived in Budapest, but he and his family would frequently drive three hours toward the Hungarian-Ukrainian border to visit his maternal grandparents in Mateszalka. I had been staying with his family for the holidays that winter and, on the day after Christmas, I drove east with them.

By that point I had visited Budapest several times, having witnessed it during both the winter and summer seasons. Functioning as the nation’s largest city and capital, it rests on both sides of the Danube River, with the Buda side of the city to the west and the Pest side of the city to the east. I had never travelled outside of the United States before my first trip to Budapest, and I was in awe each time I visited. Until then, it had been my only experience of Hungary.

The city was sprawling, full of life and exhilaration and opportunity. The narrow streets were packed densely with cars while crowds of people dressed in stereotypically sophisticated Central European fashion hurried around on foot. It was noisy, the air full of honking taxis and buses, bicyclists flicking their bells as they wove in and out of the traffic and people chatting in Hungarian. It smelled of street food and cigarettes and car exhaust. At night, the city was engulfed in yellow and orange light. It was brilliant. The Parliament was illuminated, its lights reflecting back up from the Danube as it shimmered and glistened over the water. Even in the dead of winter, the lights of Budapest fooled me into thinking that I was warm.

Budapest is a destination. People go to Budapest, whether for travel or to live. No one goes to Mateszalka. At least, that was what I had been told by Andrew and his Hungarian mother, Ildiko, who was born in Mateszalka and had moved to Budapest when she started university. “You leave Mateszalka,” I remember her saying to me once. “You go to Budapest.”

At the time I wondered why Ildiko’s parents did not join her and her husband in the city. In his book, Nemes stresses the importance of “look[ing] at those who stayed” rather than focusing on those who left (1). However, if Mateszalka had really been so empty and lonely, why would anyone with the opportunity to leave deliberately choose to remain?

We left Budapest in the afternoon to arrive in Mateszalka just in time for dinner. It was already dark when we arrived. The grandparents lived a few minutes outside of the center of town on a quiet residential street. The other houses did not have any visible lights on, which exaggerated

the sense of isolation that had begun to creep in. The feeling was mitigated upon entering their home as we stepped out of the cold, empty darkness and into a familiar, warm orange light.

A very small, elderly woman with a round face and short, curly brown hair greeted us in the entry hall. She hugged and kissed everyone with a wide grin. Her eyes, wrinkled behind her glasses, welcomed me over to her so she could greet me the same. I did not speak Hungarian outside of the basic greetings and neither of the grandparents spoke any English. This did not seem to be an issue, however, and appeared to be a source of amusement for Andrew's grandmother. Our communication with each other consisted mostly of smiles, flailing hand-motions and the inevitable giggles that would ensue from accepting our inability to understand the other through spoken language. I learned to call her Nagy, short for *Nagyanya*, the Hungarian word for "grandmother."

Nagy helped us remove our outer layers and hung our coats on hooks attached to the wall. The house, dimly lit except for the kitchen, which shone bright, smelled of something delicious that Nagy had been preparing for all of us to have for dinner. She gestured for us to follow her so she could give me a tour.

The single-story home had one bedroom and bathroom, a kitchen and dining area, and a wide living room with a Christmas tree in the corner that illuminated a soft green and red glow. The walls were painted a waxy, eggshell shade and chipped in some places. Burgundy carpets covered the floors. Family photos in plastic frames hung asymmetrically throughout the house. Nagy walked us down the hallway, past recently washed laundry drying on racks outside of the bathroom, to the bedroom.

The bedroom was where Andrew's grandfather, István, spent most of his time. The rest of the family called him *Papo*, so that is what I began to call him. Papo, due to diabetes, had only one leg and was fighting stage four colon cancer. Because of this he was bedridden but would get up to use the bathroom or to eat at the dining table if there was family visiting. He was only able to do this with the help of Nagy.

Papo was propped up in his bed, watching the TV across from him on the dresser. When he saw all of us, he smiled, his eyes wrinkled in the corners the same way Nagy's were. Each of us went to greet him with kisses on his cheeks and a gentle embrace. He spoke to Ildiko and Andrew in Hungarian, his voice strained and tired. Though I could not understand their conversation, I knew the moment was somber. The warm glow from the rest of the house seemed to fade. Only the TV, with the volume practically muted, shone soft light onto Papo's face. Ildiko sat on the edge of the bed next to him and put her head on his shoulder.

Ildiko and Nagy helped Papo to the dining room. He sat at the end of the table while Nagy danced around the kitchen, gathering plates full of food and motioning for the rest of us to sit down. She chatted excitedly with Ildiko, who translated to me that we were to eat *túrós csusza*, a traditional Hungarian dish consisting of egg noodles, sour cream, cottage cheese, and thinly sliced bacon. Nagy had made this dish specially for me, as she had been told it was my favorite.

The conversation at dinner was mostly in Hungarian. I sat in between Andrew, to my left, and Ildiko, to my right. Nagy jumped at the opportunity to refill my plate twice more after I finished my first helping. As I ate the *túrós csusza* I listened to the animated voices around me, straining to hear words that I understood. These were only a limited few. “*Hogy vagy, Papo?*” (“How are you doing, Papo?”) “*Nem, nem, nem.... Igen.*” (No, no, no... Yes.) Though I did not actively participate in the conversation, I did not feel like an outsider in any way. I watched as we ate, noticing Ildiko had reached across the table to place her hand on Nagy’s. The large window that stretched from the kitchen area to the dining room was cracked open to let out some of the heat from the cooking. Long and white, lacy curtains gently swayed in the cool breeze coming through, but I did not feel cold. The window could have been just a wide, black screen; I could not see anything outside through the darkness. I watched Nagy and Papo, who were both looking around the table as they ate. They, along with the rest of the family, were smiling and seemed unbothered by the isolation.

After dinner we decided to go for a walk through the center of Mateszalka. It was only eight-thirty in the evening, but it had already been dark for hours. It felt like it could be midnight, or three in the morning. Nagy and Ildiko helped Papo back into bed and later joined the rest of us in the hall by the front door as we tied our shoelaces and bundled ourselves beneath hats and scarves and thick, puffy coats. Once everyone was ready, we ventured outside into the cold. Ildiko was the last of us to exit, letting the door shut behind her. We were left suddenly in what felt like a very vast, and almost suffocating, darkness. There were only a few dim, flickering streetlights along the road that allowed us to see where we were going. The few surrounding houses still had no lights on and, from what I could see, there was no one else outside and no cars drove by. It took us less than eight minutes to reach town.

We talked while we walked, a graceful flow of words moving between Hungarian and English for myself and for Nagy, respectively. Our voices echoed through the street as we approached the town, which seemed hollow to me at the time. The streetlights that shone in Mateszalka cast a very pale, almost fluorescent-white glare over the concrete that covered everything from the street to the buildings. The air was frigid, but fresh, and smelled of winter: a combination of snow and forests and distant, burning firewood. Growing up I had lived in a few rural areas, but none were as quiet as I remember Mateszalka to be.

Ildiko, Nagy, and Andrew’s father walked ahead. They spoke in low voices and Nagy’s head was shaking from side to side. Andrew whispered to me that Ildiko was trying to convince Nagy to bring Papo to Budapest to be closer to the rest of the family. Apparently, this was something Ildiko had become more persistent with due to Papo’s deteriorating health. Nagy was, as she was known to do, refusing.

We had been walking for about twenty minutes now and had finally reached the center of town. The town square was really a circle outlined by pillars in a crescent shape. In the middle stood a tall statue of a man on a horse with lions at the base, lit up by the same pale light. I could make out two dark silhouettes walking in the direction opposite of which we came, the only other people I had seen in Mateszalka thus far. I was once again overcome with the sensation of loneliness and wondered what made Nagy and Papo feel so strongly about staying. I brought this question up quietly with Andrew. He told me that Mateszalka was their home and all they ever

wanted or needed existed there. I brought up what Ildiko had said to me, how “no one goes to Mateszalka.” I asked if he felt that his grandparents were lonely there and he told me that there was a stronger sense of unity and community that existed in the small, countryside towns. This is similar to Nemes’ description of the people who stayed, that “many [of these] men and women in the provinces took pride in their towns and sought to make them better” (5). I understood this concept but still couldn’t shake off the wonder I felt towards Nagy and Papo.

My curiosity is a product of my childhood. My family moved frequently while I was growing up, meaning that, by the time I was eighteen, I had lived in nine different places and attended the same school for no more than three years at a time. Settling into a place was never a characteristic that marked my childhood. I did not know what it truly felt like to “stay,” I only knew what it meant to go. Because of this, I found it difficult to relate to people who had only lived in one place. I was well aware that most people do, in fact, want to pack up their things and move to a new location but do not have the privileged ability to make that a reality. It was difficult for me to understand how Nagy and Papo, who had an open invitation to go somewhere else and be closer to family, chose to remain in the same place. In a clear example of my own narrow-minded thinking, I viewed this lack of movement as a form of stagnation, of being stuck. I now recognize that their decision to stay does not mean that they are stuck, rather contentedly undisturbed in the place they call home. Andrew had explained to me that they, of course, felt lonely at times. “But,” he said to me as we all turned to walk back home. “They find dignity in staying home.”

I sat with this for the rest of my stay in Mateszalka. Over the next few days Ildiko would re-extend her invitation, which Nagy and Papo would respectfully decline. The more I witnessed these interactions, the more I began to recognize the complexities in what it meant to leave versus what it meant to stay. Neither is inherently better than the other; both can exist with the same level of subjective importance.

A year and a half later, Papo passed away and was buried in a cemetery on the outskirts of Mateszalka. Nagy continued to decline all invitations to live in Budapest.

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#### Citation

Nemes, Robert. *Another Hungary: The Nineteenth-Century Provinces in Eight Lives*. Stanford University Press, June 2016.