

Paradise Lost or Gained? TNC Establishment and Interethnic/Interracial Relations in a Central European Small Town

Introduction

Galanta is geographically situated in Slovakia, in close proximity to the Hungarian (50 km), Austrian (70 km) and Czech borders (100 km). As far as the town's history is concerned until 1920 and 1938-45 it was part of Hungary while during the rest of the 20th century it belonged to Slovakia (until 1993 Czechoslovakia). Galanta is located within the Slovak-Hungarian language border where Hungarian and Slovak speakers lived side by side for centuries. During the Hungarian rule the majority of its inhabitants considered themselves to be Hungarian speakers, while the rest of the population described themselves as Slovak or German speakers.¹

As of today Galanta has a total population of 13600 out of which 64% identify as Slovak, 33% as Hungarian and 3% as Roma, Czech or other.² In spite of this composition, at the time of the interviews, in 2013, the town has still been considered "Hungarian-oriented" as in more than one electoral period two thirds of the members of the city council represented ethnic Hungarian parties.

As far as the religious setup of the town is concerned, until 1944, when all Jews from the region were deported to concentration camps, one fourth of the total population (ca 4500 persons) was Jewish. The Holocaust changed all this, but the interviews conducted with locals bear witness to a small but active Jewish community still being present in Galanta. Several informants described Galanta as a town traditionally inhabited by Hungarians, Slovaks and

Jews while the Roma, who live in small enclaves on the outskirts of the town, were barely mentioned.

Similarly to other multiethnic cities and towns in the region³ the social life of the local inhabitants has traditionally been structured along ethnic lines; and national/ethnic (Slovak vs. Hungarian) and racial (Roma vs. white; Jewish vs. Christian) categories have formed the taken-for-granted frameworks of social experience. At the same time and according to recent figures, 1200 persons are registered as non-resident foreigners.⁴ This is noteworthy as Slovakia generally is a country with a low level of immigration (1.22 % of the population is of migrant origin). Our article purports to show how, in this context, the migrants in Galanta are pictured in local stereotypes and ethnic hierarchies.

Method

This paper presents the findings of a pilot study. Within the framework of the pilot four interviews were conducted with individuals in key positions in the local community. These individuals were chosen because they are well known figures in Galanta and because they were expected to have deep insights into how the town has developed in the past fifteen years. All four informants are male, they were at the time of the interviews between 40-70 years old and had at some point during the past 15 years been members of the municipal assembly Two of them combine involvement in local politics with being businessmen while the other two are civil servants.

Questions were posed about how the establishment of the TNC has influenced the life of the local inhabitants. Another key topic explored in the interviews was the nature of interethnic

and inter-racial relations in Galanta and how they relate to the changes in the population structure that have occurred in recent years.

The interviews were treated as articulations of discursive practices through which individuals understand and shape their relations to the social world⁵. In the analysis of the interviews we explored the discursive manifestations of ethnic and racial stereotypes. Our focus was on the discursive (re)construction of identifications and we aimed to show how local discursive practices relate to concrete events which are considered important in the present and in the recent past of the locality. In the interviews, the stories about 'who we are', 'who we were' and the lived project of 'what we ought to become' comprise shared narratives which embody some dialectic between dynamism and uniformity.

Local Narratives and the Arrival of Samsung

Until 2002, when the Korean transnational company Samsung Electronics was relocated from the United Kingdom,⁶ Galanta used to be a sleepy, grey town that was struggling with a high level of unemployment (close to 20%) and was marked by economic stagnation. Several of the factories (furniture, construction and food processing industry) which were established during communist times had been closed and the traditional agrarian character of the town, which used to characterize the times before communism, had not recovered to compensate for the dismantling. The unemployment figures seem to have been a crucial reason why the municipal political leaders lobbied hard for bringing the TNC to the town.⁷ Seemingly they were right to do so, as the establishment of the TNC led to revitalization of the town in economic terms. Since 2002 the unemployment rate in Galanta and its immediate vicinity has plunged from about 20 to about 7.5% in 2013-2014.

Within a few years the company employed 3000 persons most of whom were coming from the near proximity of Galanta, but also guest workers from Bulgaria, Romania and Vietnam as well as managers from Korea. The presence of the transnational company in the town is conspicuous. The company buildings occupy a large segment of the center of the town. Other visible signs of the presence of the company are the workers' hostel built close to company premises, the road signs showing the way to Samsung, the annual festival "Samsung Days" and the omnipresent news about Samsung-promoted events in the town in the local newspaper.

However, our interviews indicate that while in the beginning of its presence in Galanta Samsung was still considered to be the savior of the town, ten year later it has become regarded more as a traitor. As a civil servant described the situation, Samsung was in the beginning of the 2000s hailed with an arch decorated with bunches of flowers. By way of contrast, ten years after its arrival it was seen as a symbol of failed expectations. According to the interviews, the problem was not that the TNC had offered more than it could deliver. It was rather that the expectations were unrealistic to begin with. The locals considered the TNC insensitive to the particularities of local experiences and needs. They expected Samsung immediately to solve the problems of unemployment among local low-skilled workers. Contrary to these expectations, Samsung started instead early on to hire skilled workers with some knowledge of English. Moreover, as a local official explained, Samsung used recruitment methods, such as interviews, which were previously unknown for what was seen as factory jobs and which were regarded as "foreign" or "typically Korean". Because of these recruitment procedures only a handful of Galanta inhabitants got a job with the company while significantly more employees were, at least in the beginning, recruited from the neighboring villages. An interesting discursive consequence of this development was the dichotomy that was established between locals (Galanta inhabitants) and "intruders"/villagers (people who commuted to

Galanta from the neighboring villages). A member of the municipal council even called those who commuted to Samsung from the nearby villages "parasites" who took the jobs from the locals.

After this initial selectivity, Samsung started in 2002-2003 to extend its production and to employ workers on a mass scale. At the time of the interviews approximately 2000 employees from Slovakia and from abroad were hired directly by Samsung while others were recruited and employed through employment agencies. According to one informant, the procedure of employing people through agencies is a convenient solution for the company since Samsung may disclaim responsibility for the employees.

The economic crisis of 2008-2009 had negative effects on demand and the number of employees dropped abruptly from ca 3000 to ca 1000. Since then there has again been a recovery. At the time of the interviews there were, according to our informants, around 2000 employees working in the company.

The narratives about the present and future of Samsung in Galanta reflect a love-and-hate relationship. The importance of the company for local business is revealed in stories about subcontractors whose businesses - be it an Asian restaurant, an employment agency, or the bus company that drives the commuters from the neighboring villages to Galanta - all in one way or another depend on the future collaboration with Samsung. At the same time informants tried to emphasize that Galanta is no longer solely dependent on Samsung. Other companies have followed Samsung's lead and established branches in Galanta (though none of them is as powerful and big as Samsung).

When the importance of Samsung for Galanta's development is acknowledged in the interviews, this is also done somewhat grudgingly. Samsung is seen as big, powerful and rich but is criticized for lacking social and especially financial commitment in community affairs. As one of the informants explained, Samsung does a lot at the symbolic level: maybe above all the aforementioned annual Samsung Days, a cultural event organised every year to express gratitude to everybody who has done something for Samsung. Samsung's top brass together with representatives of the Korean embassy in Bratislava visit the annual Galanta market days - a social and cultural event organised by the municipality. What my informants criticize the company most for is that 'Samsung does not act as a socially responsible company.' The narrative of social responsibility dates back to the 'good old communist times' when the chemical factory Duslo, established in the neighboring town of Sala played an important role providing working, housing and recreational opportunities to up to 5000 employees, their families and thereby also to the community at large. According to our informants, Samsung ought not to work in isolation but should recognize its social responsibility vis-à-vis the locality. This social responsibility is formulated as an overall obligation to the locality's inhabitants in terms of employment opportunities (at least 10 per cent of the workforce ought to be locals, the interviewees argue), investments in infrastructure outside the factory and the sponsoring of local sport clubs and educational enterprises.

Dichotomies and Stereotypical Images

In general the interviews bear witness to a discursive practice within which dichotomizations constitute the general pattern. The discourses analyzed here are pervaded by dichotomies, which are all constructed at the intersection of racial, ethnic and social categories.

First of all, the self-image of Galantians is that local inhabitants uphold bilingual language competence. According to our informants, a typical Galanta-dweller speaks (or at least understands) both Slovak and Hungarian fluently while the villagers commuting to Galanta are described as monolingual Hungarian or Slovak speakers. The informants take pride in raising their children to be bilingual while they are complaining about others in their generation who only speak Slovak to their children.

Another important feature of a Galantian is the local knowledge about who is a Jew and who is not. While the Jews are an invisible minority they play an important role in the narratives about who is a 'local'. By way of contrast, a visible minority as 'the Roma', many of whom live in social housing on the outskirts of the town, does not seem to be considered as members of the local community at all. When we posed a question about the inhabitants in an area of social housing, our informants gave either responses which indicated prejudiced attitudes or simply avoided the question and started talking about 'the foreign workers who resemble the Roma.' "The Roma" on the other hand are ascribed not only darker skin⁸ but they are also seen as a people who cause problems for others and refuse to work. The category of Roma is thus expanded to cover not only racial but also classed aspects as it has come to essentialize a purported relationship between race and poverty.⁹ This stereotype places those identified as Roma low on the local hierarchy. The Roma are by and large associated with poverty and criminality and are thus said to shun work and live off social benefits.

As explained above, within a few years after Samsung's advent the company employed 3000 additional persons, among them guest workers from the Eastern parts of Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria (ca 800) and Vietnam (ca. 300). Most of the guest workers still live densely concentrated to a hostel in the city center. Therefore their presence is tangible in the local context.¹⁰ Like the Roma, the guest workers from Eastern Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria are by sever-

al local representatives associated with increasing criminality in the town and with poverty. The Vietnamese guest workers, on the other hand, are described as poor and are pitied for being far away from their homes. However, the Vietnamese guest workers are mainly seen as powerless non-locals, but Eastern Europeans are pictured as a potential threat to the local order. It should also be remembered that the presence of labor migrants is seen as a sign of certain prosperity of the town and of Slovakia generally because, as an informant explained, 'they would not come if it was not better here than where they come from.'

All persons of Korean origin who work at Samsung have some kind of a leading position. The interviewees perceive the Samsung Korean managers as distant and at times arrogant. The informants described the leadership of Samsung as highly hierarchical. A four-layered hierarchy, according to our informants, always consisted (regardless who these persons are) of a Korean president who lives in Vienna, a Korean deputy president who lives in Budapest, another Korean deputy who lives in Bratislava and four managers who live in Galanta. Three of these managers are recruited from Korea and one from Slovakia. Our informants emphasized a few aspects about the manager recruited from Slovakia. He always seem to be a "he", he is usually replaced after 3-4 years in the company, he is always bilingual (Hungarian - Slovak) and he has no local attachments (at the time of recruitment). The highest-ranking Korean managers, who only visit Galanta occasionally, are ascribed high social status, while those Koreans who live in Galanta are described both in positive terms, as diligent and hard-working, and in racial terms as chinky-eyed and smelly. According to a local businessman, 'the Koreans get very drunk at parties and they smell. People who rented their flats to the Korean bosses had to renovate them from the ground up because of the smell the Koreans left.'

The interviews indicate that everyday contacts between Koreans and locals are mostly limited to factory premises. Thus, the stories told in the interviews seem to be based on quick impres-

sions, second-hand information and stereotypes built on hearsay rather than on more solid first-hand experiences of direct contact.

The Koreans are pictured as exotic, non-European people who deserve respect for their wealth and managerial competence, but who are thus also seen as self-centred, disrespectful to local culture and indifferent to the needs of Galanta. Our informants explained that the habits of the Koreans are impossible to understand for Europeans while they emphasized that very little contacts were established between locals and the Korean managers because 'the Koreans think too much about themselves and have never intended to integrate in Galanta'.

Conclusion

In the interviews with local representatives the arrival of the Samsung is pictured as a milestone for the town's economic development even if the initial expectations towards the company have not been met. The inflow of migrants challenges the existing local hierarchies and creates new ones.

The newcomers contest the previously existing local interethnic status quo in several different ways. Seen in racial terms all Asian newcomers are, regardless of their socio-economic status, categorized as non-white, just like the stigmatized category of Roma. At the same time the labor migrants represent different class positions in terms of human capital (skilled/unskilled) and employment status (managerial/low status employment). At the other end of the spectrum, Korean migrants stand at an intersection of class and race as many of them represent Samsung in managerial positions, challenging old stereotypes about white supremacy. Thus

the local narratives of sameness and difference have to be understood in the intersection between race, ethnicity, and class.

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² Statistika (2012)

<http://www.galanta.sk/files/%C5%A0tatistick%C3%A9%20inform%C3%A1cie%20o%20meste%20za%20rok%202012.pdf>

³ Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

⁴ Pravda (2012) <http://profesia.pravda.sk/ludske-zdroje/clanok/25937-pracujucich-cudzincov-na-slovensku-pribuda-najviac-je-rumunov/>.

⁵ Herbert J. Rubin & Irene S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2012).

⁶ Terry Ward & John M. Applica, *ERM case studies: The employment impact of relocation within the EU* (2009) http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/emcc/erm/studies/tn0803056s/tn0803056s_7.htm.

⁷ *ÚJ Szó* Nov. 21 (2002).

⁸ Gail Kligman, "On the Social Construction of "Otherness" Identifying "the Roma" in Post-Socialist Communities. *Review of Sociology*. 2 (2001): 61-78; Brubaker, *Nationalist Politics*, 2006.

⁹ Kligman, "Social Construction", 2001; János Ladányi, "The Hungarian neo-liberal state, ethnic classification, and the creation of the Roma underclass," in *Poverty, Ethnicity and Gender in Eastern Europe during Market Transition*, ed. Rebecca Jean Emigh and Iván Szelényi (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 67.

¹⁰ Jarmila Filadelfiová, et al. *Sondy do kultúrnej diverzity na Slovensku*. [Probes into the cultural diversity in Slovakia] (Bratislava: IVO, 2010).
