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## The American Immigrant Experience Through a Photographic Lens

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THE AMERICAN IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE THROUGH A PHOTOGRAPHIC LENS

OLIVIA SEVITS

HONORS PROJECT

Submitted to the Honors College  
at Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the  
requirement for graduation with

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## **Research Question**

My goal for my Honors Project is to assess how the photographic medium has historically been used to document the American immigrant experience. Then, I hope to use my own photo book to provide a different perspective. As the granddaughter of Hungarian immigrants and refugees, I often reflect on my grandparents' experiences and how they impacted my own life. By researching both traditional and contemporary photographers whose work focused on American immigrants, I can compare how these immigrants were presented through different lenses. With my own photography, my intention is to provide an honest look into the life of my immigrant family, while being truthful to the complexities of the American immigrant experience.

## **Methodology: Project Overview**

To achieve these goals, I created a photobook using my own photography, old family photos, and scans of notes and keepsakes from my grandparents. The intention of this book is to serve as a response to the ways American immigrants were traditionally photographed. It also serves as a reflection of my own experiences as a third-generation American. The second component of my project is a brief timeline of the events in Hungary that led to my grandparents coming to America. This provides the viewer further context into Hungarian history and culture, as well as what my grandparents experienced. I've also included examples of how Hungarian immigrants have previously been photographed.

## **Methodology: Justification**

My project is part of an effort to preserve family history and culture to future generations. My photobook serves as a physical reminder of the past, but through my own storytelling it also serves as an intimate look into my family's life. I included personal notes and keepsakes into my

photographs to emphasize the first-person experiences at the center of my work, which contrasts with the way immigrants were previously photographed. These details include family member's handwriting, my grandmother's recipes, and the Hungarian language. In "Virtual Communities of Intimacy: Photography and Immigration" by Rob Kroes it states, "Words were meant to add focus and detail to the photographic image, yet they could only function within the wider unspoken context of established relations of kinship or friendship. Outsiders, strangers to such intimate relationships, could never hope to get the full message." In my photo book, the scans convey a strong sense of intimacy to the viewer to help give context to these relationships.

I chose to use this medium because photography has been used for decades to share the experiences of immigrants with the American public. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, countless immigrants entered the country through Ellis Island, and photographs from this time are often viewed as iconic representations of the American ideals: freedom, opportunity, and prosperity. While used to influence public opinion, these photographs were often inaccurate representations. For example, Augustus Sherman's photographs tend to focus on the Americanization of the immigrants, capturing them in proximity to flags and wearing standard American clothes. This depicts them in a way that separates them from their native culture. According to author Klara Szelezák: "The vast majority are portraits of immigrants, most of whom are clad in their best clothing and identified by Sherman not as individuals but as representatives of their homeland."

In contrast, Lewis Hine photographed countless Ellis Island immigrants during the early 1900's with the goal of depicting them as individuals rather than a collective. According to *Let Me Get There* by Louis Takás, "Hine's work was not a depiction of the stereotype of 'the immigrant' but rather of the plurality of immigrants, granting each of the subjects' individuality in a unique scenery and situation, thereby suppressing established notions of the immigrants'

inferiority." While both of these photographers were influential to the history of photography, their work did not depict the complexities of their subjects' identities. With my own photography, my intention was to give my own immigrant family more agency and depict them in ways these

### **Methodology: Interdisciplinarity**

I approached this project with two focuses: the photographic medium and history. My main method for exploring my question was researching the traditional and contemporary photographic depictions of the American immigrant experience. By critically analyzing how photography was used in the past, I can not only better understand which photographic techniques are successful, but also how I can make my own photographs distinct from what's already been done.

### **Conclusions**

After looking at previous depictions of American immigrants, I saw only a fraction of their experiences were being shared. Most of the photos depict immigrants as they are either fleeing their homelands or entering America. There is rarely a focus on the years after immigrating, the language barriers, assimilating into a new culture, and the traditions passed down through generations. With my photobook, I wanted to bridge this gap and capture these experiences more fully. These concepts are integrated throughout my photographs and provide further insight into the Hungarian culture specifically.

By creating this photobook, I feel even more connected to my Hungarian culture. This process has helped me to better understand my own identity, while also allowing me to express my feelings on family and history. It was an emotional process, but one that pushed me to represent my family and other immigrants faithfully.

### **Project Strengths**

I think a strength of my project is the intention I put into it, as every creative choice was given a lot of thought. I crafted the sequence of the photographs very carefully with the goal of creating a continuous narrative. Each pair of images supports each other and leads the viewer to the next. Matte paper is used instead of a glossy finish, which reflects the sense of permanence I want my images to have. The cover features small pieces of embroidery, which is an important part of Hungarian culture and uses their national colors. I feel I achieved my goal of depicting a more intimate look into the life of American immigrants that allows them to be seen not just as stereotypes but as complex individuals.

### **Project Limitations**

In terms of my project, the familial details I include cannot fully make sense to the viewer, since only I clearly know the context and importance of each one. It is my intention that my photographs still convey intimacy and a look into my family's life without me having to explain every piece. As with all art, the perception differs based on the viewer. Therefore, I cannot fully know if my audience interprets my work in the way I intend them to. Because I want my photographs to depict the American experience in a new way, I only included a few images from other photographers in the historical insert. My goal is that this section is not too brief, and that it provides enough context for the viewer to see how my own perspectives compares.

## Annotated Bibliography

Department of Photographs. "Early Documentary Photography." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–.  
[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/edph/hd\\_edph.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/edph/hd_edph.htm). Accessed 24 Jul. 2021.

This article by the Metropolitan Museum of Art describes the work of the earliest documentary photographers, dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such photographers include Jacob Riis, Arnold Genthe, Lewis Hine, and Alfred Stieglitz. These photographers documented a wide range of subjects, including the decrepit living conditions of the slums and child exploitation in the cities. In later years, documentary photography shifted from social issues to the broader medium of street photography. One of the leading museums in the world, the Metropolitan Museum of Art has a vast collection of photography. In the process of making my own photographs, I often look at iconic works such as these. Analyzing these photographs and the photographers who made them is essential in understanding not only the best technical methods, but also how the medium has changed throughout history.

Estrin, James. "Photographs That Humanize the Immigration Debate." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 3 Sept. 2018,  
[www.nytimes.com/2018/09/03/lens/photographs-that-humanize-the-immigration-debate.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/03/lens/photographs-that-humanize-the-immigration-debate.html). Accessed 23 Jul. 2021.

This article from the *New York Times* describes the life and work of photographer John Moore. Moore worked for Getty Images and photographed border disputes while riding with United States Border Patrol officers. The articles include many of Moore's photographs, which depict immigrants from Central America and Mexico. Many of his photographs went viral, as they featured emotional moments when families were detained or separated. Moore explains how his job as a photojournalist is to be truthful when photographing and creating captions. However, with social media facts can often be distorted and photos can be interpreted in different ways. Moore also states his main goal is to humanize the immigrants he photographs. This is something I also wish to achieve with my own photographs, to focus on the people in them as individuals, rather than products of their circumstances. Moore's photographs are an excellent example of how photography is used to document immigration issues in recent years.

Gharib, Malaka. "Stunning Photos Depict Migrants 'as They'd Rather Be Seen'." *NPR*, NPR, 7 Oct. 2018, [www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2018/10/07/654492288/stunning-photos-depict-migrants-as-theyd-rather-be-seen](http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2018/10/07/654492288/stunning-photos-depict-migrants-as-theyd-rather-be-seen). Accessed 24 Jul. 2021.

Throughout history, photojournalism has been used to inform the public about current events, while also conveying biased messages. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, photographs of immigrants at Ellis Island symbolized the American promise of opportunity and freedom. In recent years, photographs depicting refugee crises in the Middle East have depicted the violence and harsh conditions refugees face. In this exhibition created by George Soros, 13 different photographers use their images to let immigrants tell their own stories. The goal of the exhibition was to let the subjects choose how they were being portrayed, while also highlighting the resilience they all share. The photographs featured contrast greatly with the iconic documentary photographs of the past century. As a contemporary photographer myself, it is very helpful for me to analyze these images and learn how I can make my own photographs in a way that is respectful of the subjects. In preparation for my Honors project, I will compare the different ways immigrants were photographed in previous decades versus today.

Kroes, Rob. "Virtual Communities of Intimacy: Photography and Immigration." *Exposed Memories: Family Pictures in Private and Collective Memory*, edited by Zsófia Bán and Hedvig Turai, NED - New edition, 1 ed., Central European University Press, 2010, pp. 77–88. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.7829/j.ctt2jbm8r.9](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7829/j.ctt2jbm8r.9). Accessed 5 Aug. 2021.

While we may first think of the iconic, documentary photos depicting immigrants coming to America, most photographic representations of immigrants were personal photos used to communicate to their families back home. In this book chapter, author Rob Kroes explains how early American immigrants sent studio portraits to their families. These staged portraits showed their families their lives were successful in America, and they could afford these new technological luxuries. Kroes also describes the importance of photographs and words being used together. Text describing personal details, names, or events provided context to family members. However, future viewers couldn't possibly understand the full significance of these words without the familial connection. In my own photographs, I include scans of notes and cards from my grandparents. While the viewer may not understand the importance of these notes, they convey a sense of intimacy that changes the way they view my photographs. My motivation for my series of photographs is to preserve this important family history and culture for future generations.

Markowitz, Arthur A. "Humanitarianism versus Restrictionism: The United States and the Hungarian Refugees." *The International Migration Review*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1973, pp. 46–59. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/3002493](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3002493). Accessed 5 Aug. 2021.

This journal by Arthur A. Markowitz explains both the history of how the United States reacted to the Hungarian Revolution and the steps they took to assimilate the Hungarian immigrants. In 1956. This work relates directly to my own creative portion of the Honors Project as I am focusing on my own family's experience as Hungarian refugees. In the journal, Markowitz describes how the Eisenhower administration designated millions of dollars for emergency use for the Hungarian refugees in 1956. This included food, shelter, and transportation to Camp Kilner, New Jersey, where most of the refugees traveled before being sent to their new homes throughout the country. While the American public was at first supportive of helping the Hungarians escape Communism, then soon became fearful the refugees were Communist spies. The context for how these Hungarians were treated in the United States, as well as the legislation that was passed, is crucial to understand how their lives were shaped afterwards as new Americans.

MasterClass. "How to Make a Hardcover Book 10 Steps - 2021." *MasterClass*, MasterClass, 8 Nov. 2020, [www.masterclass.com/articles/how-to-make-a-hardcover-book#how-to-make-a-hardcover-book-in-10-steps](http://www.masterclass.com/articles/how-to-make-a-hardcover-book#how-to-make-a-hardcover-book-in-10-steps). Accessed 10 Aug. 2021.

This article from MasterClass describes how you can make a hardcover book in 10 steps. MasterClass is well known for its informative lessons on a wide range of topics. My intention is to make my own cover for my photobook, so this resource will be very informative when I do it myself. The article lists what supplies are needed, such as cardboard, decorative paper, fabric, and glue. It also includes specific steps that are important to the process, such as flattening the pages before you glue them together or trimming the pages so they are even. It also explains how to add endpapers or dust jackets to a book, but these are optional steps. This method does not use sewing to bind the pages, and instead relies on glue. When finalizing my project, I intend to try both techniques and see which is more successful.

Poggi, Isotta. "The Photographic Memory and Impact of the Hungarian 1956 Uprising during the Cold War Era." *Getty Research Journal*, no. 7, 2015, pp. 197–206. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/680747](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/680747). Accessed 5 Aug. 2021.

This article from the Getty Research Journal discusses one of the most influential set of photographs from the Hungarian Revolution, the Sadovy photographs. These images were captured by Czech photographer John Sadovy and documented the violent execution of

Hungarian secret police members. The secret police supported the Soviet regime that controlled Hungary for years and prompted the revolution in 1956. Sadovy's raw photographs are an example of how photography was historically used to prompt change. In the United States and other western nations, the photographs were viewed as a brave strike against the Soviets and legitimized the revolution. However, the Soviets used the same photographs to condemn the revolution as a violent insurgence against those who were protecting Hungary. Sadovy's photographs are very relevant to my own life, as similar documentary photographs that were taken at the time led to my grandparents leaving Hungary. In the creative portion of my Honors project, I will not only reflect on how I use photography to better understand my grandparents' experiences, but also how the photographic medium was used in Hungary historically.

Szlezák, Klara Stephanie. "Capturing' Immigrant Children: The Issue of Americanization in Photographs by Augustus F. Sherman and Lewis W. Hine." *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2012, pp. 9–29. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/23509456](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23509456). Accessed 24 Jul. 2021.

In this article, author Klara Stephanie Szlezák discusses the two differing methods photographers Augustus Sherman and Lewis Hine use to document American immigrant children. In Sherman's photograph, he captures the immigrant children wearing typical American clothing instead of their traditional dress. They are also placed in proximity to many America flags in the photo. The combination of these elements represents a shift from the children's native culture to instead integrating them with American standards. In contrast, Hine captures the children more candidly and uses a wider frame. Instead of using the American flag, Hine captures the New York City skyline to make the connection to the children's new home. Hine's own approval of social reform implies he viewed the immigrants as an asset to America, rather than a foreign threat. It is important to understand both perspectives, so that the viewer is aware of how the photographer's personal views can impact the message they share. Historically, the way photographers documented cultural events shifted the way the public understood them. In my project, I will analyze examples of this to better understand how photography has documented the American immigrant experience.

Takás, Louis. "Immigrants' Photographic Legacy." *LET ME GET THERE*, [scalar.usc.edu/works/let-me-get-there/immigrants-photographic-legacy](http://scalar.usc.edu/works/let-me-get-there/immigrants-photographic-legacy). Accessed 24 Jul. 2021.

This article stresses the importance of knowing the facts behind a photo, as assessing it at face value can be misleading. An example of this is Alfred Stieglitz's *The Steerage* photograph, which for decades was believed to depict a variety of migrants entering America. In reality however,

the image was captured on a boat leaving New York and featured many different types of passengers. The Ellis Island photographs of Augustus Sherman and Lewis Hine are also discussed critically in this article. Sherman's images focused on unique groups of migrants, many of whom eventually deported. Rather than capturing those who were "other," Hine's photographs provided a more accurate representation of the immigrants in America. However, personal motivations aside, both Sherman and Hine's photographs were used to promote anti-immigration sentiments. This article is a valuable resource, as it provides in-depth analysis of iconic photographs. It challenges the narrative we commonly associate with these images and explains how context can impact a photograph.

Taucraft. "16 Creative Timeline Examples to Inspire Great Project Timelines."

*Targetprocess*, 24 June 2021, [www.targetprocess.com/blog/42-timelines-is-the-answer/](http://www.targetprocess.com/blog/42-timelines-is-the-answer/). Accessed 10 Aug. 2021.

To incorporate the history discipline into my project, I intend to make a small historical timeline. The goal will be to create a timeline that is easy to read, well designed, and matches the aesthetic of the photobook. This article from Targetprocess.com shows different example of timelines and what is included in them. Each of the examples shown are designed very differently from each other and focus on specific types of information. This is very helpful inspiration not only from a graphic design standpoint, but to also decide how I should organize my information. Some of the examples include a timeline that shows how the past influenced the present and a timeline that compares two events at once. These are both ideas I could potentially incorporate into my own project.

"The Photobook." *PhotoPedagogy*, [www.photopedagogy.com/the-photobook.html](http://www.photopedagogy.com/the-photobook.html).

Accessed 10 Aug. 2021.

This text from *PhotoPedagogy* discusses the importance of photobooks and how they have impacted the field of photography. One of the best methods of teaching photography, photobooks are essential in learning the history of photography. For decades photobooks have been used to communicate ideas and are viewed as a standard academic medium in the art discipline. The different ways photographers organize and design their photobooks greatly affects their impact. This resource provides examples of successful photobooks, self-publishing information, and different design decisions to consider when creating a photobook. It also includes interviews with photographers discussing their own experiences with photobooks. For my own photobook, I want as much time and intention dedicated to the design of the book as the photographs themselves. This resource poses important questions to consider and will help me greatly as I make my own design decisions.

“The Ultimate Guide to Bookbinding for Beginners.” *The Curiously Creative*, 19 Dec. 2020, [www.thecuriouslycreative.com/bookbinding-for-beginners/](http://www.thecuriouslycreative.com/bookbinding-for-beginners/). Accessed 10 Aug. 2021.

This article from the website *The Curiously Creative* defines the bookbinding process and how it is used today. *The Curiously Creative* is a website devoted to crafting and provides ideas and tips for different hobbies. For the creative aspect of my Honors project, I intend to print my own photobook. It would be an interesting challenge to create a cover and bind the pages myself. This article describes both the tools needed for the process and the necessary steps. It’s been a goal of mine to make a book throughout college, therefore I feel it would be very rewarding, and well worth the time to accomplish it. The article also includes links to video tutorials, so if I do decide to bind the book myself, I can watch the process first.

Varela, Fernando. “Immigration, Family Ties, and Memories through Photography with José Betancourt.” *Afro-Hispanic Review*, vol. 34, no. 2, Fall 2015, pp. 151–155. *EBSCOhost*, [search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=128913036&site=ehost-live&scope=site](http://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=128913036&site=ehost-live&scope=site). Accessed 23 Jul. 2021.

This article features an interview with photographer José Betancourt and Fernando Varela of Vanderbilt University. José Betancourt is a photography professor at the University of Alabama-Huntsville and has received numerous awards, including the Humanities Center Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. In this interview, Betancourt discusses his photographic work and how it relates to his experience immigrating from Cuba as a child. Betancourt’s photography focuses on how family and memory are intertwined as he reflects on his own cultural identity. For Betancourt, many of his childhood memories are vague and centered on specific details, while his parents’ recollections are grounded in the complexities of being an immigrant in America. Betancourt’s insight is very beneficial to me, as my own photographic work focuses on the stories and events my grandparents have told me about their immigration experience from Hungary. In comparison to Betancourt, whose parents detailed what happened in gaps in his memory, I am using what I know to decipher the details my grandparents have not told me about their experiences as American immigrants.

Vaughan-Lee, Cleary. “Student Voice: Photography, COVID-19, and Our Collective Memory.” *Childhood Education*, vol. 97, no. 1, Jan. 2021, pp. 26–35. *EBSCOhost*, [search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=128913036&site=ehost-live&scope=site](http://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=128913036&site=ehost-live&scope=site).

com.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ1283908&site=ehost-live&scope=site. Accessed 24 Jul. 2021.

This article from *Childhood Education* explains how much of an impact photography can have on students. The Global Oneness Project organization created a photography contest for students during the Covid-19 pandemic that encouraged students to show their place in the world. During that time of distance and fear, photography was used to connect students together. The article also describes how photography connects with memory. It is a form of storytelling, that can communicate ideas to vastly different groups of people. By looking at a photograph, the viewer can gain a better understanding of a memory, whether that is the physical space or the emotions that are being photographed. Through my Honors project, I hope to accomplish a similar goal and successfully share my own memories and experiences with others.

Walker, David. "Finding New Angles to Tell Immigration Stories through Photography." *PDN Online*, 14 Oct. 2019, pdnonline.com/photography-business/photo-clients/editorial-photography/finding-new-angles-to-tell-immigration-stories-through-photography/. Accessed 23 Jul. 2021.

Author David Walker explains in this article from 2019 that the issue of immigration is widely politicized in recent years. In effort to address this issue, media outlets work to cover these stories from different perspectives and to photograph immigrants in a way that is more human, rather than as a source of controversy. While older photographs focused more on illegal border crossings, recent photographers focus more on the faces and lives of the immigrants themselves. The goal is to tell stories in a way that is not repetitive and catches the viewer's attention. Walker also explains how media coverage shifted to share why exactly immigrants are leaving their home country, an aspect the public did not readily understand before. The issue of immigration in America is a very complex subject, so I want to analyze it fully before completing my Honors project. Because it's an important issue to me personally, it's necessary I analyze it from perspectives different than my own. This is essential to critical thinking, as it will lead me to either reaffirm or challenge my own views after careful analysis.