

# THE SOCIAL EMBEDDEDNESS OF THE TOPOLYAI SODA-WATER FACTORY IN KISKUNMAJSA<sup>1</sup>

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*“The society in which we live limits  
the scope of roles a person might play.”*  
(Elemér Hankiss)<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*In the present work I intend to introduce the process of how the Topolyai soda-water factory (Image 1) became an official establishment with a special emphasis on its operational structure, its role and status in the local community. The fate of the Topolyai family (Image 2) provides an opportunity to research different behavioral patterns, social formations and mental representations at the same time, spanning multiple generations within a historical-social context the importance of which has already been pointed out by André Burguière. The life stories introduced in the present (as a means of uncovering the past) serve a double purpose: on the one hand they make descendants aware of their roots, on the other hand they help the process of making the past our own. The preservation of these experiences make it possible for them to be passed on and be protected from fading away, thus demonstrating their true value. While I think that the communal and social interactions of the culture in question should be introduced through their own norms, categories, cognitive structures, sets of tools and concepts, I deem it best to investigate the local world view of the individual through the persona*

*and life values of Ilona Topolyai. (Image 5) During the analysis I tried to utilise both micro and macro level approaches uniting the local reality with the global horizon. Using this method of research I focused on the institutional framework first (local and national artisan organisations) then I shifted my focus toward individual actions and behavioral forms, these being the main factors that determine the characteristics of the soda-water community. Also these are the most useful factors in analysing the unique characteristics of the community in an ever changing historical-social setting.*



*Image 1. The old soda-water factory, Kiskunmajsa, 2013.*



*Image 2. The Topolyai family at the end of the 1910s*

**THE ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE SODA-WATER FACTORY**

I wish to start out by presenting the organisational structure of soda-water manufacturers in general, providing a broader context for the Topolyai soda-water factory. The first soda-water co-operative in Hungary was established in 1892 by manufacturers based in and around Budapest. They had their own letter of advice from 1895 that was published as a supplement of the *Magyar Vegyiparosok és Kereskedők Közlönye* (Bulletin of Hungarian chemical industrialists and merchants). An official newspaper (*Szikkvízgyárosok Lapja*) was launched on August 1, 1900. The yearly subscription fee for the paper was 12 Kronas which included a Krone 2,000 insurance for death, accidents or disability. The organisation also founded a public limited company. The Hungarian Territorial Soda-Water Association (Magyar Vidéki Szikkvíz Szövetség) founded in 1935 required training in order to give out operating licences. After the Second World War, soda-water manufacturers joined the KIOSZ (Kisiparosok Országos Szövetsége – the National Artisan Association) that helped to strengthen the social cohesion of artisans and had an overall integrative effect. Among the KIOSZ's members we already find Ilona Topolyai (*Images 3–4.*). In 1990, KIOSZ was replaced by the National Soda-Water Manufacturer Artisan Body (Országos Szikkvízkészítő Ipartestület), which later joined the Mineral Water Product Board (Ásványvíz Terméktanács). The significance and relevance of the organisation is demonstrated by the International Convention of Soda-Water Manufacturers that was organised in both 2002 and 2005.<sup>6</sup>



*Image 3. An artisan meeting, Kiskunmajsa*



Image 4. A postcard showing images of the soda-water training, Bp., 1948.

The official body of soda-water making artisans (as an independent organisational manifestation of society) can be viewed – from a socioanthropological standpoint – as a kind of group form that “connects and typifies (...) the habituated actions of two or more individuals”.<sup>7</sup> The community is governed by inner rules and a kind of hierarchy that operates within the social web and the system of relationships. The artisan factory bears all the significant characteristics of a group organisation such as a unique goal and interest, a hierarchic structure, a strong feeling of community as well as symbolic language and behavior units.<sup>8</sup> The intersubjective interactions of soda-water makers (production, distribution, shipping, sales) strengthen these essential social patterns over and over again. On these occasions soda-water artisans take up certain microenvironmental positions (unique verbal forms of representation, the usage of specific tools related to soda-water culture, etc) that function as signs of belonging to the same community and as a tool for differentiating themselves from other groups.<sup>9</sup> Group cohesion and a strong web of social relationships (in other words the connections between different communities) are apparent features of the soda-water factory in Kiskunmajsa. Through Ilona Topolyai the family could integrate into the local artisan organisation and also into a bigger, national community in the form of the national artisan organisation. The shipping of soda-water also connected the family to a wide social web. The distribution of thier product helped the company in building powerful connections and a wide social web that enabled the family’s social integration and the stabilisation and improving dynamism of the soda-water culture.<sup>10</sup>

Being a member of a given community offers a number of alternative identity and activity choices that I wish to examine from the point of view of social status and in the context of the individual's representation. According to Goffman's theory<sup>11</sup> it is important how an individual judges a given situation and his/her role in it, how he/she creates his/her place within society and how his/her social status influences his/her everyday attitude and interactions. Ilona Topolyai had a number of options concerning models for specific social roles from this point of view which are worth taking a closer look at. As the owner of a soda-water factory she represented and communicated her artisan world view to the outside world while also trying to strengthen the identity of her family. She also determined and defined the possibilities and boundaries of group activities. From this point of view Ilona Topolyai's status can be seen as an authoritative, dynamic role<sup>12</sup> that gave her certain rights but also responsibilities.<sup>13</sup> Her daily tasks and social status were connected to the running of the soda-water factory: she was responsible for taking on and laying off employees, she handled all money issues, paid the employees health and retirement insurance, and monitored daily income. She was also the one who dealt with carbon tanks (for making soda-water). She ordered new bottles and parts, consulted with auditors and made the company's tax declaration. Although members of the family did not receive any pay, all major expenses were covered by Ilona. She paid for standard two-week recreational vacations every year that were usually booked near thermal baths in Hévíz, Keszthely or Budapest. She also covered the renovation expenses for the house, and the living costs of the horse. She also purchased a car for the family. She even lended money for employees to buy houses.

Ilona Topolyai's behavior and her unique, individual attitude all show signs of an artisan's life. Her exceptional *self-representation*<sup>14</sup> only strengthens Goffman's theory, that the innermost frame is the reference to unique phenomena. The social status of a person does not, however, determine the whole field of activity, which means that the leader of the soda-water factory also existed in a number of sociocultural environments simultaneously. Ilona Topolyai's main interpersonal (family, relatives) and other relationships that were based on a collective identity (owner, leader, co-op membership) complemented each other well and also feeded on each other creating a solid foundation for social integration.

### THE SODA-WATER FACTORY AS A COMMUNITY

As the employers and employees of the soda-water factory in Kiskunmajsa existed as a unit in the organisation of both work related affairs and everyday life, it is worth taking a look at them as a community. Social anthropology often views the concept of community as a sort of web or texture. This concept later became replaced by the term *network*. According to Eric Wolf we should look at communities as self-shaping and integrating systems that operate according to their own sets of rules.

This school of thought understands a community to be a web of group relations.<sup>15</sup> In this case, using a biographical narrative as a general starting point for uncovering these relations seems useful mainly because it provides an opportunity to study the behavioral sets ordinary people apply in their everyday lives. When analysing the Topolyai family as a community in connection with the soda-water factory in Kiskunmajsa, it is thus reasonable to start out by looking at Ilona Topolyai herself and her network of relations. On the other hand we shall not forget that the individual only exists within his/her system of social relations.<sup>16</sup> Robert Redfield pointed out that no community can be treated as a completely independent island without any outward connection which only strengthens the hypothesis<sup>17</sup> that in order to truly make our cultural heritage our own we must accept that we are its heirs first.

If we start out by saying that the role of the individual within the social network is determined by his/her community relations the analysis of the special interactions governing the relationship between the individual and society as a whole become important. Let's take a look at what this all means in connection with our present topic. The older members of the family always aimed at preserving and passing on the family identity and behavior, the values connected to making soda-water. Passing on these values, however, became somewhat compromised as newer generations tried to adapt to new circumstances. The passed on pattern and the social framework provided by the micro-community made it possible for family members to appear in new social roles and they also created a method for family members to identify with the status and the identity of being a soda-water manufacturing artisan.<sup>18</sup> The creation and nurturing of a collective identity was a part of everyday interactions for the workers of the soda-water factory. Under the leadership of Ilona Topolyai every family member and employee had various statuses in the factory with community statuses being the focus during work. On the one hand they accepted the rules that consolidated through everyday interactions, on the other hand they expected the leader of the soda-water factory to manage and operate the factory in line with artisan values. The feeling of belonging to the community required clearly defined tasks that everyone was able to complete and rules that everyone felt obligated to keep.<sup>19</sup>

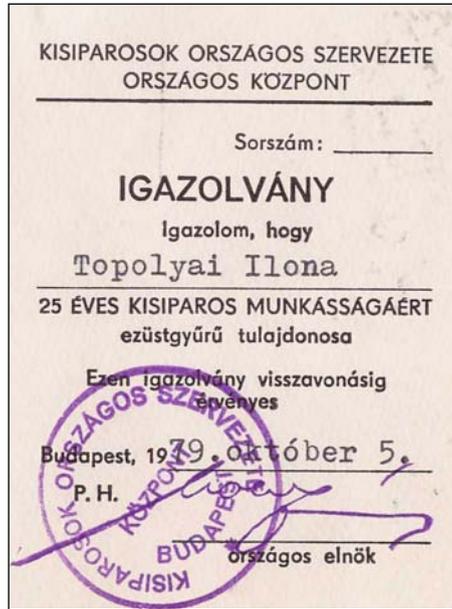
Employees employed by the family had significantly higher living standards than for example co-op soda-water employees as they usually owned a house, livestock and a small amount of land. They were paid rather modest salaries but they had their meals in the house and all of their bigger but reasonable expenses were paid by Ilona Topolyai. If a member of the Topolyai family died, every employee attended the funeral with their own families. This kind of compassion created a bond that went beyond the traditional employee–employer relationship and rather resembled some kind of matriarchal community.

**SYMBOLIC BEHAVIORAL PATTERNS IN THE ADMINISTRATION AND  
MANAGEMENT OF THE SODA-WATER FACTORY**

After the death of Ferenc Topolyai, Ilona Topolyai's father in 1951, Regina Lajos (Ilona's mother) became the owner and business manager of the soda-water factory. This transition marked the beginning of an overall change in the traditional gender hierarchy within the family. The family's male members either died, went missing, got captured or went into hiding during and after the Second World War, forcing the family's female members to take over their responsibility as breadwinners. Taking on this kind of responsibility prompted a change in their social status as well: they were suddenly required to fill in the male roles besides taking care of the family. This transition led to Ilona finally becoming the head of the family.



*Image 5. Ilona Topolyai  
(1916–1997)*



*Image 6. A 25 years  
an artisan certificate, 1979.*

Ilona Topolyai was a well-traveled and well-educated woman with excellent practical skills. She spent three years in Belgium in the 1930s as an educator for children where she learnt to speak fluently French. Her income greatly contributed to her finally paying back the debt accumulated during the Great Depression (1929–1933) and through the modernisation of the house and the soda-factory itself. She recognised early that running the soda-factory required further studies

so she completed the artisan training program (*Image 4.*). She dealt with many kinds of tasks connected to the small factory and she was also an important figure of the local artisans' guild. She participated actively in every meeting of the KIOSZ organisation in Kiskunmajsa. It is no coincidence that after her mother, Regina Lajos died in 1955 due to the many adversities she suffered throughout her life, Ilona inherited the soda-water factory and the farmland in Ötfa. The smaller part of the enormous house was left to Erzsébet Topolyai, Ilona's older sister who remained a femininem figure throughout her life: she helped with the housework, took care of the vegetable garden and the horse while also cooking for the family and employees alike. After the death of her mother, Ilona Topolyai's essential role in the soda-water factory became even more dominant: not only did she run and lead the factory putting her professional experience and knowledge to use but also she actively took up work in it, cleaning, repairing and filling bottles until she was 75 years old. Her situation was especially bad after the nationalisation of companies when the family was even banned from its own home and the factory was closed. She then rented a smaller building in a different part of town (*Alvég, Images 7–8.*) going in to work there every day of the year on her Puch bicycle. Due to the amount of physical work that would not have been easy to handle even for a man, her health degraded over the years but she continued to work even with a replaced hip until she could stand up. She was the first to arrive in the factory in the morning and the last to leave at the end of the day.



*Image 7. A shop in Alvég, 1960s*

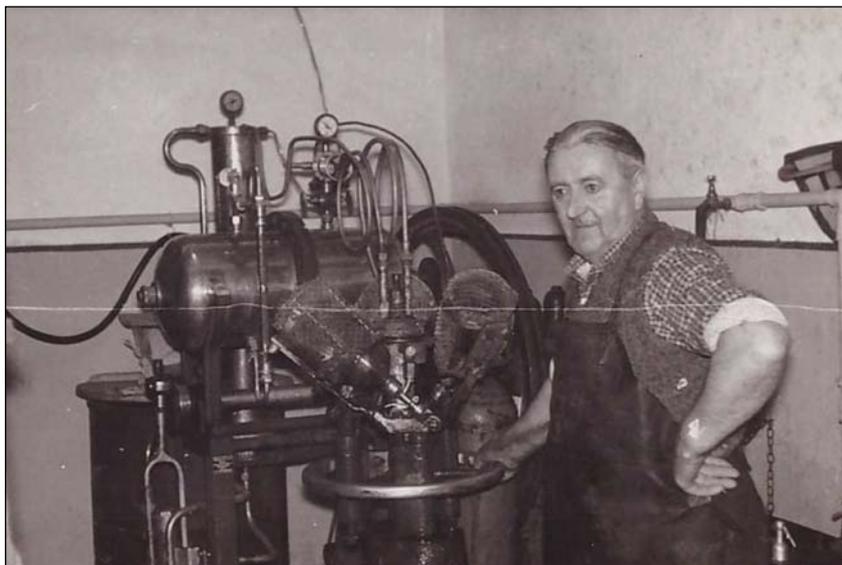


Image 8. Soda-water production in Alvég – Lajos Ferenc<sup>20</sup>

Ilona Topolyai was respected not only by her family but by the local society as a whole due to her undeniable professional know-how and the fact that she could find the right tone to speak with everyone. Her name became intertwined with the production of soda-water in Kiskunmajsa and people still keep her in good memory. People in the soda-water business always represented a unique color within the local community – it was their tireless work that made sure Kiskunmajsa never ran out of soda-water and “fröccs” (wine diluted with soda-water).

The social relationships and interactions of the factory’s owners and employees faithfully reflect the socio-cultural environment within which distribution and resale took place, while Goffman’s frame analysis makes it possible to analyse the very organisation of the factory, its inner structure and interactional behavior units within a more complex context. This brief presentation of the operation of the Topolyai soda-water factory has proven that the division of labor between men and women was not always subjected to the kind of gender discrimination usually associated with and widely practiced in the 20th century. Ilona Topolyai was a very self-conscious woman who practiced her craft professionally, nursed a good relationship with her employees, represented the lifestyle and values of a factory owner with grace and could adapt to the ever changing economic–political environment around her business. Her main aim as a small soda-water factory owner was to increase her family’s wealth and to maintain and pass on its good reputation.

## CONCLUSION

The goal of this research was to showcase the Topolyai soda factory emphasising its important heritage, and also to examine the material and immaterial values and the general activities of this family-owned plant from a multidisciplinary point of view. The central concept of this essay was that persons and groups interacting in a social system create, over time, concepts or mental representations of each other's actions, and that these concepts eventually become habituated into reciprocal roles played by the actors in relation to each other. My view is interpretive and experiential, seeing the community as a cultural field with a complexity of symbols the meanings of which vary among its members. I delineate a concept applicable to local communities through which people see themselves as belonging to society.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "This research was realized in the frames of TÁMOP 4.2.4. A/2-11-1-2012-0001 »National Excellence Program – Elaborating and operating an inland student and researcher personal support system« The project was subsidized by the European Union and co-financed by the European Social Fund."
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. Hankiss, Elemér: *Az ezerarcú én. Emberlét a fogyasztói civilizációban*. Budapest, 2005. p. 230.
- <sup>3</sup> Abstrakt: "The fate of the Topolyai family (Image 2) provides an opportunity to research different behavioral patterns, social formations and mental representations at the same time, spanning multiple generations within a historical-social context the importance of which has already been pointed out by André Burguière." – Cf. Burguière, André: *A történeti antropológia*. (Historical Anthropology.) In: Sebők, Marcell (ed.): *Történeti antropológia*. (Historical Anthropology.) Módszertani írások és esettanulmányok. Budapest, 2000. p. 67. (Henceforth: Sebők, 2000.)
- <sup>4</sup> Abstrakt: "The preservation of these experiences make it possible for them to be passed on and be protected from fading away, thus demonstrating their true value." – Cf. Keszeg, Vilmos: *Alfabetizáció, írásszokások, populáris írásbeliség*. (Literacy, Writing Habits, Popular Literacy.) Egyetemi jegyzet. Kolozsvár, 2008. p. 304.
- <sup>5</sup> Abstrakt: "During the analysis I tried to utilise both micro and macro level approaches uniting the local reality with the global horizon." – Cf. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1525/aa.1967.69.6.02a00020/pdf>. (Last downloaded: 2015. 11. 25.)
- <sup>6</sup> Cf. Kiss, Imre: *Szódavíz, egy magyar kultuszital. Szikvíz ipartörténeti album*. (Sodawater, a cult drink in Hungary. A book of soda-industry history.) Budapest, 2008. pp. 42–58.
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. Berger, Peter Ludwig – Luckmann, Thomas: *A valóság társadalmi felépítése: tudásszociológiai értekezés*. (The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge.) Budapest, 1998. p. 84.
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. Cohen, Eric: *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. London, 1985. pp. 39–69.
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. Goffman, Erving: *Keretelemzés*. (Frame analysis.) In: Goffman, Erving: *A hétköznapi élet szociálpszichológiája*. (The Socialpsychology in Everyday Life.) László, János (ed.). Budapest, 1981. (Henceforth: Goffman, 1981.) pp. 547–549.
- <sup>10</sup> Cf. Scribner, Robert W.: *A kora újkori Európa történeti antropológiája*. (Historical Anthropology of the Early Modern Europe.) In: Sebők, 2000. p. 172.
- <sup>11</sup> From 1958 Goffman worked on theories concerning the normative regulations of everyday interactions and the formation of situational norms, in other words, the issues of frames of interpretation. He tried to establish the cross-referentiality of all communicative behavior, its scene and situation within the field of sociolinguistics for which he provided an integrational example in a study titled Frame analysis. (Cf. Goffman, 1981. pp. 769–779.)

His main focus is the proposition that human life is and always has been governed and determined by social and cultural rules and conventions. According to Goffman's theory the central concept of social functioning is the framework which basically is a frame of interpretation applied in social situations. (Cf. Goffman, 1981. pp. 620–627.) It can be viewed as a historically determined field of reality where sociocultural requirements serve as reference points. For people making soda-water, the all-time framework for interaction and interactional behavior units is society itself. There are some real life situations beyond the main framework that form the frames of interpretation. Goffman called this transformation *keying* and defined it as a transfer that makes certain real life scenes comprehensible that at first sight might be confusing embedded into the social structure of everyday life. (Cf. Goffman, 1981. pp. 627–648.)

<sup>12</sup> The actual behavior of a person within the boundaries determined by status.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Eriksen, Thomas Hylland: *Kis helyek – nagy témák. Bevezetés a szociálanropológiába.* (Small places, large issues. An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology.) Budapest, 2006. (Henceforth: Eriksen, 2006.) pp. 70–71.

<sup>14</sup> Frederik Barth applied the *self-representation* pattern during the social anthropological study of a Norwegian fishing boat's crew to illustrate the connections between human relationships and forms of situational behavior. According to this model different types of social interactions and activities require the participants to always choose the appropriate behavior in each situation. (Cf. Eriksen, 2006. pp. 73–76.; Cf. Barth, Thomas Fredrik Weybye: *Models of Social Organisation.* Occasional Papers, No. 23. London, 1966.)

<sup>15</sup> Cf. [http://www.uio.no/studier/emner/sv/sai/SOSANT1600/v12/Wolf\\_Aspects\\_of\\_group\\_666294.pdf](http://www.uio.no/studier/emner/sv/sai/SOSANT1600/v12/Wolf_Aspects_of_group_666294.pdf). (Last downloaded: 2015. 11. 25.)

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Tóth G., Péter: A „közösség”. *Egy fogalom megalkotása, kiteljesedése, széthullása és felszámolása.* In: Pócs, Éva (ed.): *Közösség és identitás.* Budapest, 2002. (Henceforth: Tóth, 2002.) pp. 16–20.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Tóth, 2002. p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Parsons, Talcott: *The Social System.* London, 1991. p. 98.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Eriksen, 2006. pp. 73–76.

<sup>20</sup> The younger brother of Regina Lajos.