

CONTESTING PASTS?

POLITICAL RITUALS AND MONUMENTS OF THE 1956 REVOLUTION IN A HUNGARIAN TOWN

László Mód

University of Szeged, Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology

H-6722 Szeged, Egyetem str. 2., Hungary

E-mail: modlaci@gmail.com

Abstract: The documentation and interpretation of the political rites linked to the anniversary of the 1956 revolution and freedom struggle provides an excellent opportunity to interpret several phenomena (political rituals, construction of memory, use of the past). The example the author had analysed is a good illustration of the process whereby constructed knowledge of the past acquires a visible form. The different memorial places are mainly associated with particular locations but they owe their real life to their use that is gained above all from the rites. He tried to point out how different political parties at local level appropriate memory, and how these constructed memories compete with each other.

Keywords: monuments, memory, political rituals

Since the collapse of communism the celebration of October 23, its filling with symbolical contents has been taking place practically before our eyes in the political system that bases its legitimacy precisely on the revolution and strengthens it with the revolution.¹ Since 1997 the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Szeged has been carrying out research with varying intensity on the rites, symbols and memory associated with the state feasts. A volume of studies edited by Gábor Barna, containing articles by students, appeared on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the 1956 revolution.² The articles analyse the October 23 celebrations and recollections related to the events of that time.

The topic arose again as a research possibility in 2011 when in the frame of the International Student Seminar organised every two years by our department we examined the local festival of a small town in the south of Hungary and the strategies for the use of urban space. Tourists visiting Szentes, a town with a population of 30,000 may notice the group of monuments in the centre of the city, next to the Calvinist Great Church, that is closely related to local memory of the 1956 revolution. Outsiders and even local people often ask themselves: Why have

¹ In Hungary new feasts took shape with the change of the political system in 1989–1990. Those with socialist and communist ideological connections disappeared and there has been a strengthening of national feasts. Special emphasis was placed on the celebration of 15th March, 20th August and 23rd October, that had been opportunities for alternative celebration. BARNÁ 2011. 112.

² BARNÁ (ed.) 2006.

three monuments to the same historical event been erected in close proximity to each other, and why are memorial rites still held at all three of them? In my paper I will try to show how different political parties at local level appropriate memory, and how these constructed memories compete with each other. The symbolical struggle waged for the possession of memory reveals social conflicts that otherwise remain hidden or barely perceptible to the outside observer on ordinary weekdays.³

My research was based not only on interviews with the organisers and participants in the commemorations and on personal observations, but also on analysis of press reports on the topic that enabled me to reconstruct the way the rites of remembrance were shaped from the late 1980s up to the present as well as the process of erection of the monuments.⁴ I continued the fieldwork after the conference making possible a more thorough interpretation of the phenomenon in a broader context.

The Monuments

An important means and method of connecting memory to space is the creation of monuments that make past events as it were tangible. In Szentes, like other places in Hungary, among the Protestant grave markers,⁵ the so-called *kopjafa*, *fejfa*, *gombosfa* or carved post appears within the new frame of interpretation. It appears with increasing frequency outside cemeteries too, and has acquired a new function entirely different from the original. Monuments of this kind made of carved wooden posts were first erected in Hungary in the 1970s, when they were placed above the mass graves on the site of the battle of Mohács.⁶ In 1988 an opposition group marked plot 301, the unmarked grave of victims of 1956 in this way. After the change of system in Hungary it became very popular to erect monuments of this kind and the range of occasions grew wider.⁷

3 JAKAB 2012. 49–52.

4 Among the press publications special mention must be made of the county (*Délvilág*) and the local paper (*Szentesi Élet*), as well as a number of Szentes internet news portals that also posted photos of the celebrations. I was also able to obtain from the local authority a copy of the scenario for the official commemorations that provided a basis for an analysis of the space and time structure of the commemorations. Among my informants, in addition to local representatives of the various political parties, the family of the person who undertook an active role in erection of the first monument greatly helped my work.

5 The gravemarkers in the cemeteries of Hungarian villages are quite varied from the religious point of view. The cross is widely used among the Catholics, while in Protestant communities carved wooden gravemarkers (*fejfa*, *kopjafa*) were commonly used. A number of researchers have dealt with the origin of these latter, but the question of their origin and when they spread has still not been settled satisfactorily. L. JUHÁSZ 2005. 11.

6 The Hungarian army was defeated by the forces of The Ottoman Empire in 1526. The battle is interpreted as a tragical turning point in the Hungarian history.

7 Géza Boros classified the gravemarkers linked to the 1956 revolution into three groups. The first comprises the so-called death signs, for example the objects marking Plot 301. The second type consists of cemetery gravemarkers, the meaning of which is basically determined by the environment where they are placed. The largest group comprises the gravemarkers that function as monuments. Boros 1997. 88–91.

In this respect one of the elements of peasant or folk culture is being filled with new content and, as Gábor Barna⁸ has pointed out, it is not possible to separate the identifications of headboard=grave marker, *kopjafa*=ancient oriental weapon=symbol of the Hungarians.⁹

In the case of Szentes, the use of Protestant grave markers as a 1956 monument has a special additional meaning as for centuries the town's Calvinist inhabitants used this means to mark the place of the dead in the cemeteries. In the early 1990s there were still around 1000 such grave markers in the town's Calvinist cemeteries, bearing a variety of style features. Up to the 1870s slim posts with a square cross-section and geometrical ornamentation were popular. The *gombosfa* (globe post) regarded as typical of Szentes evolved after a change of form. It was customary to paint the grave markers in different colours that conveyed symbolical meanings. In the early 19th century red was used for those who died a violent death and light blue was used for young people. Besides the inscription, the globe posts also had the image of a willow symbolising death, and the abbreviation ABFRA (In the hope of blessed resurrection). The grave markers were made of false acacia or oak by local coopers.¹⁰

Now, it is worth placing the Szentes monuments in this frame in which they reveal different memories linked to the same historical event. The first was erected in the late 1980s at the initiative of local members of two political parties, the *Független Kisgazdapárt* (Smallholders' Party)¹¹ and the *Magyar Demokrata Fórum* (Hungarian Democratic Forum).¹² József Kádár, a local doctor of medicine donated the material and the carving was done by Ferenc Szabics senior, a wood-carver from Szentes, drawing on local traditions and style.¹³ Since the leader of the town at the time, the president of the council, did not allow the monument to be erected in the main square, through the mediation of Imre Szabó, Calvinist cantor, it was unveiled on October 22, 1989 beside the Calvinist Great Church, a site owned by the church.¹⁴

8 BARNÁ 2006. 249–250.

9 As Ilona L. Juhász sees it, a richly ornamented type of cemetery gravemarkers has become a national symbol that can now be found outside Europe, in Hungarian communities on other continents. There are also examples of Hungarian settlements making a gift of them as a kind of national characteristic to non-Hungarian twin settlements. L. JUHÁSZ 2005. 179.

10 SZAKÁLL 1995. 99–137.

11 After the collapse of communism the party was the member of the Hungarian parliament from 1990 until 2002.

12 The party was formed in 1987. It was one of the most important political factor in the first half of the 1990's in Hungary.

13 According to Ilona L. Juhász the number of motifs and symbols appearing on the carved wooden posts is increasing: in addition to the traditional symbols often drawn from folk culture entirely new ones are also appearing. L. JUHÁSZ 2005. 79.

14 In her research among Hungarians in Slovakia Ilona L. Juhász showed that an initiation ceremony is closely linked to the erection of carved wooden posts (*kopjafa*), which is inconceivable without the participation of public figures or the laying of wreaths. L. JUHÁSZ 2005. 113–120.

The next monument, the second, was erected in 2001 at the initiative of a local group of the *Magyar Út Körök Mozgalom* (Hungarian Way Circles Movement).¹⁵ It was financed with donations made by 25 persons and in appearance resembled a cemetery gravestone. Two symbols can be seen on it: a cross and one of the most important symbols of the revolution, a flag with a hole in the centre. The members of the organisation clearly stated that their aim was to erect a lasting memorial to the events.¹⁶

In late October 2006, on the 50th anniversary of the 1956 revolution a new element was added to the group of monuments: the town's mayor ordered a new grave marker that was placed next to the one that had been unveiled in 1989. It must be added that a local member of the Smallholders' Party together with several others had removed the first monument because the part underground had begun to rot. A press report at the time found it important to stress that this was aimed not only at restoration of carved post.¹⁷ The intention was to exclude a group of commemorators, namely persons representing the Hungarian Socialist Party¹⁸ (with the town's mayor at their head), a perfect example of the conflicts surrounding the practice of remembrance taking shape around the monuments. At the same time, according to the mayor the new monument would serve reconciliation because a dispute would be unworthy of the event. Moreover, he added, the message of the events in Szentes of the revolution and freedom struggle, still valid today, was that the town should preserve its peace as it did in October 1956, thanks to Sándor Gujdár, commander of the local guard. The county press also reported on the events, stressing the absurdity of the case: "The affair of the Szentes kopjafa is such a splendid example of our bungling, that we could not deny our Hungarian nature. This is not the first case this year of staggering absurdity in the sleepy little town on the Great Plain. Yesterday there was another ridiculous example in Szentes where they are holding a veritable competition to erect grave markers. The craftsman who repaired the Smallholders' memorial post and the woodcarver in Budapest who made the kopjafa commissioned by the mayor Imre Szirbik were racing against time. Both were finished in time, both poles were erected. The distance between them is less than half a metre. But the distance between the commemorators who had the carved poles erected is immeasurable."¹⁹

The environment of the monuments acquired its present form with the renovation of the Calvinist church and Kiss Bálint street. The designer, coordinating

15 István Csurka (Hungarian writer, politician) was excluded from the Hungarian Democratic Forum and after that he formed the movement in 1993.

16 The monument was unveiled on 22nd October 2001; representatives of the churches (Catholic, Calvinist) were also present and played an active role in the celebration, blessing the Hungarian people.

17 BALÁZS Irén: Kettő kopjafa Szentesen. [Two Carved Post in Szentes]. *Délvilág*, 21 October 2006. 5.

18 The party was formed on 7th October 1989. Its legal predecessor was the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. Since the first free elections in 1990 it has been represented in the Hungarian parliament. It was the governing party of Hungary between 1994 and 1998, and then from 2002 to 2010. Since the 2010 elections it has been in opposition.

19 Sz.C.Sz: Kopj le, fa... [Get off, carved post!] *Délvilág*, 21 October 2006. 5.

with the Calvinist minister, intentionally chose the shape of the Greek letter “omega” for the low brick wall around the monuments, considering that it offered a more interesting possibility than if the objects had simply been placed in a V-shape. In the designer’s interpretation the “omega”, expressing the end of something, refers to the overthrow of the communist system and the crushing of the revolution, and it can also be linked to death and to the heroes of the events. Despite the close connection of the space to the Calvinist church, the symbol of the cross also appears. According to him this refers to bearing the cross and the way of the cross in the general sense, and for this reason it goes beyond the Catholic usage. At the same time the use of the “omega” shape for the wall also make it possible to provide a suitable place for the three monuments without placing the principal on any one of them that would have led to a series of conflicts. The first one is placed at the left arm of the cross, the last at the right, and the monument erected in 2001 is placed in the middle. In an interview the designer said that he had tried to create a “cemetery character” but had made only minimal use of plants in order to prevent maintenance problems. Instead, the surface has been covered with white gravel. A single ornamental tree represents the “cemetery environment”: its pendulous branches recall the well known symbol of the weeping willow.

According to the Calvinist minister who has lived since 1999 in the parsonage next to the monuments, the objects can be regarded as a clear reflection of present-day Hungarian reality. It is his opinion that as long as the members of a nation are not capable of remembering together, the nation will remain weak and fragmented. This point was also made by one of the town’s history teachers when he wrote the following in the local press in the second half of the 1990s: “Public opinion has now clearly split into two. All the parties know who they do not want to celebrate with! It is almost impossible to explain their choice of who they will lay a wreath with. As a result the national day has essentially become a symbol of the national division. And I have not even mentioned those who, deep in their hearts do not regard October 23 as date deserving respect and tribute but as a shameful blot on our history or, in a less extreme case, as an error.”²⁰

Besides the three monuments placed close to each other, there are also other places in Szentes connected to the memory of 1956. On 23 October 2006 a memorial tablet was unveiled on the facade of the town hall overlooking Kossuth Square, placed there by the local government. The inscription (“Placed by the community of Szentes in memory of their fathers. Who, in the fateful days of 1956, rather than turning feelings and weapons against each other, were wise and calm in the interest of the people living here and the future of the town.”)

20 POSZLER, György: Úgy látszik...[It looks like...]. *Szentesi Élet*, 25 October 1997. 1.

clearly refers to the local events,²¹ that thanks to the activity of Sándor Gujdár, commander of the local guard, did not lead to armed conflict. This is why his portrait too appears on the commemorative tablet that was unveiled by his son at the ceremony. In 1991 a tablet was placed on the facade of Mihály Horváth Secondary School commemorating Árpád Brusznay who was a student of the school from 1934 to 1942. In 1958 he was executed by the communists for his role in town Veszprém. The school's students and teachers regularly hold commemorative rites at the memorial tablet and place a wreath on it.

Rites of Remembrance

Following the collapse of the communist regime, within a few years the local authorities constructed the official rites of remembrance linked to the 1956 revolution.²² There have naturally been differences over the past decades in the structure of the ritual, but they were not major changes. In some years the flag was raised and wreaths laid in the morning, in other years this was generally done in the afternoon. Within the frames of the celebrations the most important actions are held one after the other, but in 1994 the flag was raised and wreaths laid in the morning and the public meeting was held in the afternoon.

The official ceremony nowadays begins in the main square with the effective participation of the army when the flags of Hungary, Szentes and the European Union are raised on the three flagpoles in the presence of the town's leaders. The participants in the commemoration then proceed to the area beside the Calvinist church where the monuments related to the 1956 revolution and freedom struggle are found. After that the town's mayor presents "*Pro Urbe memorial medals*" in the former Csongrád County Hall.

21 László Barta who for decades worked as an archivist in Szentes, has compiled material on the local events. The revolutionary events began in Szentes on 25th October. The red stars in the factories were removed and smashed, the red flags were removed, soldiers tore off the badges from their caps. On the following day, the 26th the crowd gathering in Kossuth Square began to tear down the monuments to the Soviet war dead. The order to fire given by the commander of the local guard was disobeyed by his soldiers. A decisive point in the history of the revolution in Szentes came when Major Sándor Gujdár, commander of the engineer battalion went over to the revolutionaries. On 27th October he had the Soviet monument toppled, and persuaded László Török the district party secretary to give out the arms kept in the party building. On Sunday, 28th October local people gathered in the assembly room of the town hall elected a provisional revolutionary committee. The committee then organised a national guard to preserve internal order and security. The main goal of the Revolutionary Committee was to maintain security for persons and property, provide food for Budapest and prepare for the democratic transformation. On Sunday, 4th November, when news of the treacherous Soviet attack reached them, the revolutionary committee and the military council held a joint meeting where they decided not to attack the approaching superior Soviet forces. BARTA 2000.

22 According to Kertzer, ritual practices are the most important means for propagating political myths. Political rites play a fundamental role in all societies, because they express and modify the balance of political forces through the symbolical forms of communication. Through their participation in the rites people identify themselves with particular political forces. Often ritual symbols can also express hierarchical relationships in the society. KERTZER 1988. 178.

In Szentes, as in many other places in Hungary wreaths and candles play an important part, reminding people of the approaching All Souls day. The order for the laying of wreaths reflects the local power hierarchy: leaders of the local government and representatives of the political parties, civil organisations and private persons also take part in the rite, paying tribute at the monuments. As I mentioned before the army also participates, providing a guard of honour, and soldiers carry and place the local government's wreath.

In the first half of the 1990s participants in the original events also played a part in the celebrations, their recollections as it were legitimised the commemorations and increased their effectiveness. On several occasions the town's leaders presented them with awards. On 23rd October 1992 the members of the local revolutionary committee, the commanders of the town's national guard and those who had been imprisoned all received commemorative certificates.

Conflicts around the commemoration of the Revolution of 1956 preliminarily derive from the fact that the Hungarian Socialist Party is regarded as the heir of the Communist regime by different right-wing political groups and organizations. It is a common phenomenon in Hungary that the political parties organize their own commemorations. In Szentes the local division of the right-wing *Fidesz* (Federation of Young Democrats)²³ normally remembers onetime events in the preceding evening of the actual celebration. Like the official commemoration, the event of the Federation of Young Democrats is built up of elements that recur from year to year. A prominent person from the party rather than one of the local representatives is always asked to make the official speech. Laying wreaths and lighting candles are also an integral part of the rite. On 22nd October 2012, before the celebration organised by the Federation of Young Democrats, people who wished were driven around the town in an old Csepel truck as a way of evoking the period of the revolution and freedom struggle.

Newer political associations turned up among participants of remembrances in the past few years, namely *Jobbik* (The Movement for a Better Hungary)²⁴ and *Hatvannégy Vármegye Ifjúsági Mozgalom* (Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement),²⁵ which are regarded as being radical right. The former one remembers within the framework of the city's official celebration.²⁶ The local representatives of the Movement for a Better Hungary express their separate position within the frames of the official commemoration by making themselves visible with banners and

23 It can be regarded as a people's party positioned as conservative. It is currently the leading party in power in Hungary. It was established on 30th March 1988 as the Alliance of Young Democrats by 37 young intellectuals in Budapest.

24 The *Jobbik* (Movement for a Better Hungary) is a radical Right-wing party, its predecessor established in 1999 was the Right-wing Youth Community grouping mainly university students. It was transformed into a party in 2003.

25 It was founded in 2001 drew its name from the public administration division of Hungary (not including Croatia) before the Trianon peace treaty, comprising 63 counties and the Hungarian Maritime Region (Fiume).

26 Earlier the Szentes members of the Movement for a Better Hungary held their commemorations separately, but in recent years they regularly appear at the party's national event and therefore find it difficult to organise their own celebration on the afternoon of 23rd October.

placards and by following a distinctive use of ritual space. During the wreath laying at the monuments they keep themselves apart from the other participants also spatially by waiting until all the other groups and individuals have paid their respects. Only then do they lay their own wreath, in this way clearly dissociating themselves from certain other groups. They only lay a wreath at the monument in the centre of the group, because they regard the organisation that erected it in 2001 as their spiritual predecessor. In 2013 after laying the wreath they also released three white doves from a box, an action they see as symbolising the aspiration for freedom. They distinguish themselves from not only left-wing but also right-wing parties that undertook active role during the period of the regime change. They define themselves as the sole representative of the revolution's "spiritual heritage".

The local representatives of the Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement intentionally organised separate commemoration rites, giving preference to the carved pole that was the first of the monuments to be erected. They dissociate themselves from the official ceremony because the mayor, the town's leader is a member of the Hungarian Socialist Party, successor organisation to the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. They cannot accept that the same people who laid wreaths at the Soviet monument in the town's main square before the collapse of the communist system, have done the same after 1989 at the 1956 monuments.

As the years and decades pass it may seem to the outsider that which monument the different commemorating groups prefer when laying a wreath no longer has any significance. However practice shows that the wreaths placed at the monuments can convey symbolical messages and where these are placed is regarded as important by some of the commemorators. In 2013 the participants in the commemoration held on the evening of 22nd October placed their wreaths and lit their candles at the carved post erected in 1989. In the frame of the official commemoration the town's mayor and deputy mayor stood with heads bowed not before the monument erected by the local authority but at the one in the centre of the space, while the two soldiers placed the wreath there. In this case it can be seen that the town's leaders do not give priority to their own carved post. But during the official commemoration other groups consciously choose the place where they will lay their wreaths.

In recent years besides 23rd October a new occasion²⁷ has arisen for commemorative rights related to the monuments, namely 25th February, the Memorial Day for the Victims of Communism²⁸, introduced in a decision by the Hungarian Parliament in 2000. The Movement for a Better Hungary and the Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement organise commemorative rites of similar structure, which includes a ceremony when they lay wreaths with black and tricolour

27 Ilona L. Juhász draws attention to the fact that it is a relatively common phenomenon to hold events of other types at the carved wooden posts. There may be cases where the commemoration is held at a post erected for another occasion if there is no monument associated with the 1848-49 revolution and war of independence. L. JUHÁSZ 2005. 120.

28 The date refers to 25th February 1947, when Béla Kovács, general secretary of the Independent Smallholders' Party was unlawfully arrested and taken to the Soviet Union.

ribbon, light candles, or sing the national anthem of Hungary. The ceremonial speeches talk regularly about the failure of accountability and the heritage of the Hungarian Socialist Party, and in the meantime they highlight dividedness on the right. The rituals are often linked with protest actions that quite clearly present current political views.

Summary

The documentation and interpretation of the political rites linked to the anniversary of the 1956 revolution and freedom struggle provides an excellent opportunity to observe through the example of a town in Hungary the division in the commemoration of a historical event and the attempts to monopolise and make use of the past. Parallel with and following the collapse of the communist system, monuments clearly intended to bind memory to a particular place and make the past visible appeared in the town. The structure of the local commemoration of the 1956 revolution and freedom struggle indicates the intention of different groups of commemorators to take possession of the past by erecting their own monuments directly next to each other's. In Szentes, as in other places in Hungary, the Protestant gravemarker, the *kopjafa* or *fejfa* was linked to the memory of the historical event and through a change of function or expansion of meaning appeared as a monument. Even within the frame of the commemoration rites the political groups and parties expressed their separate positions and through this their own aims and views. This can be done through a separation in time, manifested in the holding of their own commemoration. The ritual use of the monuments can also indicate the effort to monopolise memory. The commemorations are linked as much to the past as to the present, because they reflect the current state of politics. The rites enable certain commemorating groups to express and strengthen their identity. The construction and expression of their own identity is often achieved in contrast with other political groups.

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Fig. 1. The monuments after the official celebration
(23 October, 2013. Photo: L. Mód)



Fig. 2. The symbols of the first monument
erected in 1989
(2012. Photo: L. Mód)



Fig. 3. The raising of the flags on the main
square of the city
(23 October, 2013. Photo: L. Mód)



Fig. 4. Laying wreaths by soldiers
(23 October, 2013. Photo: L. Mód)



Fig. 5. The members of the Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement on
the Memorial Day for the Victims of Communism
(25 February 2013, photo taken by one of the member of the organization)