

CONSIDERATIONS FOR RESEARCH ON THE SZEGED FLOATING BATHING HOUSES

Many tourists visiting Szeged are attracted by the sight of the Szabadság (Liberty) floating bathing house (Hungarian: *úszóház* = floating house), an enormous structure rocking on the River Tisza. If we ask a local resident, we are not likely to get an answer to the questions of what purpose the structure serves, whether it is a sports facility belonging to a sports club, or perhaps a hospitality facility, who visits it, who operates it and how long it has been on the river.

My intention here is principally to outline some considerations that will enable us to study the Szeged floating bathing houses and place them in the frames of social history, urban history and anthropology. The topic is an especially rewarding one because both as an institution and through their visitors the floating bathing houses on the Tisza represent a socially unique survival phenomenon. The origin of the groups who spend their leisure time at the floating pools can be sought in the bourgeois life of Szeged in the interwar years or even earlier, in the second half of the 19th century. Despite this no analysis has been made in any of the social sciences of the institution of floating bathing house and not even the slightest reference is made to them in monographs dealing with the history of Szeged. The only study has been the nostalgic work by Gitta Bátyai: the data she collected served as the starting point for the present paper. Few people are familiar with the bathing life associated with the floating bathing houses that has now disappeared or can be found only in traces, but it has proved to be worth taking a better look at the subject.

THE FLOATING BATHING HOUSES IN SZEGED UP TO THE FIRST WORLD WAR

For the residents of Szeged the Tisza riverside had quite complex functions. In the early 19th century fishing, passenger and goods transport were closely linked to the river that must have appeared as a kind of workplace in the thinking of local people.¹ The question of

¹ Nagy 1991. 115.

regulation of the river bank provided a continuous topic for Szeged publicists.

In Europe, together with the urbanisation trends in the second half of the 19th century a change also occurred in the way of life of the urban population. Through the welfare functions of the state that were then taking shape with the regulation of working hours, leisure time appeared in modern social frames in the life of urban workers. Bathing and the sports movements then emerging became a favourite way of spending time for the bourgeoisie, following the pattern of what had become a distinctive cultural phenomenon among the aristocratic stratum in Hungary. It was probably these new social demands that provided the justification for the floating bathing houses.

In the eyes of the Szeged middle class the Tisza must have been mainly a place for work, as bathing in the river did not correspond to the norms being shaped by the emerging bourgeois way of life. The free bathing areas beside the river designated by the city council in the mid-19th century at the upper town lime kilns and at Boszorkánysziget (Witch Island) must have been a socially acceptable place for bathing only for workers and peasants.² For the bourgeoisie wishing to distinguish themselves visibly also in their way of life, the men, women and children regarded as naked using these stretches of the river together must have represented a moral taboo. They stayed away from the river, not only out of a sense of propriety, they were probably also deterred by the large number of deaths by drowning that remained a constant problem up to the end of the 19th century.

The floating bathing houses that we know about from reports in the local press from the end of the 1850s opened a door to the Tisza for citizens of Szeged in two ways.³ Most importantly they removed from its original environment and “civilised” the space suitable for bathing that had earlier belonged to a foreign, dangerous Tisza and was linked to lower status groups. In the microcosm of the boat, visitors coming into contact with nature could feel safe both physically and emotionally as they did not have to distance themselves from their socially determined roles. The structure of the bathing house was also designed to meet the demand for separate bathing. Visitors were able to venture into the water of the Tisza in entirely separate, closed bathing cabins and in this way they could enjoy the pleasures of bathing in groups, but

² Bányai 2003. 18.

³ Bányai 2003. 6.

separated. The Naschitz, for example, had eight such cabins of different sizes as well as a large pool.

The forms of group social contact were minutely regulated on the floating bathing houses visited by the bourgeoisie so that the accustomed values of everyday life were not violated in this context either. Twofold demands had to be taken into account in designing the boats. On the one hand they had to meet the demand for physical exercise and on the other also serve the demand for the extension of private life. According to the publicist the Neumann bathing house achieved this in the following way: *“It will have 64 changing rooms and 8 small private baths. The mirror bath where beginners will be taught to swim will be very big, allowing sufficient space for physical exercise. The family pool will be the most comfortable: the pool will be bigger than an average-sized room and it will be available on an hourly basis for families with members who do not wish to visit the public baths.”*⁴

The bathing house not only offered the family an opportunity for relaxation, it is easy to see that it also provided the social frames of everyday life, ensuring the separation of men and women.⁵ Bathing was available for women for relatively few hours, indicating that the urban bathing houses were operated mainly for men. Children were also given access, within the frame of swimming instruction that had become part of education. In contrast to the adult age group, it was only the socially accepted norms of physical education that justified their independent use of the bathing houses.⁶

It must also be kept in mind that according to the social notions of the time, bathing was mainly a collective forum, a form of outward show rather than enjoyment bringing refreshment. The distance required as desirable in bourgeois life had to be respected.⁷

Among the persons ensuring the operation of the bathing house, the swimming master who ensured the guests' safety, and the swimming pool captain who made sure that the rules were respected, played an important part. The press of the period stresses the “military order” that prevailed in the bathing houses, regarding it as a positive feature; again this was something that corresponded to the demands of the bourgeoisie. All this was in sharp contrast with the practice that has

⁴ Bányai 2003. 4.

⁵ From the 1860s the separation of the genders when bathing was the general practice in all baths regarded as elegant. Bányai 2003. 8., 15., 17.

⁶ Hadas 2002. 24.

⁷ Gyáni 2002.

arisen among the lower social strata, considered to be without any system.

Some elements of bathing house life must have been borrowed from the bathing culture developed and maintained by the wealthy stratum, although differences can also be observed. In its late 19th century form bathing was much more associated with visits to popular spas in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. For those who lived the life of wealthy aristocrats, visits to Karlstadt, Bártfa and other renowned spas often served as exotic attractions. For centuries bathing had been part of the way of life of the nobility and it was only from the end of the 18th century that it became part of the culture of the middle class. The rites developed in the spas became concomitants of cultural adaptation and were indispensable in ensuring that different social strata and age groups could holiday together without friction.⁸ Popular topics of conversation for visitors, apart from discussing their own health problems, included international novelties and gossip about various members of the closed societies.⁹ For the rural middle class in particular, the floating bathing houses with their own spa did not have such an attraction. They were part of the bourgeois milieu where the more prosperous middle class could rest after work in a pleasant environment.

Two further factors that led to the reshaping of bathing house life in the 20th century also need to be mentioned. I have already mentioned that drowning often occurred along the stretch of the river bank designated for the poorer strata. After a number of plans that were not carried through, in 1894 the municipal council built a public baths on the Upper Town stretch; these operated until 1923 with a number of renovations. However, this single facility was not able to meet all the demand and there was no decline in the number of deaths by drowning. Although safe bathing for the broad popular strata was not achieved, the attempt does indicate that welfare efforts were being made. Another measure that did not have a major impact was the gesture made by the owners of the larger floating bathing houses (Mór Neumann and István Regdon) providing free swimming instruction for orphans and setting aside cheap baths for low-income visitors. Besides improving their public image, this charity on the part of the entrepreneurs enabled

⁸ Kósa 1999. 156.

⁹ Kósa 1999. 168.

poorer people to enjoy physical culture and develop a connection with the water.

The other factor that changed the image of bathing house culture was the appearance of sports associations. A Rowing Society had been operating continuously in Szeged since 1870 and had a centrally located boathouse beside the Inner Town bridge, it was not until the early 20th century that facilities of this kind began to increase in number.¹⁰ They brought a further change and widening in the connection of the city dwellers to the river. If the bathing houses could be regarded as bridgeheads of urban life in the 19th century, it was with the appearance of the boats of the sports associations at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century that people took full possession of the river.

THE FLOATING BATHING HOUSES UP TO THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The many floating bathing houses built in the first half of the 20th century differed from the baths operated by the entrepreneurs in a number of respects. One of the most significant differences was the changed ownership form. Members of the sports associations formed at the turn of the century and building or buying floating bathing houses on the Tisza used the facilities not as paying, temporary guests but as part-owners.

The Szeged Boating Society that had existed since 1870 and had taken part in the rescue operations during the Great Flood of 1879 in a certain sense represented a transition between boathouses where the emphasis was on sport and the elegant bathing places. Their bathing houses that from 1894 were located beside the Inner Town bridge, still represented a strange duality: they had storage space for boats and a facility for launching them, but they also had various salons, changing rooms and training rooms that were kept separate and given equal importance. According to the contemporary press the comforts were intended to encourage ladies to show more enthusiasm for active participation in water sports.¹¹ But probably that was not the only reason for maintaining the facilities. They served as a scene for social life, but the occasion was no longer a passive way of spending time, it

¹⁰ Bányai 2003. 11.

¹¹ Bányai 2003. 11.

was boating and swimming. The atmosphere of the “Tisza” Szeged Rowing Society and the Szeged Rowing Club established before the First World War shifted much more in the direction of sports.¹²

As a result of the restricted opportunities for travel due to the well known events following the First World War, in the 1920s a whole series of floating bathing houses were built causing real competition for the most suitable stretches of the riverside. The groups organised on various bases wanted a place for themselves on the Tisza not only for sports but also for purposes of outward show. The wealthy members of the Szeged Regatta Society for example and the young sportsmen who formed the Szeged Swimming Society with a centre on the Upper Tisza riverside had very different financial status and social background.¹³ In places break-away attempts upset the organisational unity. In 1926 a few members of the Boating Society tried unsuccessfully to form a new association under the name of Wesselényi Boating Club, then in 1932 earlier members of the Szeged Swimming Society established the Szeged Yachting Association. In both cases the new organisations immediately began to build new floating bathing houses.¹⁴ Probably the practice of sports alone would not have led to these splits: the aim was more likely to demonstrate a separate group identity. Setting up a bathing house on the Tisza was considered to have prestige value for the main social societies. Groupings not necessarily or not at all linked to the water, such as the local Scouts association, or the Szeged Fészek Club formed by artists, writers and journalists immediately began to build bathing houses.¹⁵

Since association members had part ownership, and were able to create personal space (changing cabins, storage of boats and other equipment), the bathing houses became a kind of second home. Citizens with club membership were able to spend time with acquaintances who for the most part had similar interests and status; a kind of community life began to take shape offering people of Szeged a separate identity.

During the period examined, through physical culture and sports increased interest was shown in general in all forms of active use of leisure time. The Szeged press often dealt with the results and successes of the sports associations that probably all citizens, even those not

¹² Bátyai 2003 21–22.

¹³ Bátyai 2003. 25.

¹⁴ Bátyai 2003. 14., 35.

¹⁵ Bátyai 2003. 30–34.

engaging in water sports, could identify with, thereby strengthening the local identity. It was not only in this sense that the bathing houses were an integral part of Szeged. By organising balls and beauty competitions open to outsiders they played a part in shaping the city's formal community life.¹⁶

It must be added that there was no change in the case of the bathing houses known since the 19th century. Although the strict moral norms were slightly relaxed and there was a certain opening towards water sports, bathing continued to be the main focus. There was no change in their number, moreover the new municipal bathing beaches and the clubs attracted the young public away from them.¹⁷ The floating bathing houses continued to operate in this form up to the end of the Second World War when, with two exceptions, they were dismantled. The Soviet army needed the pontoons that kept the structures above the water.¹⁸

SUMMARY

I have attempted to interpret the distinctive culture associated with floating bathing houses, from different aspects than those examined earlier. My focus has been primarily on the changes in society, culture and mentality that explain the significance these establishments had for the people of Szeged. It can be seen that because of the many different functions the structures served, the concept has a complex meaning. The Hungarian name *úszóház* (floating house) not only emphasises the dominant role of the building and comprises the names of boathouse, bathing house, club house, regatta house used in real life, but also the private houses built on the Tisza.¹⁹ But why can it be useful to examine the phenomenon in greater depth using ethnological methods and historical sources? It can be seen that the research to be carried out here is linked to the question of spatial use and mental maps. It illustrates the direction of change in thinking about the Tisza by the people of Szeged, and shows which social strata had ties to the river in the different stages of the city's history. The urban bathing culture did not represent the form of rest involving outward show but rather formed an integral part of the everyday lives of working people. The bather was not detached from his own environment as was

¹⁶ Bányai 2003. 13.

¹⁷ Bányai 2003. 16.

¹⁸ Bányai 2003. 4.

¹⁹ Bányai 2003. 3, Délmagyarország 21 November 2007.

the case of those who visited distant resorts, he often met acquaintances while bathing and continued the everyday dialogue.

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