

POSSIBILITIES FOR ETHNOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH ON A SZEGED HOLIDAY SETTLEMENT

In many places along the major rivers in Hungary there are holiday settlements offering special possibilities for spending leisure time for those who possess holiday houses there. Along the lower reaches of the Tisza, such holiday zones are found not only in the vicinity of Szeged but also at Mártély, Mindszent, Szentes and Csongrád. They can comprise as many as several hundred houses, often raised on stilts. During the seminar we conducted interviews with the owners of such properties, made an on-the-spot study of the holiday settlement known to the people of Szeged simply as “Sárga” (Yellow), and examined the archive of the Tömörkény István Holiday Association. I have continued the research since then and would like to report in this article on the results obtained so far.

POSSIBLE WAYS OF DEFINING THE SECOND HOMES

The phenomenon I examined can best be grasped with the concept of “second homes” that numerous disciplines have attempted to define and interpret in recent years. Foremost among those making such efforts have been countries where broad social strata possess structures designated by various terms (e.g.: Finnish: *mökki*, English: weekend home, summer cottage etc.), usually far from cities, in a rural environment. There are many different variants of second homes; in our case the types linked to summer holidays are the most common. Orvar Löfgren has pointed out that in Sweden the first generation of holiday home owners belonged to the urban elite, but in the course of the 1920s and 1930s the social basis gradually widened as clerical workers and public servants began to erect less imposing buildings. The lifestyle of families who spent their holidays in the country differed radically from that of urbanites as great emphasis was placed on various sports activities, sailing, rowing, hiking or fishing. Holiday communities at the seaside grew rapidly, while the hotels gradually emptied as more and more people wanted to own or rent a house of their own, and whole seaside villages were eventually bought up. Those who could not afford

to buy an old building built a new one, but in a style that perfectly symbolised the Swedish summer holiday ideal. In Norway official statistics report the existence of more than 400,000 holiday buildings that can be classified in two main groups. Those on the coast are often found in villages and are linked to sailing, while such buildings became popular in the mountain areas in the 1960s and offer excellent opportunities for skiing in winter and for excursions, fishing and gathering forest fruits in summer. There can be many different motivations for maintaining a second home as city dwellers buy or build holiday buildings in rural areas for various reasons. Some people like a simple way of life close to nature, others go on a kind of time travel when they periodically return to the scene of their childhood.¹

EMERGENCE OF THE HOLIDAY SETTLEMENT, TAKING POSSESSION OF THE FLOOD PLAIN

The holiday settlement known as “Sárga” is located in the immediate vicinity of Tápé and within the public administration area of the city of Szeged. It is on the flood plain of the Tisza and comprises several hundred buildings owned by various institutions or companies and private individuals. The bathing beach is opposite the mouth of the Maros river, at the entrance to the “Winter port”. From time to time the river covers it with a thick layer of sand, probably the origin of the area’s name (Yellow). This stretch of the river bank is very popular, especially on hot summer days when hundreds of people come to seek relief in the river. From the beach to the Kiskőrössy fishermen’s inn² a road that in places can be used by cars runs parallel to the river³, with side roads branching off in the direction of the embankment. A survey made by the Szeged Planning Enterprise in the mid-1970s described the road conditions as follows: “*The inner roads follow the irregular limits of the plots of land and their width changes irregularly. A paving of 80 cm wide concrete slabs is found in only a few places, and because of the size is suitable only for foot traffic. The short 1.50 m. monolithic concrete footpath leading to the embankment is an exception.*”⁴

¹ For more details, see: Löfgren 1999. 109–154; Bendix-Löfgren 2008. 7–16.

² The Kőrössy Fishermen’s Inn beside the Tisza opened in 1932 and served a variety of dishes (fish soup, fried fish, pasta with cottage cheese) and drinks. Délmagyarország 17 July 1932. 4.

³ One stretch of this route, a kind of waterside promenade, was called the “Gold Shore”.

⁴ Documents of the Tömörkény István Holiday Association.

Compared to the bathing houses, the holiday settlement offers a different way of spending leisure time since the buildings provide suitable conditions for prolonged stays. Even nowadays many families move out to the “Sárga” for the summer months, which not only means that they spend their leisure time beside the Tisza, but during this time the buildings function as real homes. The local residents who undertake this distinctive way of life are not all people who live for most of the year in housing estates or multi-storey houses in the city centre: some live in Tápé on the other side of the embankment and move out to the Tisza flood plain for the summer months, preferring to spend their time here rather than in their permanent homes. The technical survey drawn up by the Szeged Planning Enterprise characterised the property owners as follows: *“the old area is inhabited mainly by pensioners who like to build for themselves in their spare time, with limited means. These buildings meet their demand for fresh air and rest during their spare time. In the new areas luxury demands also appear besides the desire for healthy rest and at the same time they are marking out their own estate (fencing off their part of larger blocks, creating kitchen gardens from green areas).”*⁵

The Tisza riverside began to be transformed into a recreational space in the early 1920s, but it was only from the 1950s that creation of the holiday settlement gained real impetus.⁶ In 1922 the Szeged press reported that a new bathing place was being created in the territory of Tápé, in a place that had become popular earlier during the Serbian occupation of Újszeged, when the Szeged Park Baths Ltd. had suspended its operation. When the situation was consolidated that stretch of the riverbank was forgotten, but in the summer of 1921 workers built a small bathing cabin there. In 1922 the Szeged Workers’ Physical Training Association decided to develop the beach, and succeeded in obtaining support for the project. According to a press report at the time, the action was particularly noteworthy because “it extends regular Tisza life right up to Tápé” and ensures the conditions for “healthy summer life” for several hundred children.⁷

⁵ Documents of the Tömörkény István Holiday Association.

⁶ In the first half of the 20th century among the orchards in the flood plain at Mártély there were already villa-like structures that not only served farming purposes but were also used for leisure time. In 1937 in Szentes the local tourism committee decided to offer for sale blocks of land beside the Tisza suitable for building “weekend houses”, but it seems that the plans were not put into practice.

⁷ Délmagyarország 23 July 1922. 6.

It would appear from the available sources that possession of the flood plain did not take place in an organised manner, as a document dated 22 October 1957 also reported: *“The holiday settlement at Sárga came into being spontaneously at the initiative of Szeged workers and with voluntary work. This holiday settlement already belonged to the workers during the time of Horthy fascism, when workers could not afford costly boathouses or expensive bathing places; workers from Szeged came out here, changed among the bushes, and enjoyed the cool waters of the Tisza. They held gatherings here that the older workers still talk about. Perhaps these workers’ traditions are the reason why the workers of Szeged built their holiday settlement here ...”*⁸

In the mid-1950s there were 107 buildings with various wall structures on the flood plain.⁹ At first many of them were simple board structures with a single room where the only furniture was a bed, table and chairs. However, in the 1950s single-storey bathing cabins built of bricks and concrete divided into a terrace and changing room began to appear, followed by holiday houses in stilts, often with attics. Buildings with a kitchen on the lower level and rooms above form a separate group. Their design was almost certainly influenced mainly by the floods as the owners of buildings here raised them to protect their belongings from the periodical inundations.

In the 1950s it still appeared that the floods did not basically determine the everyday life of the holiday settlement. As a description of structures by the Szeged Planning Enterprise also noted: *“The area is located to the east of Szeged, on the right bank of the river. The area is around the national elevation, +80.00 m. The highest measured water level (1932) was 39.32 m above the 0 point at Tápé. The 0 point of the water gauge is at 74.39 m. above sea level. Smaller inundations must be expected in the area around every 7-8 years. Icy waters rise to an average of approx. +7.00 m, that is, around or below 81.39 m they subside, consequently serious damage by icy waters does not have to be expected in the area.”*¹⁰ But a drastic rise in the level of floods after 1970 and the longer duration of flood waves resulted in dramatic changes that had a negative effect on the life of the holiday settlement as flood waters also inundated the upper levels of structures on stilts.

⁸ Documents of the Tömörkény István Holiday Association.

⁹ Earlier there were only two bathing cabins near the beach, probably built by the workers’ sports association.

¹⁰ Documents of the Tömörkény István Holiday Association.

Furniture and electrical appliances (refrigerators, microwave ovens, television sets, etc.) were ruined, it took months after the waters subsided for the walls to dry out and renovations could begin. Because of the prolonged floods there were years when the holiday homes could not be used at all during the summer months. Under the negative impact of a number of factors (the drastic rise in flood levels, the increased duration of inundations, the costs of renovation, etc.), in recent decades growing numbers have given up this way of life; as a result many buildings changed ownership or have been entirely abandoned. An article that appeared in March 2007 under the title “Sárga holiday settlement neglected” described the state of affairs as follows: *“The Szeged Sárga holiday settlement is falling into decay. According to those who live out there, at least a hundred owners are offering their holiday homes for sale. There are a few buyers, but properties change owners very slowly. You can buy a shack for a million Forints, but there are owners who value their weekend house at six million. Everyone is worried about floods (...) There are whole rows of abandoned holiday cabins. During last year’s flood their roofs could barely be seen above the water. The walls are crumbling, there are mounds of mud in the yards. Many people gave up after last year’s flood, they have abandoned their shacks. (...) The Sárga settlement is no longer what it used to be: there are many dilapidated, neglected buildings. The streets are muddy, the trees untended, in several places there are piles of rubbish.”*¹¹

LEISURE TIME AND COMMUNITY LIFE

The holiday home owners and users in the Tisza flood plain engage in various leisure time activities, among which swimming and bathing are closely linked to the river. There are opportunities for sunbathing on the beach, or along the edge of the river on jetties constructed from empty metal barrels, iron pipes and wood, adjusted to the changing water level with steel cables. These structures are often dragged up to the shore for the winter months, to avoid damage from ice floes. In 2007 there were approximately 50 jetties in the Sárga area, used to tie up rowing boats, flat boats, for fishing or sunbathing. At first the holiday home owners used flat-bottomed wooden boats on the river,

¹¹ Délmagyarország March 2007.

made for them by craftsmen in Tápé or the vicinity. These craft are driven by 4-5 HP Tomos engines made in Yugoslavia. A few people have bought decommissioned police rescue boats from Budapest. One man later had a boat maker build a fibre-glass boat able to seat seven persons and powered by a 50 HP engine. The family used it on special occasions to cover longer distances, but went fishing in a flat-bottomed boat. A few holiday home owners bought high-powered motorboats that can be regarded as status symbols as they represent their financial situation and social standing. The boats are used not only on the Szeged stretch of the river; on occasion people also visit the area around Mártély or Mindszent where the sandy beaches in the bends are good spots for bathing.

On 22 October 1957 delegates from the enterprises and institutions involved held a meeting where they elected a temporary board. They set as a task to survey and map the area, to organise a security service to protect property, to create the main traffic routes and drill an artesian well. A decision was adopted to establish the Szeged Tápé Holiday Association, that later adopted the name of István Tömörkény. The organisation set itself the principal goal of providing holidays and entertainment for members, but it also strove to ensure that the holiday settlement was kept clean, to keep order, to bring to order anyone causing a disturbance, to protect public property and ensure the respect of public health regulations. The obligations of members included respect of the rules, the payment of membership fees, maintenance of buildings, erection of fences, etc. A five-member administrative committee elected from the members for a period of five years handled affairs. During its existence the organisation amended its rules on several occasions; it could be an interesting task for the future to examine those rules. The association has its headquarters in the holiday settlement, with space for archives and an office. The association strives to use the membership fees primarily to cover the costs of water used on the properties and rubbish removal but occasionally there are also other costs, for example collecting and removing flotsam after floods.

Before 1989 the association also strove to cultivate labour movement traditions; one visible and tangible manifestation of this is the monument erected beside the Tisza on 20 August 1961. The inscription was removed in the early 1990s but the text has been preserved in documents: “<Sárga> *One of the places of the*

revolutionary organisation of the illegal workers' movement in Szeged. During the dark years of repression workers, peasants and intellectuals loyal to the people joined forces under the leadership of the party to work for the socialist future. In memory of their work on behalf of the successors, Tömörkény István Holiday Association." Before 1989 representatives of the association regularly placed wreaths at the monument on May Day and before the 7th of November the area was tidied. After the change of system, attempts were made to change the meaning of the monument, but the spatial composition designed by the Szeged Fine Arts Guild symbolising the meeting of the Tisza and the Maros rivers was never built, despite the fact that the municipality of Szeged allocated support of 100,000 Forints for the purpose in 1993.

The findings of the fieldwork indicate that the holiday settlement is divided into smaller communities that can take various forms. One typical form is when 4-5 neighbouring families regularly come together to celebrate name days and birthdays. There are also examples of such gatherings being held at the beginning of the summer season, most often in early May. In the past other special occasions included 20th August when groups of holiday owners with their families and friends watched the fireworks from motorboats and flat-bottomed boats on the river. In recent years we have been able to witness the emergence and shaping of a special local feast closely related to the holiday settlement where the Saint Stephen People's Celebration by the River was held for the tenth time on 20 August 2015. The fishing and fish soup cooking competitions, together with other programmes, provide an opportunity to form and strengthen contacts within the community, to construct a kind of local identity.

SUMMARY

The holiday settlement on the flood plain of the Tisza contains second homes where many families still spend their leisure time. Presumably the holiday buildings are used because the owners wish to step out of their urban existence and enjoy a way of life that is close to nature. Compared to the floating bathing houses, the holiday settlement offers other leisure alternatives because it provides the conditions for longer stays. The "Sárga" settlement arose from the 1950s, although bathing and bathing culture had been present in the area earlier, in the early 1920s when private persons and various enterprises and

institutions began to erect buildings. In the coming years research could be directed at a detailed analysis of topics that have only been touched on in this article, to explore different aspects of the culture of this distinctive holiday community.

LITERATURE

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