

The Gate and the Border: Everyday Stalintown

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### *Abstract*

This dissertation examines the official discourses that shaped the parameters of everyday life and the reactions of socialist citizens to them in Hungary's first socialist city, Sztálinváros, during the 1950s. Concentrating especially on the regulation of working-class leisure, it argues that the authorities sought to frame social conflict in terms of a struggle between the civilized and the backward, the rural and the urban. In so doing it provides an insight into the nature of early state socialism as a project of cultural transformation. Sztálinváros was intended to become the most socialist city in Hungary; its residents were to be the most socialist of citizens. Because of this the settlement came to symbolize a gateway between old and new, as well as good and bad. It was perhaps for this reason that many came to believe that whoever passed through this gate were left without hope. It is, however, important to consider to what degree the residents of the city were able to maintain relative freedom and autonomy in the face of attempts by the state to determine the circumstances in which they lived. Indeed, this question is fundamental to the study of every ideologically-based political system.

In the course of the research on which this dissertation is based, it became ever more clear that the histories of Sztálinváros's residents not only revealed much about the impact of socialism on everyday life, but they also cast light on the limits of dictatorship and the self-determination practised by ordinary people in the face of state power. It was precisely these limits that shaped the everyday lives and culture of ordinary people, even when they stepped through a gate which symbolized a new way of life, which was precisely what Hungary's first socialist city was. Political and social elites have long used the foundation and planning of cities as a means of projecting their power and advancing their own programs of social transformation. Sztálinváros was not simply brought into being by the socialist state in order to realize concrete goals related to the development of Hungary's armaments' industry or

other social policy measures, but to demonstrate the strength of the country's new rulers. Rulers have dreamed for time immemorial of creating cities from nothing or shaping civilization from the wilderness. Despite this, Sztálinváros did not, or only in a very restricted sense, meet the criteria of a city in the eyes of contemporaries. In order to ensure that its residents began to consider the settlement in which they lived a city, the very social definition of a city had to be changed. In this process a decisive role was played by official discourse, which privileged a representation of the city's construction as a struggle between the urban and nonurban, and, using older analogies, as a struggle between the civilized and the wild.

The city and those who lived in it were interpreted and represented in different ways. A city can be just as easily characterized by the desires of its planners as it can by the ways in which its builders deviated from those plans or by the way residents understand the place where they live. Despite the beliefs of its planners, Sztálinváros never truly became the model socialist city either in the eyes of its residents, or in the eyes of those who lived in other parts of Hungary, nor did it become the best city in the country as defined by socialism or by society in general. At the same time different social groups—the intelligentsia, skilled workers, those who migrated from the villages, or the writers of propagandistic texts— ascribed different meanings to the notion of the city as characterized by Sztálinváros. Similarly, the phenomenon that can be understood as “the attempt to create a new culture,” which was seen as central in official discourse to the construction of socialism and attempts to shape “a new socialist person,” carried different meanings for various social groups. Sztálinváros's history can be understood as that of an entirely new settlement, where social groups confronted new conditions, largely the products of state action, which formed, reshaped, and determined the social processes of the socialist decades.

The construction of the city, seventy kilometers from Budapest, began in the spring of 1950. On November 7, 1951, it took the name of Stalin and, aside from a period in the autumn of 1956 when it used the name of Dunapentele, it retained the name of Sztálinváros until November 25, 1961. At the time the city, which had been built from nothing over the previous decade, had a population of over thirty thousand. In October 1961 the XXII Congress of the Soviet Communist Party initiated a new campaign of de-Stalinization in socialist countries. As part of this campaign the city of Stalingrad in the Soviet Union was renamed Volgograd, Hungary's Sztálinváros became Dunaújváros, and East Germany's Stalinstadt was rechristened Eisenhüttenstadt.

Topics of the dissertation:

Myths and Identities of a New Socialist City, Mental Maps in Stalintown, Urban Villagers and Migrants, Marriage and Divorce, Abortions, Childhood in the City, Pubs and Leisure, Youth Subcultures of Stalintown, Prostitution in the Socialist City

Pubs and their Socialist Customers (Excerpt)

The past of the pub known as the “Knife-Thrower” went right back to the “heroic period” of the early construction of Sztálinváros (Stalintown), the first socialist city in Hungary. In 1950 Peace Square had been nothing more than corn fields. The first construction workers arrived and on one side of what later became the square the first barracks were built. These were the first buildings in Sztálinváros, offices, accommodation, general store and a factory canteen. The pub was housed in one of these early barracks. The building that began on the site of what was later to become Peace Square generated the impression that this would become the future centre of the city.<sup>1</sup>

The construction site – where firstly the houses of the city were built – was to the east of Peace Square. Thus, for the first residents of the city, the construction workers, Peace Square stood in the middle of their way from home to work, and back again. The buses that carried workers who lived in the neighbouring villages, departed and arrived from the square. For this reason Peace Square became one of the first landmarks of the new city, while the “Knife-Thrower” became its heart. For those arriving to the city, or for those leaving, the first and last thing they would see of the city was the crowd that stood in Peace Square surrounding the pub.<sup>2</sup>

The “Knife-Thrower” just acquired a reputation among those who visited the city and within popular consciousness it conferred on Sztálinváros a reputation, unsupported by police reports, as place where those with previous criminal convictions worked. In addition Peace Square, especially on market days, was a favourite gathering place for beggars arriving in the city.<sup>3</sup> The brick-layers who arrived on the first construction sites came from ranks of the rural “kubikosok” – those who travelled far from their villages in search of work in construction. But at the turn of 1953 with the foundation of the first factory, most of the workers arriving in the town came from provincial industrial towns, but also from Budapest. In 1953 there was substantial outward migration from the city, as centrally-mandated cuts in investment funds led to the suspension of construction, and consequently the geographically mobile, unskilled construction workers left. Furthermore, in 1953 the workers of urban origin came to dominate

life in the city, therefore the “cleansing” of the city, especially of the city centre, became an ever more urgent task.

Even in 1953 most Hungarians could only see the city as a “surreal dream”. The future writer, Bulcsú Bertha arrived in the city, shortly after graduating from high school, and he gained a strong impression of Peace Square and those who populated it. He equated the city with the pub he found there: “immediately behind the bar in Peace Square was a growing wood, with newly planted three or four metre-high trees. The back windows of the pub were open to the wood. When there were huge fights they opened the windows, so the winners could throw out the losers, or the waiters shouted out into the wood. By the time the police arrived, everyone was quietly sipping their wine, or more precisely their beer laced with rum, because that was the fashion at that time.”<sup>4</sup> During the course of 1953 the police were frequently called to the “Knife Thrower”.

This was no surprise, in contrast to the earlier leadership who had tolerated the pubs<sup>5</sup>, the new president of the local council, Jenő Tapolczai, who arrived in August 1953 in the city, decided to restore order in the city’s pubs. “Our city appeared in police reports .... year in, year out, as the county’s most infected city .... therefore we launched the struggle to close down all those establishments, which were clearly disreputable. Examples of such disreputable establishments were the “Leper” guesthouse, the “Buffet”, the “Knife-Thrower”, and later “The Blue Mouse”. The rumour about the “Leper” was that before one went in, you needed to fire one shot into the establishment, and only if they didn’t fire back, was it advisable to go inside. The elimination of the “Leper”, that is the gathering place of the local underworld, was a real test of strength for the council – as we placed it under constant police supervision. Our first line of attack was to shut the temporary bus station behind the “Leper” and the barracks that stood next to it, then we took measures to shut down the guesthouse, which was not as easy as it sounds”.<sup>6</sup> What Tapolczai described in both his memoirs and in council meetings as the “Leper”<sup>7</sup>, was more frequently described in official documents as the “Knife-Thrower” and his struggle with it and what it represented played a central role in his memoirs. It played such a central role because it represented the struggle the council took under his leadership against alcoholism in the city.

In 1953 the construction of the city centre was complete and Peace Square, on its fringe, did not conform to the ideals of an “urban” life-style that the council sought to promote. The pub in Peace Square was the pub of those who lived in the “barrack village” and the “village dwellers” who commuted from rural areas. As a consequence the struggle against

the “Knife-Thrower” became a symbol of the struggle between “rural” and “urban” within the developing city.

In the winter of 1953 the building in which the “Knife Thrower” was located was renovated, and it was re-opened with larger windows <sup>8</sup>, in the hope that a new building would deter unwanted customers from visiting the pub. But this attempt met with failure, in part because it was easier was to throw drunken customers through bigger windows. One sign of this, as far as the local police was concerned, was a “gang fight” which occurred in February 1954, in which one arrested man made certain political statements which crossed the lines of the permissible as far as the authorities were concerned. Many witnesses maintained that the fight was sparked by the arrival of the police, who were in the area of the pub searching for apparent “disturbances of the peace”.<sup>9</sup> Those arrested and interviewed by the police lived exclusively in the barracks or in neighbouring villages, and all of them were unskilled workers, something that suggests the regulars in the pub came from the same social groups.

At the time the police investigation was underway, in March 1954 edition of the local newspaper an article entitled “We Must Restore Order in the Peace Square Bar!” appeared. It is clear from the article that at the time the “bar” was the most popular place of recreation in Sztálinváros, but that its “reputation was not appropriate” for the city, as it was the location of almost permanent “scandals” and fights. During the day it was full of loud drunks, and clothes, shoes and stolen goods were sold inside it. “During evening meal time it seems relatively friendly”, stated the newspaper, “the visitors arrive in an orderly fashion, but within half-an-hour it has turned into the kind of turmoil, from which only scandals arise. After the required amount of alcohol has been consumed by the customers, by, say , around ten in the evening shouting and fighting breaks the various singing that is going on. Virtue is more important, than thinking clearly and consequently a fight starts as if from nowhere.” As the enterprise running the pub had to increase its income, and as the staff were friends with many of the regulars, loans were given to some of the regulars.<sup>10</sup>

The disciplining and “cleansing” of restaurants, pubs and guesthouses began in other establishments in the city centre. The renovation and the police raids failed to solve the problem of the “Knife-Thrower”; in June 1954 a fight outside the pub ended in the death of one of the combatants.<sup>11</sup> As a consequence the local authorities raised the issue with the Ministry of Internal Commerce’s Mining Food Supply Directorate, which ran the “Knife-Thrower”. The directorate resisted the closure of the pub on several occasions, warning that the closure of the establishment would cause them a serious loss of income and they could not fulfil the plan.<sup>12</sup> The local council eventually emerged victorious and on the 8<sup>th</sup> October the

local newspaper was able to announce the closure of the “Knife-Thrower”; according to other nicknames the “leper”, the “scream”, the “meat market”, or the “little tango”.<sup>13</sup>

Around a month and a half later on the opposite corner of the city centre the Gold Star hotel and restaurant opened.<sup>14</sup> The restaurant, built to accommodate two hundred guests at a time, existed to cater for the exclusive demands of the local elite. From the time it opened the Gold Star’s manager refused to allow in those “wearing winter coats” or those in “boots”. The local newspaper argued that guests had to behave in a modest, quiet, and human way: “there is no place for drunks in here”. The paper described it as the prettiest meeting place for Sztálinváros society.<sup>15</sup>

On the Sunday afternoon a week following its opening, the management of the restaurant invited its guests to “tea at five in the afternoon” charging them five forints for the compulsory use of the cloak room.<sup>16</sup> This, it appears, represented the process of “cleansing” the city centre of those who did not belong. This “idyllic” state, however, did not last long, for soon, almost directly opposite the main entrance to the Gold Star, another establishment, the Gold Star Peoples’ Bar, was opened, in part as replacement for the “Knife-Thrower”.

In 1959 the Gold Star was described as the place of recreation for the “local elite”: “Those who drank together and knew each other and trusted each other, either went to visit each other, or relaxed in the Gold Star ...It was noticeable, for example, that they looked out of the Gold Star at the workers and the director of the restaurant purposely attempted to distance his establishment from the workers, though he did maintain a bar for them behind in one of the side-streets. On another occasion an enormous fight broke out, when a ball for engineers was organized in one of the rooms on the first floor, and they refused to let workers in and tried to use violence to keep them out. In the Gold Star huge amounts of money were written on the bills of the customers and in its atmosphere one could strongly feel a certain bourgeois stuffiness”.<sup>17</sup>

In 1955 a representative survey of what was served at the Peoples’ Bar that lay at the back of the Gold Star showed that 52 percent consisted of spirits (either cocktails or rum), which showed that this establishment attracted those in the city centre who were accustomed to hard-drinking. On the other side of the building in the restaurant spirits represented only 11 percent of alcoholic drinks served; here bottled beer, which was relatively expensive, was the most popular drink.<sup>18</sup> The Restaurant and the Peoples’ Bar, opened to create a more controllable and orderly version of the “Knife-Thrower” stood in sharp contrast to each other. This was in part because two very different social groups tended to visit the different establishments. Police investigation often started because of events in the Peoples’ Bar, just as

they had because of events in the “Knife-Thrower”. This was often for similar reasons, for “drunken individuals started shouting and a gang fight began between the staff and the lorry drivers. They threw buckets, plates and other objects at each other. This caused the lorry drivers to become injured, particularly the driver Károly Sz., who had his nose cut off”. Furthermore both the cooks in the kitchen and the waiters had joined in the fighting.<sup>19</sup> In reports of this incident the fact that many “troublemakers” from the “Knife-Thrower” had taken to frequenting the Peoples’ Bar was underlined. From this one can conclude that some of the regulars that had frequented the “Knife-Thrower” had simply transferred their allegiance to the Peoples’ Bar at the back of the Gold Star.

In 1954, the almost simultaneous closure of the “Knife-Thrower” and the opening of the Gold Star came to symbolize the changing experience of urban space for the residents of the city centre. The process of the re-shaping of this experience began with the closure of the “village-like” “Knife-Thrower” and continued with the opening of the Gold Star which symbolized the “urban” “bourgeois idyll”. While the process of “cleansing” the city centre never fully succeeded, the role that had been played by the “Knife-Thrower” in symbolizing urban recreation was taken over by the altogether more acceptable Gold Star.

The closing of the “Knife-Thrower” further contributed to a process of ever more visible social differentiation in the city. Outside the ring-roads which surrounded the core of the city centre the “village-like” or “semi-rural” pubs remained.<sup>20</sup> According to one account “there was a sense of the wild-west in these pubs. Along with the bean soup that one could eat from morning through until night, a guest might also get a good thump. Csöpi [nickname, means “Tiny”] was the biggest attraction in these pubs, who at the time was the tallest man in the country, alongside Jancsi, who was two centimetres shorter than the dwarf with the visiting circus ...”.<sup>21</sup>

In the popular consciousness of city residents the campaign against the “Knife-Thrower” was seen as part of the struggle between urban and rural ways of life. The eventual closure of the “Knife-Thrower” did not mean that an “urban” way-of-life automatically replaced a “rural” one, but that the culture identified as rural was confined to a particular part of the city. The local authorities hoped that the closure of the “Knife-Thrower” would lead to an improvement in the reputation of Peace Square and, by extension, the reputation of Sztálinváros itself. Despite this the reputation of Peace Square and the “Knife-Thrower” made a more persistent impression that proved to be stronger than the will of the local council.

A factory culture group and a factory canteen moved into the space vacated by the “Knife-Thrower”. The large amount of traffic in the square continued to attract itinerant

beggars, while some of the regulars of the “Knife-Thrower” became customers of the bus station bar instead.<sup>22</sup> Another group of regulars transferred their allegiance to the 103 Drink Shop in Gorky Square, which quickly became another target of the moral reformism of members of the local council. The 103-Drink Shop was only closed at the end of 1956, when the Steelmakers’ restaurant opened to serve the needs of the working-class Technikum suburb in which it was located.<sup>23</sup> The former regulars of the 103-Drink Shop quickly settled in the Steelmakers’ Drink Shop, which opened next to the restaurant, and which was now definitely outside the city centre. When the Steelmakers’ Drink Shop was in turn closed down in 1959, the customers of the pub – who had already visited in turn the “Knife-Thrower”, the Peoples’ Bar and the 103-Drink Bar – began to frequent the local patisserie, and naturally not merely to eat the cakes served there.<sup>24</sup>

As a consequence of the policies pursued in the city the “drink shops” and coffee-bars continually exchanged their customers, and consequently this affected the reputations they acquired in the minds of the local residents. The policies created “rural”, “proletarian”, and “gentrified” meeting places. Certain pubs held particular meanings in local discourse. Migrants to the city saw the pub sub-cultures as markers of social differentiation, that were not merely about the rejection of certain cornerstones of the ideal life-style promoted by the authorities, but provided a form of alternative public space founded on sociability and solidarity. Pub culture appeared in official discourse as “oppositional” because the authorities sought to stigmatise every phenomenon, which had not been planned by them or contradicted the aims of local institutions.

Identities that tied residents to the factory or the city were bolstered by the authorities, while those that tied them to certain pubs were rejected. The actions of the local council and the police helped determine a vision of the city, which saw the city centre as its most important part that meant its establishments had to be purged of all “harmful elements”. The visions of the city’s planners, which required that the actions of the city’s residents were transparent and thus supervised by the authorities, could only be realized through the local authorities’ struggle against city centre pubs and their “cleansing”. At one and the same time the stigmatization of the pubs and their customers contributed to the way in which more modern forms of leisure, like the cinema and the dance hall, became central to the younger generation. This process showed the way in which the identities and practices of local youth tended to be more influenced by the emerging “modern” consumer culture, than by that of Sztálinváros’s first residents, among them the guests of the “Knife-Thrower”. In the 60ies the building that housed the “Knife-Thrower” was demolished together with the barracks that

flanked Peace Square. On the place where the first barrack had stood an open-air swimming pool was built, a place which represented “urban” and “modern” cultural practices. The foundations of the barrack were, however, preserved with the following inscription: “Here stood the first building of Stalintown”.

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- <sup>1</sup> - Miklós Miskolczi, Az első évtized. Dunapentelétől – Dunaújvárosig. (Dunaújváros, 1975), 37-39.
- <sup>2</sup> - Miklós Miskolczi, Város lesz csakazértis... (Budapest, 1980), 20.
- <sup>3</sup> - Fejér Megyei Levéltár (Fejér County Archive) = FML. XXIII / 509. 1. d. A tanácstörvénnyel kapcsolatos kisgyűléseken felvett jegyzőkönyvekből. 1954. szeptember 18.
- <sup>4</sup> - Bulcsú Bertha, “A legendás város.” in István Matkó, (ed.), Ipari közelképek. (Budapest, 1986), 7-23.
- <sup>5</sup> - *ibid.*, 15.
- <sup>6</sup> - Jenő Tapolczai, Egy elnök naplója (Budapest, 1977), 43.
- <sup>7</sup> - “Leper” was also the nickname for a pub in the Radar area of the city. Miskolczi, Az első évtized, 72.
- <sup>8</sup> - Sztálinvárosi Hírlap, 31<sup>st</sup> December 1953, 5.
- <sup>9</sup> - FML. Sztálinvárosi Bíróság. Büntetőpercek. 1954-1956. L. Emánuel izgatás és hatósági közeg elleni erőszak. 146/1954. During the police investigation the witnesses interviewed sought to minimize their own involvement in the affair.
- <sup>10</sup> - Sztálinvárosi Hírlap, 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1954., 4.
- <sup>11</sup> - Sztálinvárosi Hírlap, 25<sup>th</sup> June 1954., 4.
- <sup>12</sup> - Tapolczai, Egy elnök naplója, 44.
- <sup>13</sup> - Sztálinvárosi Hírlap, 8<sup>th</sup> October 1954., 3.
- <sup>14</sup> - Sztálinvárosi Hírlap, 26<sup>th</sup> November 1954., 2.
- <sup>15</sup> - Sztálinvárosi Hírlap, 30<sup>th</sup> November 1954., 3.
- <sup>16</sup> - Sztálinvárosi Hírlap, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1954., 4.
- <sup>17</sup> Történeti Hivatal. O – 13582. 5.
- <sup>18</sup> MOL. Belker. XIX-G-4-rr / 14. d.
- <sup>19</sup> - FML. Sztálinvárosi Városi Bíróság. Büntetőpercek. 1954-1956. G. László, V. László és Cs. Gyula rongálás. 137/1955.
- <sup>20</sup> - Tapolczai Egy elnök naplója , 44; Miskolczi Az első évtized , 72.
- <sup>21</sup> - Miskolczi Az első évtized, 72.
- <sup>22</sup> - FML. XXIII / 502. 8. d. 1954. szeptember 30-i ülés. 225 / 1954. sz. VB határozat; FML. XXIII / 502. 11. d. 1956. február 9. VB ülés; 16. d. 1959. április 24. VB ülés
- <sup>23</sup> - FML. XXIII / 502. 11. d.
- <sup>24</sup> - FML. XXIII / 502. 18. d.