

**Thesis of the PhD Dissertation**

**TOWN AND ELITE**

A KECSKEMÉT IN THE HORTHY ERA  
VIEWED FROM HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHIC  
AND SOCIAL HISTORIC ASPECTS

Zsolt Szilágyi

Témavezető: Lajos Timár CSc



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

Doctoral School of History and Ethnography

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I.  
THE PURPOSE OF THE THESIS,  
DEFINITION OF THE RESEARCH IDEA

The thesis explores two, seemingly separated sections, which are historical geography and social history. The necessity of geographical approach was induced by the fact that market town features of Kecskemét. However, as opposed to Hungarian historical practice, besides employing the analysis of historical geography as a vivid introduction, this section also wishes to clear the conditions that led to the emergence and actual existence of local elite.

As a commencing point, the presumption was that the features of the above mentioned environment were distinctively reflected in the structure of the elite circle, determining its life space. To reach the goal, first the town development process is to be sketched, then some of its characteristics are to be expounded. So thus the ‘sand town’ or the ‘homestead town’ concepts of Horthy era Kecskemét have come into existence.

Unlike the interpretation of the town, the conceptualization of local elite proved to imply some difficulties. The difficulty stems from the fact that no Hungarian research — or according to our recent knowledge — no English research has provided standardized concepts on how to approach the ‘local elite’ while regarding its functional diversification. To reach a result, a new elite concept was attempted to create. The shared conceptualization of local (town control, economic and social) elites shall be onwards interpreted as the ‘multi-functional elite’.

Following the structural approach, the individually created structure shall be split up incorporated with multifunctional elite groups. Seeking to reach this goal, scale changes were to be taken. Therefrom, the experiment was carried out on a nominal stage with the purpose of highlighting how lifelike and varied each group was, while omitting the general group features.

While carrying out the deconstructions on certain levels, (levels of authority, economics, occupation, family relations, neighborhood, etc.) the opportunity to define certain groups could be seized. Some particular topics, such as the topic of occupation or property-income, shall be also inspected.

## II.

### SOURCES REVIEW, METHODOLOGY

To sketch the town features, I have utilized the main relevant resources about Kecskemét from the Archive of Bács-Kiskun County: public administration, census documentation and regulations of Városi Tanács and publications of poverty status reports from Főispáni Hivatal. Mayoral, administrative, economic and private documents provided by Polgármesteri Hivatal. Documents from Mérnöki Hivatal, Közellátási Hivatal and Közigazgatási Bizottság. Other additional resources were Duna-Tiszaközi Mezőgazdasági Kamara, Kecskeméti Katona József Társaság, Kecskeméti Leszámítoló és Pénzváltó Bank, Duna-Tiszaközi Körzeti Mezőgazdasági Hitelszövetkezet, and further private documents about certain people, the collection of town maps and other manuscripts were gathered from Városi Zálogintézet. The daily reports of Magyar Távirati Iroda stored by Magyar Országos Levéltár and facility reports by Magyar Nemzeti Bank. Additionally Néprajzi Múzeum Etnológiai Adattárának Dokumentációs Gyűjteményét, as well as Sárospataki Református Kollégium Tudományos Gyűjtemény were to be employed.

As for the printed resources, the annual reports of Duna-Tiszaközi Mezőgazdasági Kamara, the directory of hosts generated in 1935, agricultural directory generated in 1936, the volumes related to census from Magyar Királyi Központi Statisztikai Hivatal (published in Új Sorozatban) and the annual reports (1920–40) issued by Magyar Királyi Országos Meteorológiai és Földmágnesség Intézet. Besides, digital resources have also been adopted –

such as the map pages of the military survey first-time conducted in Kecskemét, newsreels and postcard collection of Országos Széchenyi Könyvtár.

For the presentation of elit, I have created several computer databases, which jointly imply a gross number of 800-900 thousand items. To gather these details the following resources were utilized: board meeting and local meeting reports (1921–40, 1930–40), list of high tax payers (1921–40), directory of enfranchised civilians (1939), address and name directory of Kecskemét town (1922–40), Kecskeméti Közlöny Naptára (1928–40) and interviews that I have conducted personally (2003–10).

The thesis is mainly defined by analytic, descriptive, and where the opportunity was given, comparative approaches. The application of cliometric methods — which were proved to be unacquainted with former Hungarian Social Hungarian History writing until nowadays — has resulted a detail-abundant but periodically ‘data-pure’ work. To avoid the pure presentation of data, descriptive supplements were also added. The dissertation evenly employs ecological and sociological approaches as well. Moreover, several sorts of history sub-disciplines — such as urban history, economic history, history of mentalities, historical demography and historical geography — viewpoints and concepts were utilized.

Enclosed to the textual part, 57 tables and 74 personally designed diagrams, maps were added, and furthermore 12 images were taken to illustrate the topic.

### III.

#### THEMA BASED OUTLINE OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Scoping on the long term, one of the determining points of town development in Kecskemét was the time-dependant turnover dynamics of transit corridor in the region between the Danube and the Tisza, which had to undergo certain changes in accordance with the climatic conditions of little ice age and western

commodity demand. All these terms induced conformation in the town's economy and society. In the 18–19<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of making efforts to stabilize the shifting sand, there had been profound growth as for the vinery area and the number of outland citizens. Due to the commencing railway transport and the destruction of vine-pest in the highlands, the value of the sand that surrounded the town gained an increased price.

*Sand-town:* The geographical features of Kecskemét have characteristically incorporated into the train of thoughts and self-images of the local community; in other terms, the influence of geographical features on economics and society was traced to be more influential and determinant in Kecskemét than in any other big towns in the Great Plain. Due to economic matters, town community was exposed to potential harms. This fact was justified when consecutive natural hazards struck the area and thus perished 40 per cent of the acreage and 60-70 per cent of fruit trees, resulting in serious losses (related to their existence) affecting 30-40 per cent of the town community.

*Homestead town:* While bearing in mind the unfinished Erdei–Mendöl discussion, I have come to the conclusion that contrary to what has been considered before, the classic homestead concept was far less dominating in the Horthy era; as by this time more than 90 per cent of the homesteads were not annexed settlements any more.

*Apricot town:* Due to the local agrarian policy, between 1916 and 1935 the area cultivated for vegetables, vine and fruits was exposed to a volume growth of 40 per cent that is about 5,000 katasztrális hold (7,000 acres). By this time, apricot trees totalled more than a quarter of the 1 million fruit trees. There had been high demands showing up for this kind of apricot at Italian, Austrian, Swiss and German markets, which actually made the local economic prosperity possible during the interwar period.

*Market town:* The market vicinity of Kecskemét covered mainly its homesteads, but also involved the nearby 6 villages located 20-30 kms west of

the town. During the late 1920s, on the average, Kecskemét transacted a daily 19,000 tons of goods, which was induced by the separately operating grower (export) market in the centre of the town. Owing to the significant outlandish demand, the negative aftermath of recession was demonstrably less traceable in Kecskemét, since the efficiently operating export market eventuated a high employment rate and doubled the number of traders as well. This time, more than 40 per cent of the national export stemmed from Kecskemét.

*Children's town:* During the interwar period, Kecskemét was called 'the town of the children', not by chance, as the natality showed a prominently high rate of 22-26 per thousand. After processing the monthly reports issued by the Medical Officer's, I have succeeded in proving that the decline in fertility was not generated by Great Depression. The ground of the problem was induced by the unfavorable weather conditions of 1928/29 and the thus emerging local crisis contributed to its emergence. The baby-boom in Kecskemét stemmed from both the increment of fertility and the remarkable setback of mortality rate after World War I. The construction of a complex health service, which later achieved significant results, was in course of completion these times. During this era, neonatal mortality had shown a decline of a one third rate, while the number of those died of tuberculosis decreased to 25 per cent (!). The vast majority of the expenses were taken over by the town itself in every case.

Due to the subdivisions in the 1920s and due to the economic boom in the second part of the decade, the rate of out-town dwellers has reached an outstanding increase of 60 per cent, which indirectly also contributed to the prosperity of homestead manufacturers and transporters.

*Ploughman town:* There had been a shared opinion among the locals on if Kecskemét used to be a ploughman town at all. I have become ascertained that the basis of adjudgement was strongly dependant on the viewpoint of certain community groups. The elite involved in town control was positive about the issue, as they had a unified concept about the relation between the town and the

homesteads. To assert their contrary opinion, the majority of town dwellers announced to be aparted from homestead civilians, who also did not regard themselves to be town dwellers. The town from a geographical point was not a ploughman town, but it was that kind of settlement as an administrative town.

As an aftermath of local estate policy, a whole range of viable ploughman homesteads started their operation. This phenomenon contributed to the emergence of a particular agricultural society, which can be regarded to be unique not just in the Great Plain but also within the country borders – only Hódmezővárshely can be mentioned to be similar. The proportion of the little farmers can be assessed to be 27 per cent during the 1930s. More than half of the traders earned their living as licensed traditional small-scale producers. Changes in profession structure were induced mainly by the agricultural labor supply and partly by the industrial labor piracy – besides, a parallel, slow-running process was to be traced emerged by the tertiary sector.

The local community still had strong links with their farmlands: 6–23 per cent of various kinds of society classes owned their farmland or were tenants during the 1910s. No proof has been found to indicate any changes of this status in the Horthy era. Demonstrably, 15–30 per cent of the host society in Kecskemét were not licensed small-scale producers during the 1930s. According to my calculations, the society of Kecskemét originated from the market town can be positioned as the second last one amongst the range of towns with municipal right in the Great Plain, which demonstrates that Kecskemét had the least divided structure during the disquisition.

*Debtor Town:* The transformation of local economic structure, which was developing even beforehand World War I, had become accelerated during the second term of the 1920s. This process had to go with a serious and incredibly fast indebtedness of the host community. By 1935, in Kecskemét, a nation widely salient rate of 16 per cent was the number of those who confessedly took upon the fact that the note principal of their debts had reached at least one third

of their land property value. This situation demonstrates how outstandingly positive and venturesome the host community was in terms of business matters.

In parallel, the process of indebtedness could be also traced in case of the poorest groups within the town society. The number of those pledged nothing else but their articles of everyday use and their own clothes doubled during the 1930s. The families, who had never been compelled before to take out any pawn credit, now were forced to pawn their assets from time to time, which drifted them into a contradiction of debts.

*Open town:* Via the calculation of dissimilation index, which method is widely used in the field of urban sociology, I succeeded in proving that the space restriction of Jews and the non-Jewish locals of Kecskemét was remarkably low ( $D=25$ ), as compared to other places in the Great Plain. This also means that the spatial interaction of the two groups was really intensive, which indirectly indicates the high rate of (economic-social) openness asserted by the receptive society. As a reasonable fact, it can be also mentioned that nearly half of the Jews were traders in the 1930s and the idiosyncrasies of the town also directly resulted a mutual subservience between Jewish and non-Jewish locals.

Those Jewish traders who had no local land property, could be otherwise honoured members of the local community, yet those were most openly accepted who were local land owners. In terms of acceptance, this host status was a determining factor – not just in case of the Jewish locals.

As for the *local elite*, it is a formation of a society group, who were organized by human bases and financial assets, due to which they possessed high, organized or latent standings and thus owned organized or latent power. They asserted this power influentially within the local settings on the whole of the locals, or on part of the locals, or only on certain members of the local community. The proportion of elite members showed variation based on geography or settlement hierarchy – including the value differences that

emerged the given local elite, and the differing quantity and quality conditions stemming from the given settlement law cases.

The urban elite compounded the town control (governing), an economic and a societal elite circle. These main three elite circles split up into smaller subgroups within the shared, interlocking segments (three dual and a complex), of which synthetic name is multifunctional elite.

In the midwar period, *the urban elite of Kecskemét* was made up of 550–600 members who numbered only 0.8 per cent of the local society. What asserted the greatest impact on the consistency of the elite was the administrative reform of 1929. As an aftermath of the reform, the financial background was not enough to gain and to own a membership within the circle of the town control elite. The power the town control elite, during the 1930s, became more and more disproportionate: while in 1925 those numbered 47 members, in 1935 those numbered only 9, who did not hold an economic post besides having a remarkable income or wealth.

The property elite belonged to the circle of economic elite and was proved to have utilized the temporary status of the real estate market collapsed during the Great Depression and thus coined their financial vantage. One-third of this upper elite circle reached a property increase of 35 per cent, the mid elite circle made it 21 per cent and the lower elite circle made it 26 per cent between 1928 and 1938.

The urban elite of Kecskemét was typified by a kind of flexible structure with no rigid features, which was mainly exposed to the changes asserted by country government intentions and was the least influenced by the economic-social actualities during the interwar period. Consequently, this economic elite circle was proved to be the most stable one out of the other elites.

From this part forth, due to practical aspects and methodological reasons, I shifted the main emphasis on the multifunctional elite (368 members). There through the functional mobility of the elite members could be highlighted in a more focused way; namely what functional elite posts they gained, retained or

lost during the examined period. In the meanwhile, it became clear, what factors were needed for success, or what conditions led to the losses of post(s) and power. In this part of the thesis, the analysis was carried out on a nominal level, which also made the deconstruction of the (multifunctional) elite circle (term is mine) possible.

*Multifunctional elite:* Mostly vacancies gave one the possibility to take up his new post; which process also inherited a kind of generation change as well, since the ‘newcomers’ were usually of a younger age – in their forties. As I have authenticated it for several times that, the process of taking a good position was attained either by one having a large fortune or by the prestige one gained during the accumulation, which was an expedient tool for town control elite post procurement.

On one hand, if one wished to join the elite circle, then his entry was greatly promoted by owning a fortune, particularly land property; even if this person was only an expectant owner either as a direct descendant or in his wife’s line. On the other hand, one could also wield power via graduation from higher education (especially from law school).

Owning a membership within an elite circle for several years, demonstrably promoted the financial status of the given person (and his family’s), due to which he attained a significant property acquisition. As for extending public relations, which indirectly means position procurement, one could advance efficiently if he was sophisticated in manners, was more passive relative to conflicts, or if this one could come into prominence easily. For one being the descendant of an old, prestigious local family was an assurance to success; which did not mean that those who were not born in Kecskemét could not attain elite positions. When one already owned a position within the elite circle, then he could proceed for newer positions of other functions and for their inherent power on equal terms with the other circle members.

Multifunctional elite power was possible to be retained via enduring, diligent work manners, outstanding expertise, subsequent financial background and extended relations. Provided someone possessed all three (complex) elite functions, he stood a better chance to attain — what is more to augment — his positions; since alteration rate of positions in dual elite-circle was 74–79 per cent, in case of complex elite circle this rate reached only 45 per cent during the inspected term. The most common causes of post abdication were the retirement at an elderly age or the decline of property-income status. In the latter case, while striving for avoiding bankruptcy and stabilizing his financial status, one often was obliged to give up his position, particularly if he was involved in town control power – besides, when being involved in a situation like this, one was still taking attempts to retain his social elite position at least.

A different estimation of situation is necessary when one subdelegated from the post of town councilor after retirement or illness, as in this case he attempted to keep his elite position in economic control or within the society. Naturally, there had been cases when one receded to a complete retirement to spend his time within his undisturbed family circle. Finally, all endeavors were effectless once one was lacking in ambition – as it was precedential before.

The multifunctional elite concept was only one method to inspect the conditions of affiliation to the elite circle, the background of attaining the power, and to analyze — via the certain positions, focusing on the individuals — the power system maintained by the urban elite. After the completion of deconstruction, it became apparent that the elite circle cannot be described in any other way but only via a finely detailed inner structure. I depicted this ‘fine structure’ as a built-up of several smaller and bigger focus points, of which had their own central figures (icons) and who circumscribed the characteristics of the micro group to a great extent. There had been those who had the inclination to become the member of these circles, but their attempts were not successful. They belonged to the gravity space of each circle, which space is also called as

allurement space. There were certain ones who belonged to several kinds of these allurement spaces, but they still did not commit themselves to either kind, or they gained no access at all. There were cases in point, when one did not seek after getting closer to either circle. This fine structure involved not only the power structure, but also incorporated and was formed by family relations, school qualification-erudition, occupation, business or property-income factor.

As the essential viewpoint of society history examinations is discussing the professional and property-income aspects, I have decided for depicting the professional and property-income structure of Kecskemét elite, after the deconstruction, advancing the construction from a nominal level.

Forty-one per cent of the multifunctional elite had more than one occupations. Having regard to this fact, the occupation structural ratios of the multifunctional elite showed a much more balanced picture than the non-multifunctional elite.

One of the essential point of the examination is that, as an aftermath of the administrative reform, the proportion of hosts had demonstrably declined to a 24 per cent and thus they reclaimed a good positioning within the town control circle ( as it was the precedent before the reform), which number was again over 30 per cent by the end of the decade. As an explanation, the agricultural society, who had already learnt the Great Depression, were more open to repose their confidence in the hosts – as in 1929, 55 per cent of the hosts, 5 years later 65 per cent of the hosts got a seat in the local parliament on general elections. This indicates that elite circle of Kecskemét was deeply integrated into the local society. The elite circle was not allowed to become outsiders or seceders, as the society had multidimensional, strong links with the land, which was a kind of self-controlling mechanism as well.

The comparison with Debrecen also highlighted that the erosion of property elite in Kecskemét was generated rather by the clerisy and officials and not by the craftsmen and traders. After all, during the years of Great Depression, the

fruit export was still prospering due to which the local traders yielded huge profits.

In 1938, in Kecskemét there had been only 25 citizens whose annual income was over 24,000 'Hungarian pengő' (68 per cent of whom were Jewish traders). Fifty-seven per cent of the property elite belonged to the circle whose annual income was less than this sum, but was above 2,400 pengő. Accordingly, the narrow circles of the town's principal citizens and the middle-class members had made an enough good earning to stand their ground within the country as a whole. In the meanwhile the concentration of capital was demonstrably increasing within the multifunctional elite: in case of the elite circle of 1937, at a rough estimate, vine and land property growth had shown the sum of 1 million pengő, as compared to the times a decade ago. As opposed to this, their ratio both within the financial institution manager board and the incorporated company manager board declined with 24–30 per cent. Fifteen per cent of the streets and squares inhabited by the multifunctional elite was remarkably popular within their own circle members, thus these places associated with high prestige – 46-50 per cent of this elite dwelled these 18 streets. The most highly wanted 3 streets were Nagykőrösi, Csongrádi and Batthyányi streets. The elite members preferred those street that were radially, directly linked to the heart of the city — to the market — as it was precedential with many generations before, these streets held a kind of high prestige due to their traffic and functional roles.

## IV.

### PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE THESIS TOPIC

#### *Scientific Publications*

##### *Already Published*

1. Szilágyi, Zsolt: Erdei és Mendöl – a tanya [Erdi and Mendöl – the Homestead]. *Agrártörténeti Szemle* 45. (2003. 3–4. sz.) 549–563.
2. Szilágyi, Zsolt: Kecskemét agrártársadalma a gazdasági világválság összefüggésében [The Agricultural Society of Kecskemét in Correlation with Economic Recession]. In: *Állam és nemzet a XIX–XX. században (a 2006. március 31 – április 1-én megrendezett Történész Doktoranduszok Debreceni Konferenciája előadásai)*. Szerk. Bodnár Erzsébet – Demeter Gábor. Debreceni Egyetem Történelmi Doktori Program, Debrecen, 2006. 320–333.
3. Szilágyi, Zsolt: Szerkezeti alapvonások a Horthy-kori Kecskemét agrártársadalmában [Structural Features of Agricultural Society during the Horthy Era]. (Benda Gyula díjnyertes tanulmány.) *Korall* 28–29. (2007. Szeptember) 196–225.
4. Szilágyi, Zsolt: Gazdaelit a Horthy-kori Kecskeméten [Hostelit of Kecskemét in the Horthy Era]. In: *Generációk a történelemben*. In: *Rendi társadalom – Polgári társadalom* 21. (A Hajnal István Kör – Társadalmi Egyesület 2007. évi konferenciájának kötete.) Szerk. Gyáni Gábor – Lácza Magdolna. Kiadja: a Hajnal István Kör – Társadalomtörténeti Egyesület és a Nyíregyházi Főiskola Gazdasági és Társadalomtudományi Kara, Nyíregyháza, 2008. 295–307.

##### *Under Publication*

5. Szilágyi, Zsolt: Város–tanya kapcsolat a Horthy-kori Kecskeméten [The Interrelation of Town and Homestead in Kecskemét during the Horthy Era]. *Tér és Társadalom* 25. (2011. 3–4. sz.)

6. Szilágyi, Zsolt: Parasztváros – gazdagváros? Kecskemét adóstársadalma a Horthy-korszakban [Ploughman Town – Rich Town? The Debtor Society in Kecskemét during the Horthy Era]. *Századok* 145. (2011. 6. sz.)
7. Szilágyi, Zsolt: A Horthy-kori helyi elit fogalmáról [The Concept of Horthy Era Local Elite]. *Acta Universitatis Debreceniensis Series Historica* LXIII. Történeti Tanulmányok XIX. (2011)

### *Conference lectures*

1. Kecskemét agrártársadalma a gazdasági világválság összefüggésében [The Agricultural Society of Kecskemét Correlated to Great Depression]. *Állam és nemzet a XIX–XX. században*, DE Történelmi Doktori Iskola, Debrecen, 2006. március 31.
2. Zsidó elit a Horthy-kori Kecskeméten [The Jewish Elite Circle in Kecskemét during the Horthy Era]. *Zsidóság a magyar társadalomban a 19–20. században*. ELTE Történelemtudományok Doktori Iskola és ORZsE Doktori Iskola, Budapest, 2007. március 20.
3. Gazdaelit a Horthy-kori Kecskeméten [The Hostelite Circle in Kecskemét during the Horthy Era]. *Generációk a történelemben*. Hajnal István Kör Társadalomtörténeti Egyesület és Nyíregyházi Főiskola Gazdasági és Társadalomtudományi Kara, Nyíregyháza, 2007. július 6.
4. A társadalom gazdasági potenciálja. Vagyonszerkezet és eladósodottság Kecskeméten (1930–44) [The Economic Potential of the Society. Property Structure and Indebtedness in Kecskemét (1930–44)], *Helyzetkép és jövőkép: a magyar társadalom a „fordulat évei”-ben*, ELTE Új- és Jelenkori Magyar Történeti Program, DE Történelmi Doktori Iskola és Pest Megyei Levéltár, Budapest, 2007. november 22.