

# Pásztor Ágota: Association culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Balmazújváros, a settlement from the lowland

## 1. Objectives of dissertation, topic outline

Society and culture of the Hungarian peasantry were mainly organized by organic institutions mediating their traditions throughout centuries. However at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> – beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a process had started for the result of which the changing of culture and society speeded up. This process was the formation of a modern civilized society what is quite complex and differentiated among the peasantry. As a result of embourgeoisement the traditional culture changed completely at certain places while on other territories only some parts of the culture was affected (such as the interior of houses, clothing, world concept, mentality etc.)<sup>1</sup>

After the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century different associations, circles, clubs, casino's appeared in the life of peasantry because of the embourgeoisement and they ensured a new framework for organizing the way of life of peasantry. In this period in almost all populous towns in the plain at least two but many times even three new associations were founded.<sup>2</sup>

Kincső Verebély writes in connection with the evaluation of research of the embourgeoisement of the peasantry „cultural processes implement their intentions and statements – throughout multiple transfers – with mediation of the institutionalized cultural network”.<sup>6</sup> In my dissertation which started out from the above mentioned facts I am on a research of interactions between club culture and the culture of peasantry. During this research I also introduce each association with an emphasis on the sociological layer the given association was based on and the role the association fulfilled in the life of the settlement and the members and what social tasks the peasants solve at those times with using these associations. Among the associations of town in the examined time frame I focus on those which played a central role in the life of community in the first half of the century especially between the two world wars.

Miklós Szilágyi summarizes the results of Hungarian sociological – ethnographic researches. While he underlines the importance of farmer-circuits he also emphasizes that these organizations helped 'peasants in the process of embourgeoisement after they became possessors and became independent of the former inherited status of theirs'.<sup>7</sup>

During my researches I also take into account what role this new society organizing form which appeared along with the embourgeoisement – the association culture - played in the changing of the traditions and how, to what extent and using what direct mechanisms it influenced and assured the framework for the embourgeoisement of peasantry.

After the Second World War associations of Balmazújváros continued their activities within continuously narrowing frames until 1949 when they officially finished their operations. In the middle of the 1950s there was again a possibility to recall the tradition of associations based on new conditions. In Balmazújváros many former associations opened up their doors. These continued their activities until the 1960-70s. What is more, Rákóci Reading Circle was continuously operating until the regime change. However, changes of the last decades of the century started a new renaissance in the history of civil organizations. Along with a number of new organizations a lot of former organizations revived together with their local traditional activities. In the second half of my dissertation I research the operation of

organizations which belong to the second group. I examine under what conditions and in what forms association tradition survived and renewed for the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In spite of the fact that many researchers showed interest towards the associations of Balmazújváros there happened neither systematic processing of source materials nor researching on the relations of associations and the local peasant culture. During my former research works on club culture<sup>8</sup> it was proved that research on particular settlements – having good source materials on hand – concentrating on the network complexity and the associations can bring a number of new results.

## **2. Outline of the applied methods**

### **2.1. Overview of specialized literature**

My research spreads over a quite wide time range and my problem statement is also quite complex. But my job became a lot easier as some parts of associational life of Balmazújváros have already been in scope of interest of social sciences and as a result of that some parts of my topic is already processed. Many dissertations, studies, doctoral dissertations touch upon parts of this topic. Most of these works are about the local social events and their effects on associations in the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> century. During that period the agrarian socialist movement was significant even nationwide. Péter Fodor's more studies and his doctoral dissertation<sup>9</sup>, László Ónosi's study and candidate dissertation<sup>10</sup>, Béla Takács's volume<sup>11</sup> are specialized on the local social movements of the 19-20th century, having a touch upon the associations as well. Literature on the 1932 gendarme volley gives information in relation to the Földművelő Munkás Egylet (Agricultural Labor Association). There is also a relevance for Balmazújváros in the reader circuit debate in the 1950s. Views of Péter Veres were published in *Művelt Nép* (Educated People) concerning this topic.<sup>12</sup> Mária Vajda's research on the usual way of choosing spouse<sup>13</sup> touches upon the associations in a narrower scale but it is important in terms of my topic.

In relation to reading circles there were two summarizing works published. József Pozsonyi goes through the history of reading circles in greater lines in his article<sup>14</sup> and then he goes into details concerning the restart of the Circle of 48 in Balmazújváros. István Király mentions a lot of formerly not published data in his work entitled *Balmazújvárosi Krónika* (Chronicle of Balmazújváros)<sup>15</sup>. Among these I use data which derives from the period between 1960-90 and contains information on the closure of circles.

### **2.2. Overview of the examined associations**

After the overview of specialized literature came a description of the circles of the examined associations. The Archives of province Hajdú-Bihar store the Book of Recordings of Associations in which the associations founded in Balmazújváros are also listed. The associations are listed there in the order of their date of foundation/receiving permission to operate.<sup>16</sup> The book mentioned above shows us a colorful association structure. However the listed associations did not play an equally important role in the everyday lives of members of the community. Usage and fulfilled role of certain societies, circles in the life of the settlement could be quite different.

Focusing on the role associations fulfill in the lives of inhabitants of Balmazújváros a more differentiated picture appeared. Some associations seem to have higher scores while others remained in the background. While I was researching in Balmazújváros I asked my conversationalists to list associations (circles, societies, casino's etc.) which were functioning in the settlement during the researched time frame. As an answer for my question they mostly listed the following organizations: 1. Civil Reading Circle/Civil Casino /Petőfi Circle, 2. Reading Circle of 48 /Circle of 48, 3. Reading Circle (Olvasó Nép kör)/Small Circle/ Rákóczi Circle, 4. Kossuth Circle. Those conversationalists who were born in the first half of the 1930s or earlier were listing three more organizations in addition to the above mentioned ones: Trading Corporation, Catholic Home, Agrarian Association. The other associations listed in the registry (i.e. Book of Recordings of the Associations) were not mentioned at all.<sup>17</sup>

Specialized literatures on the topic also mention the above listed associations only. The history, background and activity of some of these associations is already processed and evaluated - I use some of these works and refer to them in the appropriate sections.

### **2.3. Methods of collecting data**

Continuing my researches I created a database of the selected associations, their history and their activities. While working on this I had to take into consideration that the lack of sources and the dissension makes the work of researchers dealing with associations a lot more difficult. Sources we have on associations many times determine the scope of our researches. This is the reason why I tried to collect information from as many sources as it was possible to be able to cover the complex scope of my research.

#### **2.3.1. Archive sources**

The first source of documents concerning associations I mention here is the Archives. Related to my researches on Balmazújváros I researched among documents of the Archives of Province Hajdú-Bihar – especially the Book of Recordings of the Associations<sup>18</sup> and the collection of constitutions of associations found in the Archives of Alispán<sup>19</sup>. I selected the associations founded in Balmazújváros until 1949 and in the next research phase I studied the constitutions of the selected associations.

#### **2.3.2. Sources found in the collections of museums**

The history of associations is written in several other documents as well. In the Museum Semsey Andor in Balmazújváros there are many different important sources related to my topic: the minutes, cash-books, membership books, fundamental rules, photo documents, and other materials.

#### **2.3.3. Source value of Veres Péter's works**

While researching associations of Balmazújváros one cannot disregard works of the local born Péter Veres. The writer mentions many aspects of everyday life belonging to an association in his autobiographical works. To the ethnographic importance of his works has already been drawn attention by several different researchers. Mihály Sárkány underlines those belletristic works in his publication where he gives the history of ethnographic researches in Hungary. He states that many literary works are based on personal experiences of their authors but they are also completed with local researches and researches of other

sources, they are based on certainty, facts and figures, a great deal of sensitivity and the categories of general education.<sup>20</sup> Miklós Szilágyi also writes in connection with the depicting of the 20<sup>th</sup> century peasant life that ethnographic monograph of peasant workers of Balmazújváros “could be written and it must be written as soon as possible” using the oeuvre of Péter Veres.<sup>21</sup>

#### **2.3.4. Methods of recent material collection**

During a research work between 2002-2004 I tracked down most of the sources of operations of associations myself using scientific research methods.

From the documents about operations of associations I managed to find two minutes. The minutes of Reading People Circle which was founded in 1905 still belongs to Rákóczi Reading Circle which is an operational association even today. The minutes of Kishorti Circle (founded in 1947) is in possession of the heir of one of the founder members.

Many autobiographies, memoirs can contain information for those who research associations. I collected information about Circle of 48 from Páll István<sup>22</sup> who was born in Balmazújváros in 1920.

There are photographic documents of special events of an association in my collection. The earliest pictures of the life of club members were taken early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These were taken of actors invited to perform theatrical plays and during grape harvest festivals organized by the associations. Later, especially after the 1980s more and more pictures were taken of associations and their lives as topic.

Several sides of activities of associations were followed by the media ever since the beginnings. Newspapers, periodicals and in the latest times television and the Internet gives an overview of their programs, events etc. During my researches I systematically looked through each copies of the local news published since 1987. The paper of town ever since its first publication regularly gives outline of events of local circles and associations.

Buildings standing and associations operating even today can be a source of aspects of associational cultural studies. Buildings of Rákóczi Circle and of Circle of 48 are still standing among the associations I focus on. There I collected data and materials using the method of participator-observer of an event.

At last I collected data with a deep-drilling method researching local data, recording life stories and I made a lot of ethnographic interviews in order to get a nuanced picture of the circle / club life of Balmazújváros.

#### **2.4. Processing Methods**

After the complex source data collection<sup>23</sup> I had to organize an enormous amount of data and materials. Basic aspects of organizing data (primarily based on content, secondarily on results of ethnographic and club specified literatures) was determined so as to get answers for my questions mentioned in the Objectives of dissertation, topic outline section.

Materials were organized in two groups along chronological aspects and the borderline was the year of 1949 when the operation of associations was restricted. In the first (longer)

part of my work I represent a short history of circles on the basis of - in most of the cases identical by sources determined aspects and additionally I also use results of my own researches along with the synthesise of my source researches. Afterwards I examined the direct mechanism of their operations. For this purpose I separated the different functions these associations fulfilled and introduced them in a different chapter compared to the results of ethnographic specialized literature.

In the second half of the dissertation I examined the operation of associations after 1949 mainly on the basis of the system created and described previously. During the data gathering and analysis I focused on revealing relationships and networks between the operation of newly established associations in the beginning of the century and the operation of renewed associations.

### **3. Basic Statements**

The Registry of Associations in the Archives of Province Hajdú – Bihar shows us a colorful associational structure. During my researches it turned out that associations founded in Balmazújváros between the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and 1949 providing different activities and profiles had taken different places in the value system of inhabitants. This value system served as a natural filter for society and separated a group of associations apart from the rest of associations namely: Civil Reading Circle, Circle of 48, Industrial Corporation, Kossuth Circle, Reading Circle, Agrarian Labor Association, and Catholic Home. These associations played a distinguished role in the lives of inhabitants and members of the society took advantage of them more frequently than of other associations.

There were a lot of similar characteristics of operations of these associations founded mostly between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> – beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their operations were oriented at communal life, what membership meant was obvious and most of them were organized basically on the basis of geographical parts of the settlement and according to social layers. During their operations their social use was of higher extent than their actual membership. All of them had an independent community house where nearly the same forms of associational lives developed. The researched associations fulfilled a number of different communal function in the lives of members and inhabitants of the settlement: communicational – informational function, political – public life role, representational role, charity function, cultural – educational role, entertainment, choosing partners.

This community function was fulfilled not only in the lives of members but also in a wider range of the society. The social usage of associations was extended to a wider range than the range of their actual members. Community houses for instance were used not only by members and their families but also by other groups, clubs and associations of the settlement.

Among the functions fulfilled by the associations there were previously existing social functions which were existing but prior to the appearance of associations these were not institutionalized. Other already existing functions were complemented or even totally changed by the new circles.

Throughout their activities a number of cultural effects of civil origin impacted the members. The fact that these organizations were local groups and that their membership was well arranged ensured that the members of these associations could build up their private-public or commune relations. Associations and their buildings became popular points, some

sort of “points of reference” - points of reference in terms of architecture and in terms of (continuous) infrastructural development. The operation of circles also became a point of reference in cultural life (newspapers, books, theatrical plays, performances, dance fashions) and in continuous transformation of traditions of social relations.

Analyzing the operations and roles of the four circles there could be found a lot of different tradition determined elements in spite of the fact that the institutional basics for associations were approved by the minister.

Constitutional rules did not define exactly the criteria of membership. After examining the documentations of circles and interviewing the members of circles it turned out that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century members were organized by different parts of the settlements and social layers. Social basis and organizational factor of circles depended on local traditions, family traditions and also the tradition of growing up into a circle.

Constitutions always outlined common goals which were theoretically known and accepted by all who belonged to an association. But in this age entering an association did not happen prior the knowing and accepting of the constitution. From the mid third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century newcomers to associations operating since decades ago were not attracted by the agreement with goals drafted in constitutions but the organization became attractive rather throughout their everyday activities. Family traditions also played an important role in accompanying of an association; the boys were grown up into club lives. If their fathers belonged to a circle, their sons had chance to take a look at how members of associations live their lives and later they also got chance to take part of some activities of an association.

Place for regular, sometimes even daily meetings was ensured by the community house built nearby the living quarters. Associations invested a lot in their community houses since these gave a chance to declare the unity of members and throughout this fact they became prominent points of architectural façade of the settlement.

Rules for showing up in associations were formed along special laws. Who and when stayed at community houses was determined by the peasant culture and the calendar order which was influenced – even determined - by their agricultural tasks.

During the everyday life within an association (during an organization and transaction of an event) it turned out who had skills, affinity and mood to what sort of activities. There was a close, often daily relationship which made a natural selection of ‘talents’ and ‘suitable people’ possible. ‘Prestigious people’ became members of leadership of the associations, those who had affinity to play became actors and the ones with cooking skills could have been the cooks of a circle etc.

The researched four associations in the second third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century fitted to the way of life of peasantry in a number of different points so that a sense of ‘associations always existed and will be existing forever’ could evolve. Culture of associations throughout their complex, to the traditions fitting operations became part of peasant culture.

The examined associations could contribute this way for members to an easier adaptation to the quick cultural, social, agricultural changes of the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century because they lived a life even between the two world wars which was supported by traditions.

In case we take embourgeoisement as an environmental change and we regard peasant culture as a changing-living system or organization than we get to the conclusion that associations and their community houses gave framework to an easier adaptation for the peasantry.<sup>25</sup> Association as an organization and their related buildings were forums to the adaptation process in fact and club culture formed by everyday activities of members was the melting pot for embourgeoisement.

Activities of associations were abolished in an administrative way in 1949. After the changes in political life in the 50s all the four associations revived and started again their operations. Club life of the 50s was based on associational traditions of the pre-war period. However, according to central guidelines the political control was strongly in effect in the lives of circles. Placing associations under higher level control was obvious when they were put under the scope of authority of Népfront.

Activities of the first decade were broken by the changed 'outside environment'. In the background of the phenomena there were complex processes: such as changing atmosphere, changing of the way of life, new possibilities. There were no young members in associations, the aging of members started. Circle incomes were not sufficient to cover the expenses of associations – not even for maintaining the operations especially not for continuous improvement and renewal. Buildings of associations were ordered to fulfill other functions. In the 1970s associations and circles closed their doors except for one club.

In the 1980s a series of events (which were not directly connected to circles) started out a number of changes. Balmazújváros also took part of a knowing your home quiz named From Hortobágy to Sárrét. The presented „Németfalusi Lakodalmas” (Nuptial in Németfalu) was successful and its success also showed the success of preserving traditions. There is way to revitalize one of the most attractive and spectacular form of club culture. While they were organizing grape harvest festivals and balls they were striving for preservation and vivid representation of traditions before the World War. Performers were those who were grown up within circle traditions. In the midst of the 1980s Rákóczi Circle took over the Nuptial in Németfalu and the organization of traditional grape harvest and ball. So the right for organizing them got back to the traditional and original organizing committee.

At the end of the 1980s a revival of traditions of circles started and their success among - and also around the inhabitants bring a revaluing of the role of associations with them. At the end of the decade Circle of 48 again opened up its doors. From the beginning of the 1990s two operating circles stated in their constitutions that they aimed at preserving of traditions. We can be the witnesses of a renaissance of the former circle life in Balmazújváros. Preservation of traditions means mainly the organizing of balls, foundation of song and dance ensembles. Balls are no longer occasions for selecting a partner but they are primarily occasions for entertainment. The base of operations of associations (i.e. community house) is no longer a place for everyday meetings. There are even more female members of clubs and the aging started out in the 1960s still continues. Most members only meet on occasion of events organized in a traditional way once a year. In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century they try to preserve traditional forms of operation, they continue the previously developed ways and membership, active participation in a circle basically means preserving traditions.

#### **4. Further reading on the topic of the dissertation**

2003 Egyesületek Dévaványán a XIX. század közepétől a második világháborúig. *Ethnica* V/4. 118-121.

(in English: Associations in Dévaványa from the middle of the 19th century until the Second World War *Ethnica*)

2004 Székházak szerepe a dévaványai egyesületek életében. *Ethnica* VI/4. 156-157.

(The Role of the club houses in the life of the associations in Dévaványa. *Ethnica* VI/4. 156-157. 2004.)

2006 A Balmazújvárosi Rákóczi Olvasó Nép kör (1905-1949). *Ethnica* VIII/2. 56-59.

(About the Rákóczi Reading Circle of Balmazújváros (1905-1949). *Ethnica* VIII/2. 56-59. 2006.

2009 Olvasókörök az 1950-es években Balmazújvároson. In Bartha Elek – Keményfi Róbert – Marinka Melinda (szerk.): 1956 a néphagyományban. 536-555. Debrecen

Associations in the 1950s in Balmazújváros. In Bartha Elek – Keményfi Róbert – Marinka Melinda (ed.): 1956 in folk culture. 536-555. Debrecen, 2009.

#### **Soon to be published:**

2010 A társadalmi csere színterei. Egyesületi székházak Balmazújvároson a 20. század első felében. In: *Ház és Ember. A Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum Évkönyve XXII.* Szentendre: A Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum

Houses of associations in Balmazújváros in the first part of the 20th century. In: *Ház és Ember. A Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum Évkönyve XXII.* Szentendre: A Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum, 2010.

2010/2011 Báli kultúra a balmazújvárosi egyesületi életben. *Tánc tudományi Közlemények II./1., III./1.*

Dance within associations in Balmazújváros. *Tánc tudományi Közlemények II./1., III./1., 2010/2011*

**Official names of the organisations, institutions, associations – and their English descriptions or equivalents:**

Népfront Popular Front

Földművelő Munkás Egylet Agricultural Labor Association

Polgári Olvasó Kör Civil Reading Circle

Polgári Kaszinó Civil Casino

Petőfi Kör Petőfi Circle

48-as Olvasókör Reading Circle of 48

48-as Kör Circle of 48

Olvasó Népkör Reading Circle

Kiskör Small Circle

Rákóczi Kör Rákóczi Circle

Kossuth Kör Kossuth Circle

Művelt Nép Educated People – newspaper

Ipartestület Trading Corporation

Katolikus Otthon Catholic Home