PHD DISSERTATION

DOBÁK JUDIT

LIFE IN THE IRON-WORKER COLONY OF DIÓSGYŐR ETHNOGRAOHICAL – ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY

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The field-site of my research, the iron-worker colony (settlement) of Diósgyőr, nowadays is a building estate of Miskolc. The nearly 140 years old colony was built parallel with the establishment of the local iron factory. The heavy industry, and within this, specifically the metallurgy, generated certain social processes in Northern Hungary, and created life-styles, formerly unknown for this region. In my dissertation I will describe one of these specific ways of life, the lifestyle of the industrial workers living in the colony.

My research has started in 1996, and was undertaken in several cycles. In the one hand, I consider my work to be primary a cultural anthropological study, both in its methodology and in its approach. On the other hand the work has several features coming from other disciplines. I apply the terminology of the ethnological studies, the chosen approach is that of the retrospective one used in the field of the historical anthropology with a special focus on the role of history within the social processes and finally some of my methodological concerns are coming from the quantitative approach known in the field of sociology.

The workers and officials living in this community had formed a unique worker-community, with an even more specific form of life. Their life is characterized by the city. This, somehow suburban, environment, the well-organized building structure of the colony defined the life these workers were living. According to my research at the beginning he closeness of Miskolc, later on, after the two towns were united, the direct connection of the city and the colony had effected understanding of space, the cultural, economic and social relations of those living here. It also characterizes the gender relations, the connections between certain social entities and the access to cultural and material goods. The inhabitants of the colony originated mainly from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, from the Upland, from Austria, from Bohemia and Poland. Therefore one characteristic difference of this community was the common experience of being 'stateless'. This emotional background and the shared desire for settling down created a unique community and served as a basis for the birth of worker-dynasties. The state-owned and state-operated factory and colony had a strong strategic importance, which also meant certain benefits for those living here, that helped to create a special pattern of identity.

According to my hypothesis the inhabitants of the iron-worker colony of Diósgyőr can be seen as community. The locals had formed a lifestyle different from that of other workers in the country. These specific characteristics were defined by the establishment of the colony. The specific characteristics mentioned here are: the fact that both the factory and the colony was state-owned and state-operated, the local community had been formed on the basis of voluntary re-settlement, all the inhabitants were employed by the same workplace and that the community was trying to reach a point of complete self-support that strengthened the cohesion.

The loyalty toward the factory did not come from the professional achievements of the individual, but from the social benefits and services provided by the factory for the whole family of the workers.
A planned, highly hierarchic group-settlement was created. This created community had helped the individual to find his/her way and status within the local community and established a social group called worker-aristocracy that served and still serves as a desired model for those living in the locality. The workers of the iron-worker colony were differentiated, but this differentiation did not exceed the borders of the locality, it did not have relevance in the wider social setting. Therefore, even if it has certain bourgeois features, the worker-aristocracy could not become an integrated part of the later middle-class.

The degradation of the colony, due to the known historic fact, was inevitable. The circumstances that helped to form this locality vanished, the role of the state was minimized, the heavy industry and the professional experiences gained in it became unnecessary, the existing social system does not have any connection with the current local community.

According to my understanding the life of those living in the community was influenced by the closeness of Miskolc to a much greater degree than by the actual locality Diósgyőr.

B.) METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES USED IN THE RESEARCH

The research on which the dissertation is based was carried out between 1996 and 2007. Although the research itself had been carried out in several cycles, my connection with the locals was continuous. For every cycles I had to choose informants based on the relevance of their experiences, but the primary aspect of my choice was to be able to build up a trustful relationship with my informants. The research done on the characteristics of the lifestyle was based on the analysis of the individual and collective memories.

During the first phase of the research (1996-1998) I made unstructured interviews and analyzed the physical environment. The aim of my research was to prepare a complex analysis of the lifestyle of the inhabitants living in the iron-worker colony of Diósgyőr. Because of this aimed complexity I felt a certain need of applying methods of different approaches. My main approach is cultural anthropological, therefore I have decided to undertake several turns of extended fieldwork. I have chosen informants who could not only help me with my interviews (genealogical, narrative and life interviews) but also let me peek into their everyday existence.

At the beginning of the research it was very interesting to focus on the local social hierarchy and its spatial characteristics. For understanding the relationship between status and space I have chosen a method, at that time rarely used, called mental mapping. The mental maps served not only the purpose of data-gathering techniques but were also one of my analytical tools. Therefore this part of the research can be considered as part of the cognitive researches or social geographic approaches.

After I have defined the focus points of my research I conducted a large scale survey, which was finished in 2004. With a questionnaire consisting of 109 questions we have surveyed every inhabitants of the colony who fit into certain categories: they had to be older than 50 years, ¼ of their life had to be spent in the colony or they had to be relocated but familiar with the traditions of the colony through the experiences of their parents. By putting up these criteria 60 families became potential informants, from which 55 was actually surveyed. It means a 90% sampling of the colony's 50+ years population. This survey was also the basis of a similar research done by researchers and students in 10 rural localities in Norhern Hungary. Because of the questionnaire itself and the common approach the results of two research can be compared.

The questionnaire consisted of both open and closed questions, but also used scales to gain relevant answers. The relatively small sample made it possible to use MS Excel in the analysis. This program is able to provide the needed mathematical statistical formulas for the analysis.

In order to evoke my informants' memories o I used visual materials as methodological tools. I used my own photographs but also documents found in private collections, museums and archives. By showing the pictures and taping these photographic interviews I was able to get information that were otherwise inaccessible for me through the life interviews and questionnaires.

Through the private photograph and document collections of my key informants I was able to conduct some really micro-focal studies – essential for an anthropological fieldwork.

Beside the primary sources coming from the oral history, I also used secondary data sources: archival documents, museum collections. A complex research in the cemetery of the colony was also carried out.

C.) THESIS STATEMENTS OF THE DISSERTATION

The self-definition of the iron workers of Diósgyőr is local, they do not seek for a status within the wider worker community, they did not have an everyday relationship with the workers of other factories or with the mining settlements. Their self-image is based on the factory, on the colony and on the work. The only relation within which they were differentiate themselves from other communities is that of their comparison with the neighboring agricultural community.

By defining the way of life I have used the definition of life-style. By using this definition I was able to narrowing the gap between the homogenization approaches and the case studies existing in the literature. By doing so I was successful in analyzing the deterministic features that effected the given social group, and also in identifying the features that created the quality of life on the individual level.

According to my hypothesis the iron-worker colony of Diósgyőr is highly differential, but the status of the specific groups is only valid within the borders of the community. With the lack of outward connections these statuses cannot be realized in a wider social setting and therefore, even by showing bourgeois characteristics, this group cannot become an integral part of the later middle-class.

My second hypothesis is focusing on the existence of the worker aristocracy and its hierarchy-cretaing social role. The notion of worker-aristocracy is *per definitionem* paradoxical, by reflecting on the lower end of the social scale and by using an expression that is traditional connected to social elites. Even on the everyday level, the notion itself has a two-folded meaning. Those who were considered part of this worker-aristocracy did not have different working conditions from those who were taken by the community as unskilled, lower-class workers. Both social group had similarly hard physical work, even if the 'aristocrats' had the skills and experiences. The work itself was just as dirty, unhealthy and dangerous. The only difference between the 'aristocrat' and the unskilled worker was the difficulties of being substituted. The skilled, intelligent, experienced, well-educated worker was not easily substituted by the factory, therefore the professional rank was not only a rank in terms of the salaries but also in terms of social status. We have to note here, that applying etic categories for this case is highly problematic and serves only the purpose of grouping this aristocracy into a larger unit.

The paradoxical nature of the notion of worker-aristocracy is also showed in the dealing with time. This special relationship with time was the real basis on which the 'elite' was formed. The essence of the worker-aristocracy can be analyzed by looking at the means of spending one's free time. In this free time the worker aristocrat built a micro-world, a community with strict inner rules in which the members were better dressed and chose other means of leisure.

We have to note here that the free time was highly structured by the legal definition of working hours and by the salary earned from the factory. The workers did not have any other source of income, which actually meant that the factory itself has formed its own aristocracy by promotions and hiring.

It was the economic interest of the factory that, beside paying salary and giving social benefits, it had built up a highly paternalistic system. The workers, theoretically speaking, used this opportunity well. But also this system is to be blamed for not empowering the worker aristocracy to build up a community that is dynamic enough to react when the

economic circumstances have changed. This process led to the collapse of the working class after the socialist era has ended.

The community of the iron-workers of Diósgyőr is hierarchic. Four different status groups can be observed. The lowest level is formed by the blue collar workers and their direct leaders. The second class is formed by the officials, who in numbers were considerately less than the blue collar employees. Up the officials there were the members of the managerial board of the factory. This group, with a few dozen members, gained its status through the myth-creating work of the lowest level workers. The fourth group is situated somewhere between the first and the second level. This is the class of the officials who were not integrated in the direct hierarchical structure of the factory. Most of these officials never became part of the colony, partially because they did not live within the community. Even the houses built for them after 1936 were situated outside the core of the colony and, although theoretically speaking were part of the structure, never became an integrated part of the locality. The mobility between the given classes or status groups was extremely limited, with the exception of the worker-aristocracy from which one could easily experience an upward mobility. Mostly, the members of the worker aristocracy were those who were promoted as beadles.

The most important factor by which somebody's social status was defined was the professional skill of the given individual, the recognition by the employer and by his fellow-workers. The recognition of skills also brought social benefits for the family, and defined somebody's status even outside the buildings of the factory. Among these benefits I mention the followings: getting new accommodation, using the bath, more opportunity to consume, better access to cultural capital, better access to sport facilities.

Accommodation was only provided for permanent workers and the level of comfort depended on the employment and on the importance of somebody's work.

The workers aristocracy has experienced a loss of prestige in the 1950's, both in symbolic and in material terms. The loss of values was experienced mainly at the workplace where the formerly existing groups were ended and the formerly existing vertical hierarchy became more horizontal. The new groups had new forms and new names – e.g. brigades – and created new structural levels. The unstable payments, the working competitions and the absolutely illogical norm-level ended up in complete demoralization and rewrote the formerly well-working hierarchy of the community.

This crises of values had some indirect effect in the families, but it was not able to completely wash away the former values. The skills, loyalty and hard working are still, even in the third generation, considered as the most important values in life.

During the 1950's the workers aristocracy was destroyed on purpose, although looking at the community from an outsiders perspective this change was not visible. The devaluation was to be experienced within the families and the community too. Inactivity and premature pension became options, but also the real value of the salaries lessened.

The formerly existing hierarchy of the local community has collapsed and a new, more homogeneous working class was created. In this new system the former workers-aristocracy could not play a significant role.

Until the 19th century the inhabitants of the locality in which the iron-workers colony was created were Calvinists. A few kilometers further though we find mostly German and Slovakian communities with more colorful religious patterns. The workforce of the new factory came from these settlements but mainly from Bohemian, Moravian, Austrian and Slovakian regions. n smaller numbers we could also find Polish, Romanian, Ruten and Bulgarian workers in the community.

At first, in the first elementary school classes there were no pupils considering themselves Hungarians. By the turn of the century the picture has changed and all of the pupils considered Hungarian as their mother tongue. It is obvious hat such a change cannot be part of a spontaneous and natural process, therefore we have to consider the official pressure and the statistical 'correction' as factors. We have to note that we do not have data on the mobility of workers, we do not know the rate in which these workers chose the settle down permanently. Given the relatively modern and good work-conditions and social benefits though, we must think that most of the foreign workers did establish their life here. By the end of the 1930's the assimilation process has ended. The world wars have further strengthened the process and the different ethnicities vanished in the community. Ethnicity was only part of the family-legend, after two generation it was not mentioned in the community.
The reason for this noticeably quick and effective assimilation was that leaving the ethnicity behind was an easily acceptable price for being part of the 'aristocracy'. Their ethnic identity was given up for a well-paid job and for a community that was ready to accept them as members.

In terms of religion the process follows a quite different path. We could easily think that by giving up the ethnic identity the religious groups gain greater importance. This hypothesis could only be partially proved. Right until World War II., the colony was heterogeneous in terms of religion. The factory supported the building of churches and religious community buildings by material or financial donations. Because of this there were three different religious groups and churches in the community: Calvinist, Catholic and Evangelical. Changes came in the 1950's when, as a first sign, the religious studies were not part of the school curricula anymore and the factory took away the territories formerly operated by the church. The workers had to chose: either they are members of the party and have a comfortable life, or they become social outcast but remain church members. It did not has to be a quick choice, mostly these decisions were made within a decade or so. The stereotypical picture of a left-wing, atheist worker is not proven in the iron-worker colony of Diósgyőr. Even those who were not part of any religious groups are and were considered secular and not atheist. This statement is proven by other research carried out in other worker colonies in Northern Hungary. In this colony the religious education was part of the family background. Traditionally the women were more active in terms of religious traditions than men. For most of the workers of the factory were men, the membership of the party was also a male domain. The wives of these men usually did not work and were able to continue their religious life. on the other hand, this difference was not expressed in conflicts of any kind and even the community was ready to accept the different world-view of the genders.

Physical strength and the use of it was an accepted and usual method of settling conflicts. The common stereotype of the violent worker could not be unproved by my research. Physical strength was a known advantage during the hiring process. Physical strength therefore became a value within the community too. Fights were part of life and the community judged them negatively only if they were committed when drunk, or if they became regular or if they were destructive for the community. Fighting for your honor or for a girl could even give a higher position for someone. Physical strength was regularly tested in fights with the local agricultural workers.
The worker culture was also a drinking culture, alcohol was part of the everyday life, but not at the same level, as the outside community stereotypically thinks. Both the community and the factory punished excessive drinking, because of the dangerous working conditions. Therefore alcohol was mainly consumed in the leisure time at family events or community gatherings.

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