

Éva Mikos

Alligators in the Sewers: Urban Legends about Terrifying Animals and Frightening Places

Abstract

The aim of the present study is to provide an overall picture of the nature of urban folklore using the “Alligators in the Sewers” urban legend type circulated in both the Hungarian and international press and by word of mouth. While contemporary legends have attracted only sporadic attention in Hungarian research to date, by illustrating the historical development of this legend type the aim of the present case study is to demonstrate how the phenomenon has existed in the Hungarian press for almost 200 years.

The present study attempts to identify the kind of opportunities for interpretation offered by these stories in the field of folkloristics; the extent to which they are relevant beyond their literal meaning; and the ways in which they shed light on modern-day understandings of the world. Giant reptiles that are not indigenous to Europe are terrifying to the average individual, while at the same time they evoke a yearning for the natural world in city dwellers trapped amid concrete walls. Urban sewers and storm drains hold similar terrors: on the one hand, they are there to remove filth and symbolize the more unsavory aspects of urban life, while on the other hand their hidden presence beneath the ground offers ample opportunity for the projection of numerous fantasies. Animals that lurk in the sewers, from where they emerge to attack people, are manifestations, contained within simple, traditional narrative frameworks, of the murkiness of highly structured societies and of the sense of danger that this opacity engenders in us. The emergence and persistence of such stories can be attributed to a number of social practices, such as circuses, sideshows, and the keeping of reptiles as pets, along with the respective press reports and rumors.

Keywords: folk culture, urban culture, legends, crocodiles, fear



Stories about reptiles – chiefly crocodiles and alligators – that end up living in sewers and storm drains have been circulated in large numbers in both oral and written form since the middle of the 20th century.¹ To date, most of the variants of this legend type have emerged in the United States, while in most of these versions the events take place in big American cities.² Although at first sight such stories would seem to be typical of the 20th century, in fact they have a long history.³ One recently published study has highlighted 2000-year-old parallels as well as related stories dating from the 19th century.⁴ When it comes to urban and contemporary legends, one might justifiably question what it is that makes these stories modern, and why they are associated with big cities and the metropolitan lifestyle. The answer lies primarily in the fact that the written press, which plays a decisive role in modern mass societies and which is an integral aspect of the urban lifestyle, is crucial to the circulation of such stories, while they are perpetuated in many other areas of popular culture, from film and television to the Internet.⁵ Secondly, for the past five decades the urban legends have been interpreted in the literature as metaphors for the anxieties experienced by the broad and internally stratified middle class of contemporary urban society.⁶

Researchers have recognized the phenomenon known as the urban or contemporary legend for more or less 100 years: it was first identified and investigated in the 1930s by renowned press historians in Germany.⁷ The topic became fashionable in academic circles once again after the Second World War, when a large number of North American sociologists, psycholo-

¹ On the dichotomy between the oral and written dissemination of contemporary legends, see Fischer 1991.

² Colemann 1979; Brunvand 1981: 90–98; Brunvand 2011: 174–178; Brunvand 2012: 64–65.

³ For analyses of ancient and medieval parallels to contemporary legends, see: Ellis 1983; Ellis 2001; Messerli 2006; Bennett 2005.

⁴ Asplund Ingemark 2008.

⁵ On the role of mass media in the dissemination of legends and folklore in general, see Dégh 1994; Nicolaisen 2008.

⁶ Benvenuto 2000 (2004): 77–105. Page numbers refer to the Hungarian edition, which was consulted during the writing of the present study. Fine–Ellis 2010: 1–20. Work on the study was supported by a grant from the “Momentum” program of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, MTA Lendület_2020-56 (*Locality Embedded in the Web of Global Transitions. Ecological anthropology mediating between local communities and global changes in the Carpathian Basin*). I would like to take this opportunity to thank biologist and ethnographer Dániel Babai for his help in the writing of the present study.

⁷ Shojaei Kawan 1995.

gists, and folklorists began working in this field.⁸ While it was primarily the folkloristic approach that dominated at the time, in what follows I also draw on aspects of the first two academic fields. The Hungarian versions of one such legend type that are presented in this study represent the fundamental characteristics of the urban legend, while at the same time illustrating the paradoxes of urban life.

In the case of the “Alligators in the Sewers”⁹ legend type, the role of the metropolis is particularly important: indeed, in most variants – and especially those collected in America – the events emphatically take place in cities with populations of many millions, typically New York, or more rarely Chicago. The Hungarian-language versions examined in the present paper likewise typically situate the story in these big U.S. cities, and occasionally in Tokyo, Paris, London, or Munich.

In the present study, I attempt to answer two questions. Firstly: Which specific human fears associated with life in the metropolis can the story be interpreted as a metaphor of? Secondly: What factors have contributed to the enduring popularity over the last 200 years of stories about reptiles lurking in the urban sewerage system? Which social practices, primarily in terms of attitudes to wildlife, have contributed to the persistence of the story in the press, and presumably also in oral tradition? And finally, how does the story reflect the typical human relationship with the natural world?

Sources

Although even the journalists themselves occasionally disprove the stories that appear time and again in the press, such stories continue to crop up.¹⁰ Interest in urban legends and the role of the press in disseminating them has

⁸ Although it remains an important area of research in North America today, interest in the topic is far less pronounced in Europe. However, as can be seen from the bibliography included at the end of the present study, some important publications on the topic have been written, and continue to be written, in German for example.

⁹ The stories popular in the United States refer to alligators, although in the Hungarian press both crocodiles and alligators appear, the two typically being used as synonyms. In fact, species belonging to the order Crocodylia can be classified into two families: true crocodiles (Crocodylidae) and alligators (Alligatoridae). Where not otherwise specified, in the present study I use the umbrella name “crocodile,” which appears most often in Hungarian texts, while in unambiguous, American cases, “alligator” is used. The name for this legend type was coined by Jan Harold Brunvand and is universally accepted in the literature, thus it has been used throughout.

¹⁰ Dián 2005.

so far been sporadic on the part of Hungarian folklorists¹¹, although even in Hungary the phenomenon can be observed from the 19th century.¹² To date, only a few contemporary legends circulated by word of mouth in Hungarian have been collected, which precludes a historical analysis of the oral tradition of the phenomenon.¹³ I have used online press archives to help fill the gaps in the almost 100-year-old research history. Search words, or rather word pairs, used to investigate Hungarian-language press sources yielded the legend-related data shown in the table in the appendix.¹⁴

The use of historical press archives also proved useful in terms of tracing the social history of changes in the relationship between city dwellers and reptiles: however, in this case they served not as a source but rather as an illustration, rendering the processes as perceptible as possible.¹⁵

The topic and its appearance in Hungary

The individual narratives each highlight different episodes in the lives of crocodiles or alligators that live in the sewers. Typically, the framework of the story involves an individual who returns to the city from an exotic summer vacation and brings back a baby crocodile. However, the individual in question gradually realizes that keeping this kind of reptile as a pet is likely to prove difficult in the long term, so they flush it down the toilet. Having survived the journey home, the reptile then ends up in the sewer where it

¹¹ Before the 21st century, the question was only rarely explored in Hungarian folkloristics (e.g. Hoppál–Frank 1980; Voigt 1986: 85). First summary: Nagy 2006. Besides folkloristics, the theme attracts interest among psychologists in more Western countries. In Hungary, interest among psychologists is also sporadic (e.g. Mérő 2005). In addition, journalists deal with this topic in the interests of enabling readers to differentiate between real news and hoaxes or fake news. On this, see Marinov–Dezső–Pál 2006. György Szabó, an essayist writing for *Élet és Irodalom*, a weekly magazine about literature and politics, made many valuable observations about the legend type discussed here, which continue to be pertinent today (Szabó 1973).

¹² Tracing one legend type, see Mikos 2021.

¹³ For a compilation of data before the 2000s, see Nagy 2006.

¹⁴ The finds were generated by four Hungarian word pairs (*krokodil* – *csatorna* [crocodile – sewer], *aligátor* – *csatorna* [alligator – sewer], *krokodil* – *kanális* [crocodile – drain], *aligátor* – *kanális* [alligator – drain]). Further legend-related data can be expected to come to light in the course of further analytical browsing.

¹⁵ The legend type has also turned up regularly in the online press in the last two decades: several Hungarian-language portals are even involved in refuting the truth of these and similar stories. The retrospective nature of the present study and its limited length do not allow for an examination of online data.

grows to adulthood and eventually emerges or attracts attention. In some narratives, people working in the sewers become aware of the alligator, or the alligator attacks them. In other variants, the alligator climbs or bursts its way out of the sewer, and once above ground commences to attack unsuspecting passersby. Many versions of the story include an account of the reptiles' habits. In several cases the reptiles are said to feed on the rats that live in the sewers, or on dead bodies and rubbish floating in the water. In other cases, the narrator points out that an alligator that has grown up in the dark will be white, since it has not been exposed to sufficient light. Stories in which the entire process, both the keeping of the tiny reptile and its subsequent release, can be attributed to a particular hit song or temporary craze form a special subset of the Hungarian-language versions of the story. Likewise, giving the story a happy ending is apparently a local development: rather than attacking anyone, the crocodile is eventually rescued from the sewer and spends the rest of its life peacefully in a zoo.¹⁶



Pic. Nr. 1. *Basking crocodiles – cartoon.*
1929. *Újság*. Vol. 5. 111. 30.

¹⁶ Similarly happy endings can be found in the Hungarian-language variants of the “Snake in the Banana” legend type as well: here too, the adventurous animals end their long journeys in the local zoo. See Mikos 2021: 113.

There are several factors indicating the legend-like nature of the story and the impossibility of substantiating it. Large reptiles such as crocodiles and alligators (Crocodylidae and Alligatoridae) are found primarily in tropical zones, where they live in wetland habitats and swamps. While there is certainly no shortage of water in urban sewerage networks, pollution, lack of light, and the cold continental climate of the big cities in the northern United States create a far from ideal habitat, even when the warmth of the sewage is taken into account. There is very little chance of a reptile surviving for any length of time in such conditions.¹⁷ Although individual episodes within the story might conceivably happen in reality – there are indeed cases of reptiles that have been kept as household pets being set free for example, and, as we shall see below, such reptiles might even remain alive for a time – in its entirety the story that has given rise to the legend could never take place in real life.

The familiarity and popularity of this story type in Hungarian is particularly interesting, since in Hungary, unlike the United States¹⁸, large reptiles of this kind have never lived in the wild. However, large predators like gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) and brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) which were native in Carpathian Basin and have been persecuted in human-wildlife conflicts are not manifested in urban legends. At the same time, scarcely any Hungarian-language versions of the first urban legend types recorded in America – such as the “Spider in the Hairdo” or the “Department Store Snakes” – have come to light thus far, even though the animals they feature are also indigenous to Hungary.¹⁹

The “Alligator in the Sewer” legend type has been present in the Hungarian press since the first half of the 19th century: the first variant predates by around 100 years the first occurrence in the American press, in the February 10, 1935, edition of *The New York Times*.²⁰ A brief excerpt from the text published in *The New York Times* can be read in Hungarian in a regional newspaper from the early 1990s.²¹ However, the earliest Hungarian-

¹⁷ Brunvand 2011: 176–177.

¹⁸ Alligators are an integral aspect of local folklore in the United States, especially in the South, where many alligators are to be found. Cf. Reitter 2005. Representation of crocodile is extremely rare in Hungarian folk culture. A crocodile is visible on the painted wooden ceiling of Hungarian Reformed Church in *Szilágylompért* (Lompirt, Romania) probably as symbol of guilt. Vígh 2019: 193–194.

¹⁹ For more on this legend type: Klintberg 1985; Mullen 1970; Fine–Ellis 149–162.

²⁰ Coleman 1979: 337–338.

²¹ For a description of the so-called Candolucci case, a word-by-word translation of an excerpt from an article in the *New York Times*, see: György Mandics: Parabolha. Krokodil a

language occurrence dates from far earlier: it sets the story in Munich, where people claimed to have seen a crocodile in an open sewer in a public park.²²

The story has appeared regularly in the Hungarian press since the 1950s: in the 150 years before that, it could be found on relatively few occasions and included few details. For Hungarians, the 1950s meant the adoption of Stalinism. Almost all opportunities for travel disappeared, while poor standards of living encouraged many people to attempt to cross the “green border” into Austria, and from there travel to Western Europe or America. This brief, easily accessible, terrifying story may have proved useful to Hungarian journalists as a way of discouraging emigration and counterbalancing the difficult living conditions by presenting the world’s big cities as extremely dangerous places where monsters emerged from the sewers.

The popularity of the theme following the change of political system may be due to several factors. On the one hand, Hungary’s proliferating television channels regularly broadcast the American horror film “Alligator” in the 1990s, a film that brought to life the legend type discussed here: an alligator, which has been lurking for some time in the sewer, rips open a manhole cover and bursts through the road surface into the street, attacking anything that crosses its path.²³ Films, oral circulation, and the dissemination of the legend in the press could nevertheless be mutually reinforcing. On the other hand, the 1990s saw the liberation of Hungary’s press market in place of the earlier Socialist press that had been controlled by the party state, subject to strict censorship and journalistic self-censorship, and unaffected by market conditions, which meant that sensationalist tabloids, for example, could once again be published.²⁴ This gave greater scope than ever for fabrications, hoaxes, unfounded rumors, and legend-like stories in a press that now operated according to the rules of supply and demand.

Interpretations

According to the literature, the function of the many contemporary legend types is to render visible the most hidden human fears and to portray in images and scenes anxieties that the average individual would otherwise be

csatornában [“Alligory”: Crocodile in the sewer]. 1991 *Dévilág*, Vol. 48. 281. 326. [Appendix]

²² *Hírnök*, 1837. Vol. 1. 65. [without page numbers]

²³ Smith 1990: 142–143; Koven 2008: 105; Mann 2015.

²⁴ Gulyás 2000.

unable to express. Members of highly structured societies, for the most part living in bigger cities, are exposed to an extraordinary variety of visual stimuli, from massive billboards through the regular viewing of television shows and films to the memes that circulate on the Internet, which doubtless explains the increased significance of the visualization of narratives.²⁵ This has favored the elaboration and dissemination of legends – such as the one examined in the present study – that are centered around spectacular and easy to imagine figures and events. The story contains two essential elements: the location and the animal.

For a city dweller, there are few more terrifying places than the sewers that run beneath the streets. Besides being dark and smelly, sewers are home to rats and germs, sources of countless hidden dangers and potential breeding grounds for infections, or even pandemics. They may provide hiding places for fugitives or be used to conceal evidence of crimes. If a city dweller wishes to get rid of anything, it is flushed down the toilet into the sewer. As by-products of human life functions, where all kinds of filth are collected, sewers have been symbols of squalor, crime, and danger since ancient times.²⁶ The practice of laying pipes to carry off urban wastewater has existed since ancient times: the oldest closed sewerage network dates from 3000 to 4000 BC.²⁷ The culture of hygiene in cities declined in the Middle Ages, which was doubtless the reason for the plagues that regularly decimated the population of Europe. The connection between urban waste and disease was recognized in the mid-19th century. In the face of increasing overcrowding in cities and in the interests of suppressing the continuous outbreaks of cholera, work began on developing a waste collection and urban sewerage network to ensure that contaminated water was kept entirely separate from drinking water.²⁸

Although the microorganisms that breed in the sewers, which are invisible to the naked eye, represent a far greater danger to the human population than wild animals in the 20th and 21st centuries, they are nevertheless harder to visualize and talk about. Because they are invisible, they never, or very rarely, feature in legends. By contrast, there are countless known variations of the many legend types associated with large carnivores, despite the fact that people living in modern, urban environments scarcely ever come across such

²⁵ Gerndt 2011.

²⁶ Asplund Ingemark 2008: 145.

²⁷ Juhász 2008: 9–10.

²⁸ Melosi 2008; Fónagy 2014; Fónagy 2016. On the history of sewers in Hungary in a European context and from a historical perspective, see Juhász 2008.

animals by chance.²⁹ The appearance in contemporary legends of animals, and especially arthropods, amphibians, reptiles, and rodents that are – in many cases erroneously – believed to be harmful, as well as the appearance of large predators, is connected with the “demagicking” of stories and their distancing from the religious worldview. Among other things, contemporary legends differ from what can be considered traditional legends and tales in that they do not feature mythical beings such as witches, dwarves, giants, and devils.³⁰ However, the wild animals in these legends are not entirely identical to their real-life counterparts, since they convey ideological and religious concepts imposed on them over millennia, as well as attributes that have taken shape in traditional legends. The wild animals that feature in the urban environments of contemporary legends occasionally have magical attributes, partly inherited from the mythical creatures of traditional legends and partly recognizable from popular culture – for example comics, films, and television series.³¹ Thus, for example, the crocodiles that lurk in the sewerage system and occasionally attack humans are presented as mutant creatures³²: they are remarkably similar to the strange, hybrid beings found in Marvel comic strips and films, which assume qualities bordering on the supernatural.

According to the other approach already touched on above, contemporary legends can be interpreted metaphorically in every instance.³³ For millennia, reptiles – whether snakes and lizards or crocodiles and alligators – have channeled various human anxieties and have been associated with images of evil, treachery, crime, and danger.³⁴ The academic analysis of these stories is justified by the nature of these texts as “social valves.” The stories contain elemental human anxieties, which, while they may go back millennia, are still relevant today, and which are often embodied in the form of phobias of specific creatures such as spiders, snakes, or other reptiles and amphibians.

The emergence of the story can be explained as the perpetuation of traditions that date back thousands of years. However, many other factors may also play a role in the elaboration and perpetuation of the present-day –

²⁹ This is also perhaps why, unsurprisingly, some kind of animal features in the title of many of the first summaries, anthologies, and monographs on the theme: see Brunvand 1984; Brunvand 1988; Brednich 1990; Brednich 1991; Brednich 1993; Brednich 1996.

³⁰ On the differences between village and urban legends, see Dégh 1975. On the close links between traditional and contemporary legends, see Dégh 1996; Dégh 2001.

³¹ On the interrelationships between contemporary legends and popular culture, see Dégh 1994; Brunvand 2004. Popular culture has also integrated a great deal from traditional folklore. An exploration of this topic is beyond the scope of the present study.

³² Koven 2008: 105.

³³ Cf. e.g., Szabó 1973. Fine–Ellis 2010.

³⁴ Cf. Sax 2001; Vigh ed. 2019.

contemporary or urban – form of this legend type: these include the continuously evolving attitudes to wildlife in Western societies and, more or less similarly but with a slight delay, also in East-Central Europe, as well as changes in the ways in which wild animals, and especially carnivores, are present in the world's big cities. The presence of wild animals, including large reptiles, in European cities in the temperate zone has always been seen as a curiosity, and all occurrences have been reported in turn by the press. In what follows, I illustrate how this has taken place across several broad periods of time, and how the phenomenon has been reflected in the press.

Crocodiles in Hungary: Changes in attitudes to wild animals in the 19th to 21st centuries

The relationship between human beings and wild animals has undergone many changes in the 20th and 21st centuries. In what follows, I explore key moments in the history of the development of the relationship between animals and human beings, and especially between unusual carnivores and average newspaper readers on the lookout for entertainment, in order to highlight those moments that are materialized in the emergence and perpetuation of contemporary legends. The process ranges from the Enlightenment ideal of the human desire to govern the natural world to the concept of animal protection, with numerous stages in between. At the same time, while intellectual attitudes towards wildlife have undergone significant changes, or indeed a fundamental transformation, in the past 150 to 200 years, it is striking that no substantial change can be observed in the urban legends that represent the morals of ordinary – middle-class – people, and in the corresponding rumors and hoaxes. This would suggest that the basic moral position and mentality of a newspaper-reading individual of average education does not necessarily follow the dominant trends. According to the literature, urban or contemporary legends are the embodiments of average morals and the moderate attitude acceptable to the majority, and they mediate a kind of average opinion.³⁵

Public zoos opened in the course of the 19th century in most of Europe's big cities (private zoos were already in existence), while opportunities to become acquainted with the animal world existed in many other forms as well. Most of these forms have been consigned to history, although traces of them have been preserved both in reliable published reports and in the form

³⁵ Stehr 1998.

of fictitious rumors and hoaxes that resemble them but have no, or little, connection with reality. The latter correspond to the individual motifs or plot elements of the legend. These rumors and hoaxes, however, are the distorted, exaggerated versions or parodies of these motifs and plot elements.

From the middle of the century, there were a growing number of reports of traveling shows exhibiting real animals in big cities, and occasionally in smaller settlements too, generally in the context of staged tableaux. Fights with wild animals had already featured in gladiatorial shows in antiquity and may even have included vanquishing giant reptiles. The animal displays in the repertoires of traveling circuses and menageries in the 19th century also included exhibitions of reptiles. These shows belong to the medieval tradition of the “theater of fear” and were chiefly intended to strike terror into their audiences: the relationship between animals and humans took on a militant aspect, in which a typically deliberately aroused animal was subdued by its trainer. An animal tamer placing their head in the mouth of a lion or a crocodile embodied the 19th-century ideal of the subjugation of nature by human beings, demonstrating how they were capable of gaining mastery over animals that were presented as wilder and even more terrifying than in reality.³⁶

Unsurprisingly, people at that time were terrified of these exotic carnivores, even though there was almost no chance of encountering such animals in their everyday lives. At the same time, one of the properties of the urban or contemporary legend that is emphasized chiefly by psychologists is that it represents the human desire to spy and human attempts to uncover secrets.³⁷ Reports – probably hoaxes or fake news – of someone coming across a wild animal that, according to the news article, may have escaped from a circus, are fairly common in the contemporary press.³⁸ It is not impossible to imagine an animal escaping from a circus or menagerie and roaming around for a time on a riverbank or in a forest. However, the frequency with which this particular rumor, and others like it, cropped up in the contemporary press is not borne out by the numbers of traveling circuses and shows, or by the numbers of wild animals that escaped. It is rather the case that the storyteller would have liked to encounter a dangerous animal, since their relationship with danger was somewhat ambivalent: they both hoped for and dreaded such an encounter, to inject a little excitement into their lives.

³⁶ Tait 2016.

³⁷ Sergio Benvenuto associated this chiefly with others’ love lives, although it is potentially true of other areas of life. Benvenuto 2000 (2004): 25–46.

³⁸ E.g., N. A. 1882: 228; N. A. 1938: 19.



Pic. Nr. 2. Advertisement for a show featuring a live crocodile.
1871. *Szegedi Híradó*. Vol. 13. 116.

In the interwar period, crocodiles were mentioned in the Hungarian press rather as the raw material for bags, wallets, and shoes. At the time, fur and leather coats, footwear, and other accessories made from the skins of wild animals were regarded as prestige objects, suggesting prosperity and luxury. Demand for snake and crocodile skins was met chiefly by the Far East, where animals were bred on crocodile or snake farms as sources of special reptile leathers. Wearing snake or crocodile skin dresses still fit into the paradigm of dominating nature.

The wearing of leather and fur began to go out of fashion in the 1980s, influenced by the animal protection laws passed in response to social pressure. Many fashion and cosmetics companies joined the campaign for animal protection, declaring, for example, that their goods were produced without cruelty, without the senseless destruction of animals, and without animal testing.

A Trencsintéren Kolozsvárt
csak néhány napig látható
nagy
kelet-sudáni állatsereglet,
melyben a legkülönbözőbb ragadozó állatok láthatók.
Ugymint: oroszlanok Berberidből, Afrika, Nubia, Senegalból;
tigrisek Braziliából; leopardok és párducok Indiából;
foltos és csikos hiénák, vagy az ugynevezett sirások; külön-
külön fajok farkasok, sakálók és medvék, struozmadar-
ak és saskeselyűk, lámák és guanagok, mufflonok,
antilopok, szarvasok a Pampás hegysegből, különböző faj
majmok, papagályok és kajdácsok, krokodil, alligator
boa constrictor, király, vagy óriáskigyó.
Naponta két nagy előadás etetéssel
egybekötve
Az első előadás délután 4 órakor, a második este 8 órakor.
Fellépte a híres francia állatszelidítő
mademoiselle ROSETTE,
a kitűnően idomított oroszlan, párduc és farkassával. Továbbá
fellép a világhírű állatszelidítő
Signor RAVIOLI,
az ő idomított állataival.
Helyárak: 1-ső hely 40 kr 2-ik hely 20 kr.
498 1-2 Tisztelettel
Az igazgatóság.

Pic. Nr. 3. "Menagerie of East-Sudan." Advertisement for a traveling zoo and animal taming show. 1895. Magyar Polgár [Cluj-Kolozsvár]. Vol. 9. 158. [no page numbers]

In the period that followed the Second World War, imports of luxury and even exotic goods were not promoted in Hungary. The 1950s, however, which were known explicitly as a decade of poverty, saw the renaissance of the "Alligators in the Sewers" legend. In the later decades of Socialism, however, there were new developments. The keeping of small reptiles in terrariums became increasingly popular throughout the world. In the way of all trends, this one was also taken to the extreme: the keeping of large wild animals as pets in the West was a way of showing off or an expression of eccentricity. An illegal industry grew up around the hobby, and although from time to time there are reports of the discovery of smuggled animals, this bizarre moneymaking enterprise continues to flourish.³⁹

³⁹ Van Uhm 2016.



Article 1. Bizarre bequest. *Népszava*. 1960. 88. 303. 4.⁴⁰

The presence in the city of large animals, including reptiles, kept as pets suggested the publication of spoof stories – hoaxes and rumors. The fact that they are hoaxes is confirmed by the lack of concrete detail and the tendency towards exaggeration.

The most popular exaggerations and typical press-reported rumors in the second half of the 20th century include reports of people walking pet crocodiles on leads, or perhaps taking them to the cinema⁴¹, or people keeping exotic reptiles at home in a swimming pool or bathtub. These latter stories were published in the Hungarian press during the Socialist era to illustrate the decadence of the West and to demonstrate the excessive opulence and ludicrous manias of the people who lived there.⁴² Some articles go even further;

⁴⁰ A quite extraordinary individual has recently died in New York. When the police entered his apartment, they discovered a python, an alligator, an aquarium full of poisonous fish, six parrots, two cats, and various other animals. The ravenous python was killed immediately to prevent it from causing injury, while the other animals were taken to the zoo.

⁴¹ N. A. 1959: 4.

⁴² N. A. 1944.

reporting how the animal breaks out of captivity and subsequently bathes in a shopping mall fishpond or wallows about in a branch of the city's river.⁴³



Article 2. Bitten by a snake...

Szabad Szó. 1981. 38. 77. 4.⁴⁴

Occasionally, however, the owners of unusual and sometimes dangerous animals do indeed get tired of them. The releasing of turtles into the wild has led to the major ecological disturbance of domestic water habitats.⁴⁵ Similarly, alligator turtles have caused severe damage in the past two decades due to the growing trend for keeping predatory reptiles as pets. Large predatory reptiles

⁴³ E.g. N.A. 1995: 18.

⁴⁴ Around 80 reptiles, including an alligator, were being kept in the apartment of a young Californian man who dies after being bitten by a cobra almost 1 meter in length. The "livestock" belonging to Knut Anderson, a 27-year-old truck driver, also included a number of poisonous snakes. The young man was fatally bitten by a cobra that he was keeping in his bedroom. The orphaned snakes were taken to the San Diego zoo, where the value of the collection was estimated at around 11,000 dollars.

⁴⁵ Panker 2013.

that are native to the temperate zone are able to survive in conditions in Hungary and represent a grave danger to indigenous species.⁴⁶

Both reliable reports and hoaxes about animals that have escaped or that have been released into the wild, as well as news and information concerning the illegal trade in wild animals and the official measures to prevent it, have all helped to perpetuate the “Alligators in the Sewers” legend. On the one hand, these legends, as we have seen above, are metaphors for the fears engendered by the mysterious, underworld powers of the big city, and, among other things, by the germs that breed in the sewers. Furthermore, despite the many regulations and the ever-increasing importance of animal protection, fears of actually being attacked by wild animals are not entirely unfounded, nor have they been allayed by the legal regulations related to animal protection in modern societies.

Summary

The “Alligators in the Sewers” legend type is a part of urban folklore, while at the same time it is a simple way of evoking the dangers and unpredictability of life in the big city. Like all urban legends, it expresses moral truths, cautions self-restraint and the avoidance of extremes, and takes a stand against excess and exhibitionism. It calls attention to the dangers inherent in keeping wild animals as domestic pets in an urban environment, and to the importance of caring for the creatures entrusted to us. In addition, it focuses on what is still, even today, our rather ambivalent relationship with wildlife and on our anxieties with respect to the natural world, whether or not those anxieties are justified.

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Appendix

Variants of the “Alligators in the Sewers” legend type in the Hungarian press

Title or first line	Genre	Year	Organ of the press in which it appeared
<i>A müncheni közönség seregestül megy az Isarpartra</i> [Members of the public in Munich flock to the bank of the Isar]	News	1837	<i>Hírnök.</i> Vol. 1. 16. [without page numbers]
<i>Krokodil az utcái csatornában</i> [Crocodile in the gutter]	News	1912	<i>Az Újság.</i> Vol. 10. 131. 13.
<i>Krokodilok a kanálisban</i> [Crocodiles in the sewers]	News in brief	1958	<i>Fejér Megyei Hírlap.</i> Vol. 3. 41. 4.
<i>Krokodilok a kanálisban</i>	News in brief	1958	<i>Kisalföld.</i> Vol. 3. 34. 2.
<i>Krokodilok a kanálisban</i>	News in brief	1958	<i>Népszava.</i> Vol. 80. 36. 4.
<i>Kiment a divatból</i> [Out of fashion]	News in brief	1958	<i>Szabad Föld.</i> Vol. 14. 40. 4.
<i>A kíváncsi krokodil</i> [The curious crocodile]	News in brief	1959	<i>Népszava.</i> Vol. 87. 8. 4.
<i>Titokzatos állat a Rhone partján</i> [Mystery animal on the bank of the Rhone]	News	1969	<i>Hétfői Hírek.</i> Vol. 13. 24.
<i>Krokodilok a londoni csatornáikban</i> [Crocodiles in the London sewers]	News in brief	1976	<i>Előre.</i> Vol. 30. április 15. 4.
<i>Alvilági krokodilok</i> [Underworld crocodiles]	News in brief	1978	<i>Amerikai-Kanadai Magyar Élet.</i> Vol. 20. 10. 11.
György Moldova: <i>Krokodilok</i> [Crocodiles]	Sketch	1979	<i>Új Tükör.</i> Vol. 16. 60. 26.
<i>Egy krokodil lábszáron harapta...</i> [A crocodile bite on the leg]	News in brief	1983	<i>Magyar Nemzet.</i> Vol. 46. 115. 6.
<i>Útonálló krokodil</i> [Crocodile bandit] ⁴⁷	News in brief	1983	<i>Vas Népe.</i> Vol. 28. 113. 16.
<i>Útonálló krokodil</i>	News in brief	1983	<i>Zalai Hírlap.</i> Vol. 39. 113. 12.

⁴⁷ The versions in the shaded rows were published on more or less the same date and with roughly the same text, even where the titles differ.

Útonálló krokodil	News in brief	1983	<i>Szabad Szó</i> . Vol. 40. 114. 4.
Útonálló krokodil	News in brief	1983	<i>Előre</i> . Vol. 37. május 24. 6.
<i>A harapós krokodil</i> [Snapping crocodile]	News in brief	1983	<i>Népszava</i> . Vol. 111. 113. 16.
<i>Csodálkozással fedezték fel a párizsi csatornák gondozói...</i> [Amazing discovery by the keepers of the Paris sewers]	News in brief	1984	<i>Magyar Nemzet</i> . Vol. 47. 82. 6.
<i>Krokodil a csatornában</i> [Crocodile in the sewer]	News in brief	1984	<i>Magyar Szó</i> . Vol. 41. 70. 8.
<i>Krokodil a kanálisban</i> [Crocodile in the sewer]	News	1987	<i>Magyarország</i> . Vol. 24. 50. 18.
Tamás Bihari: <i>Aligátor nincs, patkány is alig. A város szigerei</i> [No alligators and scarcely any rats. The bowels of the city]	Reportage	1991	<i>A Világ</i> . Vol. 2. 30. 15–16.
György Mandics: <i>Parabolha – Krokodil a csatornában</i> [“Alligory”: Crocodile in the sewer]	Essay	1991	<i>Délvilág</i> . Vol. 48. 281. Otthon Magazin melléklet [without page numbers]
<i>Óra helyett</i> [In place of a clock]	Feuilleton	1992	<i>Reggeli Délvilág</i> . Vol. 3. 100. 10.
Csaba Farkas: <i>Három tünet – Tiszta Amerika</i> [Three symptoms – Pure America]	Feuilleton	1994	<i>Reggeli Délvilág</i> . Vol. 5. 112. 7.
<i>Krokodilveszély Párizsban</i> [Crocodile threat in Paris]	News in brief	2000	<i>Magyar Szó</i> . Vol. 58. 34. 16.
<i>Krokodil a kanálisban. Városi legenda?</i> [Crocodile in the sewer. Urban legend?]	News	2003	<i>Délvilág</i> . Vol. 69. 395.
<i>Elfogták a randalírozó krokodilt</i> [Crocodile troublemaker captured]	News	2004	<i>Kárpáti Igaz Szó</i> . Vol. 85. 85–86. 15.
<i>A hongkongi krokodil esete</i> [The case of the Hong Kong crocodile]	News	2004	<i>Magyar Szó</i> . Vol. 61. 135. 14.
<i>Krokodil a kanálisban: városi legenda?</i> [Crocodile in the sewer: Urban legend?]	Article	2013	<i>Délvilág</i> . Vol. 69. 39. 5.
<i>Goebbels és a krokodilok</i>	Anecdote	2017	<i>Vasárnapi Hírek</i> .

Alligators in the Sewers...

[Goebbels and the crocodiles]			Vol. 33. 31. 30.
János Hadzsy: <i>Játék az élővilággal – Bottal ütni a pítont nyomát</i> [Game with wildlife – Hitting the traces of a python with a stick]	Article	2018	<i>Magyar Szó.</i> Vol. 75. 163. 18.