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Women's Employment and Lifestyle in a Hungarian City of Heavy Industries in the Fifties

Andrea Pető

One of the moving forces behind the social developments in the 1950's was the fast industrialisation of Hungary, a process which totally changed the situation of many layers in society. This is particularly true for the working women, and within that category for those, freshly streaming into industry with stressed investments, and to the women leaving agriculture and finding unskilled or taught-in work in the industry¹. The initiation of the unskilled female labour force was mainly possible in jobs having a low position in the hierarchy of the social employment prestige. As opposed to the promises, it shortly turned out, that the providing state could not take over the burden of these women at home, the burden of motherhood². From the kindergarden to the up-to-date laundry many things were missing from the coming into being of women's role's transformation, as claimed in the socialist propaganda.

A female minister, appearing in the papers was just as familiar in the 1950s as the young girl in working clothes, smiling from a truck that was not made for the female body. If we want to leave the almost caricature-like simplified schemes, and would like to draw a realistic picture of the working woman in the first part of the fifties, we have to confront the female-image of the propaganda with reality. We shall attempt to do this with the help of research material, preserved in the archives of the communist party (MDP, and after 1956 MSZMP), and unseen by researchers so far.

The changes, starting in Hungary in 1953 after the death of Stalin and the Berlin revolt woke up the need in the leadership to get to know the

real conditions of the working class³. A committee was formed, that visited factories and tried to gather information about the actual situation of the working men and women. Since before the opening of the party archives the results of this examination were only known to the closest leadership, the Political Committee, the source value of the examination is very high, within the limits caused by the campaign – like structure, the members of the Political Committee could actually confront pure reality. This investigation was repeated after the 1956 revolution, in 1958 in a somewhat wider and more thorough form. The leadership, which was astonished by the large number of the working class representatives that took part in the events qualified as contra-revolution, was looking for the answer to this in the living-conditions of the workers. This strictly secret report too was made for the members of the Political Committee, it is a shockingly sincere report, free from frases or propaganda.

Based on these two great sources value, but up to now not only unpublished and unseen, but also unknown reports. I work upon introducing in a larger study, the developments and ever more the lack of them of the Hungarian working classes' and particularly the working women's situation in the 1950s. The limited range defined by the Yearbook allows only the confrontation of 'Poesis and Reality' (*Dichtung und Wahrheit*) which is the propaganda and the real situation in a selected small area. I chose the workers of the Ózd Metallurgic Industries for this investigation for 3 reasons. First of all, this factory was a one of the ones stressed in the socialist heavy-industry, secondly the propaganda dealt with it in details. Moreover, working men and women came in large numbers from the surrounding towns and villages to the rapidly expanding factory, we can study the conflicts of the workers finding themselves in the industrial life-style this way as well.

The *Művelt Nép* (Educated People) Publisher published the reportbook 'People in the factory' written by Sári Barcs about the old time Ózd in 1953. In the following I shall compare the statements of the book with the 1953 Politburo secret investigation's data, which even if only removed, but still reflects the opinions of the working women.

Let us examine, how these women saw their living conditions, the social care in the reportbook made for wider masses, and in the confidential report, made for the closest leadership.

After 1945 the number of the factory's workers increased very rapidly. The building of social institutions could not keep pace with this. Labour supply was ensured by recruiting, where the recruiters went through villages, and – paying a certain percentage of the wage in forehand –

directed the, mostly unskilled, women to another part of the country. Besides recruiting, a spontaneous moving into towns was also visible, its cause being the apparent economical possibilities and the fact that towns were better provided with wares.

It is typical to the growth of the population, that the population of Ózd increased by 10,000 between 1949 and 1957. The earning industrial population increased from 7452 to 21,299, and 64.4% of this number worked in industry, and 60% of this in metallurgy. Besides this growth, the housing and other infrastructural investments failed to come about. In 1951 2200 housing claims were accounted in the city, and only 106 were built⁴.

Of course, the propaganda sees the housing problem differently as well: 'A few steps away from the seat of the Hungarian Soviet Cultural House the street goes up the hill – we read in Sári Barcs's book – New houses stand on top of the hill. Two-story workerhouses, white as snow, with sunshining windows and trees bowing in front of the windows. The Ózd Táncsics housing estate is just like everywhere else in Sztálinváros (Stalin city) in the May 1 street, or in Budapest on Peace square. Still, over here they have a special meaning – since right next to them are the small Rima apartments without bathrooms as bad examples.' (These were small, colony-like flats built by the Rimamurány Rt. A. P.) The Rimamurányi Salgótarjáni Rt., created after multiple fusions of mines and factories was a large-capital, dynamically developing company, that gave 68.9% of the country's crude iron production, and 51.5% of the martinsteel production in 1943⁵. The leaders of the factory, out of christian-socialist ideas, and in order to increase the efficiency of the production cared a lot about the social and cultural care of their workers. The effects of the very rich and up-to-date infrastructural investments (house, school, hospital) can be felt even today. However, Sári Barcs may disparage the 'Rima flats', it is thanks to them, that in the 1953 investigation relatively fewer complaints were lodged in Ózd over the cultural and social institutions than in other factories, and these claims were caused the overpopulation and the fail of the expected investments to come about.

The Táncsics houses already occupy half of the hill and the settlement is expanding further. In 1951 new flats were built for 148 worker families, by the end of 1953 eight thousand people will move into their new homes: These data of the reportbook belongs to the world of dreams and propaganda together with many other project-numbers. Of the apartments that were not newly built, it was typical that three fourths of them were one-room flats without comfort. They even mention it in 1953 report: 'the

city was overcrowded before, but now the conditions are unbearable: The report also mentions, that 'it is quite frequent that 10–12 persons live in a one-room flat', in Ózd 5.5 persons were accounted for every one room.

The 1953 report states: 'There is a large amount of rats in the housing estate. We cannot keep anything other than firewood or coal in the lean-tos and pantries, because the rats eat up everything. In many places smaller poultry is also kept in the rooms, that is how they protect them from the rats'⁶. Even the expression block of flats receives a new meaning: A living unit where there are lean-tos and pantries (of course, outside the so-called house) not many differences from a village. There is not much difference in their life-style either. They bring the firewood from the wood-shed, they worry about the growth of the poultry.

The summarising report too marked the housing issue as the most difficult problem. Even though during the 1953 investigation most of those questioned were leader or skilled workers. The housing problem did not affect this skilled, mainly local layer. Most of the skilled workers were descendents of families living in the surrounding villages, or in the town itself for many generations, and not unskilled workers coming here during the recruitments. When we consider the housing issue we also have to think of the incredibly increased number of workers, mostly coming from newcomers, out-workers, commuters. Looking at the problems of the foodsupply it is understandable, that besides the wages earned in the factory, the families did not give up the food and profit coming from the tillage and the animal husbandry. Still, the housing problem seemed the most important issue to the committee. 'Some families live in astonishingly inhuman circumstances' – wrote the committee, and stated, that 225,000 apartments would be immediately needed in order to stop this unbearable situation⁷.

In Ózd the situation of the newcomers, the externals was even worse than that of local workers. Workers coming from one area settled in one place, the room had as many inhabitants as many pallets it had room for. This is an extreme, but as such, typical that those working on the 1953 investigation noted down astonished, that in the caves of the Avas hill on the border of the town 7–8 child families lived without any comfort or health care what so ever.

The situation of the ten thousand living in bunk-houses surprised the makers of the report as well. Most of these bunkhouses 'do not come up to the minimal demands... they are not furnished in any human manner'.

The importance of convincing of the working women in the "ideological work" is emphasized in Sári Barcs's book, too: "The propagandists visit

the surrounding villages on Sundays' – writes Sári Barcs – 'The women look for the wives. They explain to them patiently one woman to woman: if your husband works on the land on Sunday, he will come tired to the factory on Monday. What does your husband do? Is he an engine-driver in the industrial railway? He cannot pay attention if he is tired, he will crash the locomotive into something, he could have an accident, he can do damage, won't get his wage. It is impossible to live a double-life, to be there on two places with full strength.' The propagandists talking people out of the land were not met with similar approval. The working on the land, the garden formed a fundamental part of life. Let us examine how the optimist author of the reportbook makes us see the situation of working women in Ózd factory: 'An airy walking, brisk girl hurries at the bottom of the smelting-furnace' – we quote again Sári Barcs's reportbook – 'one is carrying a blue enamelled can – it is about 5 litre, and whoever she meets, she addresses kindly: Would the comrade like to have a little soda-water? (In the winter she gives sugared, hot coffee out of her can instead of soda to those working in cold places, and early springtime she has a big bag of cherries with her.)' The author contrasts the pretty girl with the protection-food, given out by the former capitalists. The workers not only get protection-drinks and – food – we read in the book – but they can do their everyday shopping in the stores set up within the factory's area. 'Since the spring round, colorfully roofed, happy little shops have been set up in the yard of the Blast-furnace, on the Martin-plaform, and they spread like mushrooms in every part of the factory. Buffets, where dairy wares, baker's wares, fruit and cigarettes are sold. The workers do not need to go into the village or to wait till the end of the shift, if they happen to go out of food or cigarettes. (Though so far as the food is concerned, there is no particular catastrophe even without the buffets, the 4 Ft lunch in the canteen is so tasteful and nourishing that even the most demanding ones can talk about it with satisfaction, and one can definitely make it on this lunch until the end of his shift.) On the shelves of the colourful pavilions are piles of grapes and greenpeppers, biscuits, cheese and bread by the bunch. By the end of winter, when the body is lacking the necessary vitamins, when such things count as "firstlings", as novelties sold for a lot of money, the Ózd foundrymen, open-hearth furnacemen, forge-rollers eat apples with cheese. They receive it for free as protection-food:

That is how the author of the 'People in the factory' saw the situation. But the working women, questioned in the same year in 1953 often complain about the shops. One of their problems in the area of supply

was that in the largely overpopulated town there were not enough shops to buy food in. That is why gardens were needed. The other was that there was a lack in basic foods (meat, fat, fruit, vegetables). Even though as stressed industrial region it was better supplied theoretically. The 1953 report quotes the words of Lajos Molnár a stahanovist solderer and his wife: 'In the summer we did not have any vegetables for 8–10 days, and my wife had to stand in line many times for half a kilogramm fat.' If during the summer investigations they complained many times over the lack of fruits and vegetables, then it seems quite unlikely, that grapes had stood in stacks during the winter. Despite the defined and overregulated prices the free-market prices were actually the highest in Miskolc and Ózd, this was one of the most expensive areas in the country.

The working women in the metallurgical factories founded families, too, they became pregnant and bore children. But this caused great conflicts. Of the data, typical to the Ózd health care the most alarming is definitely that of the extremely high infant mortality⁸. This was 17% higher in Ózd in 1954 than in 1941. One of the reasons to this was that the women doing heavy physical work did not want to go to easier, lighter positions when they got pregnant, because this would have caused a serious decrease in their salary. According to the Factory Committee's secretary, the factory's physicians were also guilty, because 'they do not record the pregnancies even if already shows seriously'. Particularly problematic was the taking of pregnant women away from the unhealthy jobs. The heavy physical work and the unappropriate caring for pregnant women often ended in premature birth. The lighter physical work resulted in a salary decrease, therefore, in many cases women kept their pregnancy a secret⁹. The women that took jobs in the industry, were given heavy physical work as well. That is what the brigade that visited LKM stated, during the 1953 MDP PB working class investigation. 3770 women worked here, and with the factory's physician's suggestion, 3000 should have been sent to healthier jobs immediately¹⁰. Due to the lack of skillfulness they could not get to better jobs. In the fine plate-mill works of the Diósgyőr Metallurgic Industries, for example, they had to carry 120–130 kg blocks from one processing place to another, being this was cheaper than automation¹¹.

The placing of the newly built settlements was also unfavourable, because they were built right next to the smoky, foggy factories. Due to this in Ózd the number of the respiratory illnesses increased rapidly. In the infant mortality the unfavourable housing conditions also played a role. And at the time the 1953 examination was done, there was no pedeutricians in Ózd. The examined and seen facts had a significant role

in the decision over immediate measures by those that took part in the investigation.

If the norms were not met, guilt was usually passed upon the commuters, that they work down the eight hours, that they come to work tired, etc. According to the 1953 report: 'In the processing factory of the fine plate-mill works only 71 out of 289 made a 100%. According to the leadership, the main reason for this is that they do not work eight hours, 75% of the workers is from the country, 20% of these are commuters.' The social circumstances, and the question of the norm and wage were judged pressing and urgent by those questioned in the examination, and therefore, rather this was mentioned at the sudden high level forum instead of the housing issue. These questions seemed the most solvable during such a short visit. Just like the working men most of the women also mentioned the norms, uncomprehensible after the many corrections. The wage-system of the martinsteel-works, for example, they wanted to resolve with Rakcsajev's pointsystem, that was successfully used in the Soviet Union. But at LKM the workers didnot understand it, they couldnot get used to it, because – using the argument system of the age – 'it is not used as it is supposed to'. The summarising report showed that in almost every examined factory the workers were made to do overtime illegally and were not payed for. Mistaking wage accounting was quite frequent which was met with disapproval by the workers, because of the constantly and uncomprehensibly corrected wage and normsystem¹².

But during the 1953 investigation: 'Balázs Vécsi, cast-maker, said that when comrade Zsofinyecz¹³ visited the factory, he promised, that wages would be between 1500–1600 Ft per month. But the workers still only earn about 8–900 Ft per month. József Kapusztnik from the martinsteel works complained that he can "hardly make a living" out of the 800 Ft he earns. The poverty, wages below about 1000 Ft were typical particularly to families with many children and women, raising their child alone. Comrade Szabó, who was working at the coke-ribbon, told us, that the women working there with him earn 860 Ft per month. 'There are many among them who have three children but do not have a husband. His opinion is that it is impossible to provide for two-three children from this.'

The question of poverty naturally could not be avoided in the closing report either. The report called those poor that earned 450–500 Ft a month, among whom we find many female workers. To these layers belong almost every branch of industry the unskilled workers, young skilled workers, older skilled workers, stokers, cleaning-personnel, guards, receptionists and laundresses¹³.

The facts experienced in the 1953 examination were summed up in a confidential report. In this, the most frequently used adverbs were: unbearable, and astonishing. The report stated: 'in the past two years the living standards did not increase, rather decreased, and this decrease mainly affects the working classes.' Both the makers and the readers of the report were surprised by the terrible conditions, in which the workers – that were declared the basis to power – were living.

In the socialist countries employment became an obligatory expectation, an unwritten norm. The manner which forced the women belonging to the various social groups to take on jobs came not only from the ideological side, but also from the defining of wages on a level where traditional one-earner family models were no longer functionable. Officially the housework should have been taken over by state services: laundries, eating-houses, kindergardens. But the theoretical complexity often bore technical problems as well. The female workers were confronted with the working place and the hardly changing home expectations at the same time. Women went to work in masses in the beginning of the 1950s, following the call of the socialist industry and the promises of the work recruiters. The fast developing heavy-industry needed this labour force in such an area like Ózd. The emancipated woman, taking on a job in the state sector was, a part of the socialist lifestyle, where the state takes over the burdens that came with the traditional female role. This is the picture that Sári Barcs's propaganda book suggested. The reality, though, was painted to reader (the closer party leadership) with alarming colours by the confidential report: women went to work out of need, but the proper conditions were missing, from the kindergarden to the child-doctor, from the well-supplied shops to the easier jobs provided for pregnant women. The 1953 working class investigation drew to this the attention of the higher leadership for a short time, holding a cruel and real mirror in front of them. But the wish to improve did not last longer than the making of decisions. After the 1956 revolution a new investigation had to prove that measures to improve the living standards were immediately needed.

We cannot confront the pink-painted picture of the socialist propaganda and the reality, known from confidential reports, statistics of the age, sources from archives in every socialist industrial district. My research has shown that between the situation of the single regions', counties', towns' working women we can find large differences. We can only get a general picture about the working women of this fast mobilited, but still

in many aspects conservative time-period by showing these in a detailed manner which is not the task of this study.

Notes

- 1 On the restructuring of the Hungarian society see Rudolf Andorka, *The changes of the social mobility in Hungary*. (In Hungarian) (Budapest, 1982). Miklós Lackó, *The development of the contents of the industrial workers*. (In Hungarian) (Budapest, 1961). Kuromiya, Hiroaki, *Stalinist Industrial Revolution*. (Cambridge UP, 1988) and *Summerfield, Penny, Women, Workers in the Second World War*. (Croom and Helm, 1984). On the Hungarian Women taking on jobs see J. Turgonyi – Zs. Ferge: Living conditions of the industrial working women. In: *Studies about the working class*. (Budapest, 1973), pp. 54–143. p. 65. From the rich English material: Eric Hopkins, *The Rise and Decline of the English Working Classes. 1918–1990* (London, 1991). An interesting analysis is available with the use of the oral history: Leonore Davidoff, Belinda Nestrower, *Our Work, Our Lives, Our Words, Women History, Women's Work*. (London, 1986).
- 2 The Hungarian women policy followed the Soviet pattern in the equalisation of women (liberation) – about the well processed theme see for example Atkinson, D. Dallin, A. Lapidus G. (ed.), *Women in Russia*. (Stanford, 1977), Glickman, Rose, *Russia Factory Women, Workplace and Society. 1880–1914*. (University of California Press, 1984) and Stites, R., *The Women Liberation Movement in Russia*. (Princeton, 1976).
- 3 About the 1953 changes see among others Charles Gáti, *Hungary and the Soviet Block*. (1986), Fehér, Ferenc–Arató, Andrew, *Crisis and Reform in Central Europe* (1989).
- 4 The Archive of the Institute of Political History (in the following PIA) F. 1402. p. 58.
- 5 *The History of the Ózd Metallurgical Industries*, Edited by Iván T. Berend (1980). p. 286.
- 6 PIA F. 1402. p. 58.
- 7 PIA F. 1402. p. 33.
- 8 *The mother and childprotection situation in Ózd 1952–1959*. (In Hungarian) KSH Archive F. 10.5.80. d.
- 9 PIA 276.88.24. pp. 100. 1954, January, 19th. Official report of the Organizational Secretary's meeting. Komárom county.
- 10 PIA F. 1402. p. 56.
- 11 20 June, 1952. Official report of the Trade Union functionaries' meeting. PIA 276. f. 88. 37. 13.
- 12 PIA F. 1402. p. 21.
- 13 Mihály Zsofinyecz, Minister of the Heavy Industries, later of the Metallurgical Industry 1949–1954.
- 14 PIA F. 1402. p. 17.