

Final report of the Visegrád Fund research project “History of Everyday Life of Forced Labour Camps in Central West Hungary after WWII” at OSA by István Sántha, Research Centre for Humanities / Hungarian Academy of Sciences

My half-period presentation at OSA seminar during my research work at OSA mostly outlined the direction of my inquiry and the possible lines of interpretation. There I described the relation between my original inquiry originated in anthropological fieldwork and the materials I worked with at the archive. I also sketched the theoretical background of my research (charisma term introduced into social sciences by Weber; anthropological studies on charismatic persons in rural regions of Humphrey 1983, 1995, Scheper-Hughes 2001, Grasseni 2011, Godelier and Strathern 1991; anthropological studies on separation, loss and forgetting as positive and active possibility outlined by Battaglia 1990, Strathern 1992 and Reed 2004) and the methodology which I found appropriate for interpreting my materials (anthropological studies on working through paradoxes with examples from Navaro-Yashin 2012 and Pedersen 2011). At OSA my prior aim was to analyse related documents with the guide of OSA experts to find materials to develop my original research idea.

During my fieldwork I came across with a person, remembered by his family and co-villagers, who I may assume was a 'strong man', a charismatic figure of local authority (with inheritable abilities, physical strength and common sense) who had had his part in the local events of the 56 revolution. And although his activity and undaunted behaviour in 1956 was politically acknowledged by the new Hungarian government after the democratic transformation of 1990, neither the local inhabitants nor his children were sure whether the causes if his, i.e. the local 'strong man's' imprisonment had been political or criminal. It was as if the term 'respect' could not be used in the local context in relation to a man who had spent most of his adult life in prison. This paradox was the starting point of my research. I intended to interpret with the help of OSA documents the three main features of a 'strong man' that seemed to be important for him and his children.

During the period of my research at OSA I primarily read approximately 2000 A/4 pages (paper) documents about the circumstances observed in 14 prisons and 38 labour camps in Hungary related two periods: after the WW2 until 1956; and after 1956 until the early 1960s. This reading provided me access to the first hand information for my research. Additionally I also read two books on resocialization of criminals in prisons for background notions helpful to my study (Reed 2004, Moczydlowski 1992). I also visited one of the former labour camps, a mine in Oroszlány and met a former civil miner who was related to the camp labourers before 1956 and took part in the events in 1956, those which resulted in among others the liberation of the labour camp. And simultaneously I continued my anthropological fieldwork in Hungarian countryside, where the original idea of the research was taken from.

From the inquiry into the OSA documents I found the political-criminal dichotomy, the division of society, irresolution and hesitation of the people deeply present in Hungarian society and bound to the 1956 events. Furthermore

there are phenomena that reinforce simultaneously political and criminal events and interpretations.

Among the political features belongs the determined opposition to the regime whose bases were the *pokazuha*-phenomena of Soviet (Russian) pattern of propaganda and behaviour (pretence, creation of impossible projects and the account of their accomplishment, narration and overwriting reality, submitting false reports, the exclusive importance of *Potemkin*-facade of humble aesthetics).

We can also trace in the OSA documents the situations in which a certain culture comes into being in the course of a resocialization when political inmates (with urban intellectual background) affect not only each other but also criminal prisoners who get the chance to attain literacy, the knowledge and everyday use of languages, love for books.

Fear is the first feature of criminality to be mentioned. Criminals at large could not be terrorised. They could not be either blackmailed or encouraged through fear while political prisoners could be manipulated by making them fear. This picture will be generally typical after the prisons and labour camps got relatively emptied following the amnesty of masses of political convicts after Stalin's death. Behaviour of the guards also changed; the provocative, ruthless character was pushed into the background (for a short period in 1953).

The next criminal feature is *secrecy*. While considerable solidarity characterized the Hungarian POWs during their imprisonment in the Soviet Union if only because of lingual isolation, by the time most of them returned to Hungary and remained imprisoned, those relations were spoiled and there first informants appeared spying for their mates on behalf of the prison authorities. The POWs had no more trusted each other because of the appearance of spies among them. If somebody signed something and confessed phoney, fictitious crimes due to his failing, he could be blackmailed possibly ever after. This was the practice of the selection of informants most vulnerable to such blackmailing. The categories of communists and criminals ran into one another in this respect too; from their ranks emerged the informants, denouncers of others. The orb of political convicts was not clear of these features either; all the same criminals played a significant role in it.

It is an important fact these characters are never unambiguously political or criminal; they are interwoven; the two interpretations give sense to one another. We come across a similar configuration in the matter of *trust*. Narratives of the ex political prisoners having successfully gone to the West witness they had not trust each other, created a separate world in the labour camps and prisons, which was elementarily necessary if only because of the informants on the one hand, on the other it was condition of any individual action. We most rarely come across collective escapes. The inmates did not trust each other since one could never know how another one would respond in case of emergency. The POWs had got to know, trust, adjust to each other during the long years in the Soviet camps; they were not able to imagine anyone of them becoming an informer. After returning to Hungary they were disappointed when they observed that the

Hungarian authorities had been able to manipulate some of them, persuade or force to denounce, to betray them in case of critical events like non-compliance and rebellion.

As a result of this situation we can see people disturbed and anxious, untrusting and disillusioned, with what I will metaphorically call 'broken mind', mind that can not be considered single any more, following the personal accounts stored at OSA. 1956 divided the Hungarian society; there were those who could compromise with the regime and those who could not (sometimes within the same family). View points and experiences of 1956 could not be completely passed to the coming generations since there were matters that have scarcely been discussed overtly ever since. It was also a result of the public feelings that most of the former political convicts having stayed in the country thought they had better not speak about their experiences. Absurdity of the situation that these accounts were given contrary to the aim of the Hungarian authorities, because everybody being released had to sign not to speak about any experiences, sufferings in the camps and prisons. It must also be taken into consideration that even these accounts cannot be regarded as the full truth if only because at the time of these disclosures part of the mates were still in prisons and camps.

The documents kept in the OSA archive seem to be homogeneous as those having successfully leaving the country settled at least part of their past life before starting a new one. They at large do not speak about family, friendship, relatives, home or love. The details focuses on one thought (survival, or escape). OSA materials are only occupied with half of the matters. They do not say anything about the agony parting the home country may mean, not to speak about those who stayed at home without compromising or betraying their principles. The OSA documents due to their character also cannot involve the sufferings of the families without shelter and means provided by the head of the family.

Those inclined to compromise often became informers. Those incapable of this were not only physically and spiritually but even mentally broken. Their children were affected, as parents' stigmas followed them, and as parents' mental states shaped their socialisation. Children usually distrust their father who leaves their families the feeling of fear and exclusion from the local community. In cases like that socialization at all took place without the presence of the father. The children were influenced by the sentiments of the community against a prisoner particularly when he was not present in the village, in the family, as well as in the children's life. This is shown by the children's attitude to their father and his ideas when they are not able to get rid of the doubts whether their father was imprisoned for long years purely for anti-regime political attitude. This is how small rural communities may regard the events and people of 1956.

As the main result of my research in OSA I found materials about the everyday life and socialization in prisons and forced labour camps that became a background for developing of an image of Hungarian rural renegade, a strong man, who played important role (sometimes at the edge of political and criminal activities) during the 1956's revolution. The results of my research project

conducted at the OSA will be reshaped into a chapter of my future book about social collisions and biographical trajectories in post WWII and pre 1956's rural Hungary. But I also see a great potential for a book, similar to a type of "oral history" textbook, devoted to publication of OSA materials themselves, as these unique narratives will certainly change the common perspectives on labour camps in Hungary, which previously were studied almost exclusively on the basis of archives of the State Protection Authority of the Hungarian People's Republic.

Without the accounts of prisoners and camp labourers in the 1950s preserved at OSA, we would not have a chance to interpret the attitudes and dilemmas which have determined values of families and small communities up till now. These documents are unavoidable when we work through an ambiguous approach to 1956 that exists in Hungarian society. The research at OSA is based on the features of the figure of the local 'strong man' as well as his children's and his community's dilemmas concerning him. As for the method of the research, it was not the purpose to create or reconstruct criminal or political contents but describe a sensitive period, a position, an ambiguous authoritative figure in terms of the criminal-political paradox without resolving it (following methodological premises outlined by Navaro Yashin 2012 and Pedersen 2011), while in the background of the research various contents could also appeared.

The following contents could be the chapters of a future textbook, a compilation of original OSA accounts about *The Social Life of Prisons and Forced Labour Camps in Hungary after the WW2 – The Sufferers' Point of View*:

- the structure of prisons and labour camps
- the structure of prisoners and camp labourers; 'the enemies of the state'; change of role: the situations of former secret policemen and communist leaders in prisons and labour camps
- Soviet/Russian pattern: pretension-*pokazuha*, POWs, 1956, civil experts and military officers
- emotional results of prison life: paranoia (the sense of unending control of prisoners and camp labourers) and schizophrenia (various (irreconcilable) attitudes towards prisoners and camp labourers)
- political life in prisons and labour camps: the general anti-communist atmosphere, party activities and agitations among prisoners
- religious life: until the summer of 1950 the religious activity was not forbidden in the prisons and labour camps; the underground religious life in mine shafts
- styles of accounts: humorous, absurd, comical, ironic, grotesque, morbid? elements; synonyms (prisoners as animals, prison as middle ages reconstruction)
- labour: the construction of the socialism without paying; the structure of salary
- carrier story: being imprisoned, escaping or releasing
- gender: the situation of women and under ages
- eating habits, starvation
- the attitudes of the warders towards prisoners: members of the secret police (ÁVH), communists, former fascists (*nyilas*), cruelty: torturing

- bodies and death, the fear of the events of homicide or revenge, warders being imprisoned
- the attitudes of civilians towards prisoners: cruelty of communists; collegiality, solidarity, occasional support in general.

The prior studied boxes at OSA:

HU OSA 300-40 box 5 and 6 (Forced Labor Camps in Hungary)

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