HUMAN AFFAIRS, 1, 1991, 2, 187—194

SLOVAK TOWNS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Peter Salner, Bratislava

When searching for its national roots, Slovak ethnology turned to the peasant-pastoral components of rural inhabitants and their traditional culture. The urban environment escaped this trend. This topic was, therefore, avoided in bewilderment — as being non-Slovak and thus, strange or even alien to the nation. That is also the reason why ethnology and other disciplines dealing with national history, have in spite of the hundred year old tradition, steady growth in population and the rising cultural, social and economic conditions not paid adequate attention to town; therefore the problem of "where to place it" was shifted to the future.

At the present, no one of experts may have any doubts as to the topical character of ethnological research into the town. Although there are still some obscurities as to "from where to where" ethnology and the urban environment overlap or which particular topic, which component part of population or what applied method of interpretation or technique of research have already exceeded the boundaries of the discipline, ethnology has become the subject of interest in other sciences — the related ones or those being distant to ethnology, at first glance.

Ethnology in its development has been shifted from the original orientation, and even today persisting in the consciousness of many experts and laymen, to the traditional, preindustrial forms of culture and way of life — "living antiquity", toward new phenomena. The urban environment also ranks among the new problems. It represents an entire open cultural system whose components saturate the fundamental needs of the community and its smaller parts of mutual interactions. In order to know and understand the town one should apply a complex approach to the phenomena that have not been included in ethnology or other disciplines dealing with national history.

The historical development of towns was determined by economic and legal regulations and preconditions and also by the geographic position of Slovakia which, for centuries, had been an inseparable part of the multi-national monarchy. The culture of the Slovak town was characterized by variety and tolerance to different concrete forms. It did not originate from a single root, it was shaped by broader — Central European or all European influences. In the

urban environment of the 20th century Hungarian, German, Slovak and Czech was spoken prior to the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918. The Jewish population can be illustrated by various statistical data but even better by the memories of an old citizen who stated that "knowledge of at least basic words from Yiddish had belonged to the Bratislava bonton" (M. Gažo). This multi-faceted population was completed by the Romanies as well as the members of other ethnic groups.

The differentiation of the town was not only heard but seen, too. Firm boards, official titles, advertisements, names of streets, local as well as all-national newspapers — all this was an evident reflection of the polycultural character of the Slovak towns. This can be proven by the facts obtained in the ethnological study of Bratislava, although the above conclusions can be generally applied to other areas as well.

I. Kamenec mentions that "in December 1938, i.e. under the autonomous Slovak State, its capital city had 52,000 Slovak inhabitants, i.e. 42 per cent of the overall number of inhabitants". The stable national minorities, or if you want, sometimes even the national majorities were represented by the inhabitants of Czech and particularly German and Hungarian nationalities. In spite of these nationality paradoxes, Bratislava was in the inter-war period performing the role of the capital of Slovakia to everyone's satisfaction, subsequently becoming not only its economic or administrative centre but also the political and cultural seat.

Mutual relationships between the individual ethnic groups were those of tolerance, though not devoid of conflicts. After the Czechoslovak Republic was established, the Hungarian and German inhabitants gave up their positions only with reluctance. They were not very enthusiastic about the new conditions and their representatives — the Czech and Slovak immigrants. Their relations were manifested on different occasions by everyday cultural and social life so that subsequently there arose two mutually independent, though not isolated, communities — "the Pressburg community", i.e. Hungarian-German and the "Czechoslovak" community. Their common interests were expressed in various forms of associations. The statement "when two Slovaks had met after the revolution in 1918, they went to celebrate it at the pub" (J. Satinský) seems to be exaggerated, but it is so only partially. Regular meetings in "Pressburg" or "Czechoslovak" cafés, organizing one's own social events and balls, ethnic structure of associations (E. Mannová), all this signals the attitudes of the inhabitants to these problems.

The national atmosphere was also reflected in sporting events which often had a prestigious character. Particularly, the duels of the Slovak and Hungarian clubs were anticipated with excitement (Š. Mašlonka — J. Kšiňan). The same is true of the duels between the "German cracks" from the Teresian town and

the Jewish club Makkabea (I. Zeljenka). The informant Kurt Bock told us an interesting story connected with this topic. Being a student of the Czechoslovak Academy, he did not want to play for the Hungarian club under his own name. Therefore, he was registered under the name Karol Balogh and thanks to this name he was able to survive the war in Slovakia...

The relations among different nationalities in cultural life were manifested, e. g. by ignoring the Slovak theatre season: "The Pressburg town-dwellers of German or Hungarian nationality despised the "intruders". They protested against lending the theatre building to the Cooperative of the Slovak National Theatre. They argued that if the Czechs and Slovaks wish to have their own theatre, they should build a new one, as the present building belongs to the Hungarians and Germans having built it from their own means, being the majority in the town as compared to the Slovaks and Czechs who are the minority even if only for a short time"... (J. Hrušovský).

There were some riots, too. When the plays of Hungarian authors were presented at the Slovak stage, there was an attempt to interrupt the rehearsal so that often the police had to intervene. However, in these cases one did not have to act with violent or hateful manifestations. This can be proven by police documents from 1933 published by L. Lajcha. In one case 5 stink bombs were confiscated, in the other, 18 persons were imprisoned for a short time. Moderate behaviour of the demonstrators can be evidenced by the fact that all of them were shortly released. The police confiscated only a "wooden rattle which belonged to Baluch Augustýn, rattling it by the box-office after the interruption of rehearsal".

The above mentioned tension did not, however, mean any hostility. In different spheres of everyday social life, mutual tolerance dominated along with the attempt to present one's own group as well as possible. One could almost say that ethnic tension was expressed and ventilated through ritualized forms: sports, culture, entertainment, etc. The ball season may be an example of this tendency accompanied with many prestigious events organized by various ethnic, religious or social groups as well as a wide variety of interest activities represented by more than 600 associations, today almost unimaginable (E. Mannová). The character of conflicts may be also illustrated by a statement made by A. Matuška. In his view "the Bratislava Slovak natives are represented first of all by the Bratislava citizens and those who were natives elsewhere, quickly became 'Bratislavized' ".

Social differentiation was also reflected e. g. in living conditions. Different parts of Bratislava, but also of other Slovak towns, "were inhabited by a specific group of a relatively homogeneous urban community from both the social and class aspects. There were typical quarters of workers, craftsmen as well as parts inhabited by the so-called higher society made up of intellectuals, past aristo-

cracy and nouveaux riches" (I. Kusý). One should mention the opposite side, too — colonies of the poor in the suburbs, Jewish quarters with their specific atmosphere, or the streets Vydrica and Podhradie inhabited mainly with "the Bratislava shadows" — by prostitutes, pimps, thieves...

The urban environment in the inter-war period was producing preconditions for diversified models but also conditions for the removal of occasional conflicts. In spite of the above mentioned confrontational character of certain situations, the inhabitants did not place an emphasis on the things that divided them but rather on what unified them. This can be evidenced by the fact that the football (Czechoslovak) club I ČSŠK, though gaining success since its establishment in 1919, was lacking popularity. The contemporary press had informed us that "our people do not have enough understanding of our club as they do not attend its matches, but they can be often seen at the matches between the German and Hungarian clubs" (Š. Mašlonka — J. Kšiňan). The situation changed as soon as this club passed into the national division. The team immediately became the representative and favourite of all Bratislava citizens regardless of their nationality or social position.

Social differences were mainly bridged with the activities of associations, religion and customs. Many of them were performed under the presence and control of the wide public processions, carnivals, religious processions, etc. Along with charitable events, they evoked a feeling of sympathy among different strata. By their number and variety of forms, these manifestations clearly contradict conventional ideas concerning poverty and the primitive character of customs and social life in an urban environment. An important role in these processes was fulfilled by wine cellars, pubs, inns, cafés and in particular, by wine vaults.

The wine vaults formally represented an expression of the old right of the Bratislava inhabitants (recorded in the urban rights in 1291) to sell in their houses wine from their own crop. During the described period wine-growing organizations granted the entitled individuals the right to "hang wine vault" always for two weeks (J. Horna, Z. V. Přibík). The wine vaults were subsequently turned into an inseparable part of social life in the town, "they, particularly, enriched Bratislava with a specific atmosphere, adding to it something special, that gewisses Etwas which had reminded Adolf Hofmeister a little bit — of Paris" (A. Matuška).

In the old vintners' houses there were sitting, side by side on long benches in close physical and spiritual contact, the representatives of all groups of Bratislava society. Some authentic published as well as unpublished memoirs of contemporary observers can tell us more than any detailed analyses. "We found some vacant place there, in the kitchen at the stove or at the table or in the bedroom near the beds and if it was crowded there, we settled in the corridor,

in the garden among oleanders, in the yard under the walnut tree and if necessary, even near the toilet or on the roof. And after you had found your place and were happy to have it, further guests were coming in wishing to sit down somewhere and seeking this inevitable piece of space which they needed to put their glass on. Those who had been sitting already, moved on and another 20 people were seated" (J. Rybák). "One table was Hungarian, another German and the third or fourth was Czech or Slovak — each singing the others' songs because everyone was considered equal," Z. V. Přibík writes and adds further: "People in the wine vault are usually from different strata of the population — from workers up to gentlemen representing the town and state."

The atmosphere of national and social tolerance remained in the memory of the majority of old Bratislava citizens. They repeated the same by different words: "In wine vaults one could see all strata, all professions, all nationalities. A worker beside a director, a student by a professor, a Slovak next to a Hungarian, a Czech close to a German, writers, artists, craftsmen, traders, in short, everyone who wished to sit and sing with good wine, of course, decently, without any conflict, respecting others," recalled Mr. Alexander Holovič and Ján Zubaj completed his opinion: "The wine in the wine vaults removed social, political and especially national differences. Unfortunately, the arrival of German fascism ended it all"...

A new situation was called forth by the arrival of fascists in the thirties "when we have suddenly realized that we are different nations" (Gizela Poláčková) and it culminated in social processes after the World War II. Both cases had a common feature — intolerant attacks against diversified forms of urban culture.

The first actions were aimed at the ethnic variety of the town. They had already started before the war as it follows from the recollections of the writer Š. Bednár: "We used to sit at the table in the wine vault. Guardist's songs were sung there and the name of Tiso, Tuka — one hand! were exclaimed along with other slogans and offences against Czechs and Jews. It was already quite different from the past meetings in the wine vaults with Švanda. Tolerance disappeared — tough rudeness instead prevailed." As a result of these changes the Czech, Jewish and Romany inhabitants were leaving — voluntarily but more often under pressure. The counter-reaction consisted of moving one part of the Hungarian and almost all German permanent inhabitants from Bratislava after the war. They were replaced by immigrants, mostly from various regions of the Slovak country.

Another wave of attacks, after the communists gained power in 1948, was focused on the social variety of the towns. The intellectuals were degraded so that this word was for a long time considered to be the most vulgar offence. Urban life was deprived of the strata shaping it — craftsmen, traders, businessmen. Instead of the cancelled trades, there were opportunities to work in

factories or offices. Due to the ideology, great support was offered to the proletarization of culture and way of life. Though the working class culture did not correspond to the demands and needs of all urban strata, it was becoming the generally accepted and enforced model.

The final result of these processes was the unification of culture, the way of life as well as of the urban living environment. Both forms of totalitarianism (not by coincidence) were unified in a common effort to eliminate the variety and diversity of the Slovak town, therefore, also the tolerance of mutual relations. The statement made by M. Žilková is meaningful: "Just try to travel with closed eyes to Šaľa, Galanta or Sereď — when you open them, you will certainly not recognize the place. Everywhere you see identical concrete beauties and only thanks to the church in Sereď or Lenin's statue in Galanta you can identify the town. We are weeping over Bratislava but none of the Slovak towns avoided the process of destruction."

This process of totalitarian unification was not performed at once but it continued successively. V. Havel's remark about the changing atmosphere of the sixties may also be applied to Bratislava and other Slovak towns: "Life in Prague was different then. Today, you will meet five policemen, five money makers and three drunkards on Národní třída street on a Saturday evening, but at that time the streets were crowded, people were entertained spontaneously, they were not sitting at home and watching TV, but they were going out, you could find actors, artists, painters, writers in various pubs and wine cellars; if you went anywhere you would meet some friends, the atmosphere was much more relaxed, much more free, as if humour was to be found everywhere, there was more faithfulness, hope; people were able to go in for something, to search for anything, they often suffered; as if Prague were not flooded with a stream of general indifference and was not deadly rigid under its load."

When confronting the recollections of different generations of contemporary observers to the Bratislava of their youth, we can see that the space has been inconspicuously and systematically reduced. In the forties the social structure was changed; later on associations disappeared. Even the present day forty-year olds have kept their memories of the promenade (*korzo*), of the busy social atmosphere of students' meetings and jokes. The thirty year olds do not know this phenomenon at all as the promenade was abolished at the beginning of the seventies. With the assistance of officials and police representatives, it disappeared almost without any traces.

Under such conditions the immigrants, even after forty or fifty years of residence, do not have anything to be identified with or to imitate. Their roots have remained in the original environment: "In Bratislava, different countrymen's associations were spreading like wildfire — as much as in America. Even now during the winter season there is a ball almost every week in the Park of

Culture and Entertainment — meetings of fellow countrymen from Bradlo, Spiš, Šariš, Zemplín, Orava, Záhorie, Liptov regions... and who knows what. They do not consider themselves to be Bratislava citizens. Their roots were preserved and the separate enclaves were not merged. Those newly settled try to adapt the unlucky town to their own taste which is related to the megalomaniac ideas of the country people about the capital," said the famous actor J. Satinský. Similarly the well-known surgeon K. Čársky expressed his views as follows: "Bratislava seems to be over-crowded today with people from various regions of our land. On working days its streets are jammed with cars disappearing somewhere on Saturdays and Sundays. Obviously, many inhabitants drive to their weekend houses or to their families living in the country. Those having their families here, are sitting at home and the men are often playing cards or listening to music from juke-boxes in smoky rooms."

When summarizing the above facts in an isolated way, one is not instantly aware that the confrontation of the present state with the former past does not represent a successive development but rather a comparison of two, principally distinct cultural models. The first of them is based on the described variety and tolerance, the second one, which was functioning here for the past fifty years, on forced uniformity. The impact of it is the unification of culture and way of life. The urban environment was meanwhile Slovakized, proletarized and adjusted to the model of the block of flats dwellings. However, none of these models must be wrong in itself. The only fault is that they became the only ones or at least the main ones without any possibility of choice or confrontation.

It would appear that only one of these models can be perspective for the future of Slovak towns and it is not difficult to guess which one. But it is more complicated in reality. After a half a century interval, it is not possible simply to continue from the point in which the trend of development was broken. Thus, one cannot mechanically accept the experience from the towns in neighbouring countries. They have reached it through the ups and downs of their historical and social progress.

The pendulum of the historical development of Slovak towns was gradually shifted from a level of tolerance to the level of totalitarianism. Obviously, it reached its culminating point and is on its way back. If it is really so, we shall be able to see it in the years to come.

However, social sciences should not neglect the systematic study of these processes and their impacts. The situations, in which tolerance was loosing its attractiveness and the expressions of cultural, ethnic and social intolerance were gaining ground instead, have been repeated time and again.

REFERENCES

BEDNÁR, Š.: *Bohém hľadá vlasť*. I. Bratislava 1984.

ČÁRSKY, K.: *Chirurg spomína*. Bratislava 1987.

FEGLOVÁ, V.: *Charakteristika kultúrneho kalendára Bratislavy na konci 19. a v prvých desaťročiach 20. storočia*. Slovenský národopis, *35*, 1987, pp. 347—354.

FEGLOVÁ, V. — SALNER, P.: *Sviatočné príležitosti v súčasnom mestskom prostredí (Výsledky ankety na bratislavských sídliskách)*. Slovenský národopis, *33*, 1985, pp. 88—115.

HAVEL, V.: *Dálkový výslech*. Praha 1990.

HORNA, R.: *O bratislavském vinařství*. Bratislava 1935.

HRUŠOVSKÝ, J.: *Umelci a bohémi*. Bratislava 1963.

KAMENEC, I.: *Od Prešporka k Bratislave*. Manuscript of a lecture presented in December 1988 in Bratislava.

LAJCHA, L.: *Zápas o zmysel a podobu SND 1920—1938*. Bratislava 1975.

MAŠLONKA, S. — KŠIŇAN, J.: *Zlatá kniha futbalu na Slovensku*. Bratislava 1988.

MATUŠKA, A.: *Za a proti*. Bratislava 1975.

MATUŠKA, A.: *Osobne a neosobne*. Bratislava 1987.

MANNOVÁ, E.: *Spolky v Bratislave v druhej polovici 19. a prvej pol. 20. storočia*. Slovenský národopis, *35*, 1987, pp. 363—370.

PŘIBÍK, Z. V.: *Pod bratislavskými viechami*. Bratislava 1933.

RYBÁK, J.: *Kouzelný proutek*. Praha 1974.

KUSÝ, I.: *Obytné prostredie medzivojnovej Bratislavy v slovenskej beletristickej literatúre*. Slovenský národopis, *35*, 1987, pp. 311—319.

SALNER, P.: *Perspektívy etnografie mesta*. Národopisné informácie, 1990, No. 2, pp. 7—14.

SALNER, P. et al.: *Taká bola Bratislava*. (Authors: V. Feglová, D. Luther, E. Mannová, V. Obuchová, P. Salner). Bratislava 1991.

Na slovo s Júliusom Satinským. Slovenské pohľady, *106*, 1990, 1, pp. 65—80.

ZELJENKA, I.: *Kamienky do mozaiky*. Bratislava 1976.

ŽILKOVÁ, M.: *Dokedy ešte*. Literárny týždenník, *III*, 1990, 18, p. 5.