

Stalinism, Working Class Housing and Individual Autonomy: the Encouragement of Private House Building in Hungary's Mining Areas, 1950-1954

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Introduction

Between 1952 and 1954 waste ground and agricultural land on the fringes of the western Hungarian mining town of Tatabánya was transformed into a “garden suburb” with 240 private homes. Each home was set in its own plot with a small garden at the front for the cultivation of “rosebushes, fruit trees and flowers”.¹ Behind the houses, concealed from the view of passers-by, was the part of the plot where vegetables were grown, chickens, and in some cases a pig were kept. The houses themselves were made of red brick.² They were also large by the standards of much miners’ housing in the town, each had an entrance hall, with some had one and others had two large rooms for use as bedrooms or living rooms and a separate kitchen.³ The houses were to be connected to the electrical power supply, though would not themselves have running water. All the local authority had undertaken to do was to provide wells within easy reach of the new private homes.⁴

¹ - *Harc a Szénért*, 6 May 1954

² - *Harc a Szénért*, 26 June 1953

³ - *Harc a Szénért*, 13 February 1953

⁴ - *Harc a Szénért*, 13 November 1953

The party in the town and the local authorities promoted the development of a “garden suburb” for miners as an achievement of the socialist state. The local newspaper quoted the wife of one of the new owner occupiers stating that "we have been married eighteen years, but before the liberation we simply couldn't think that we would ever own our house. Before the radio, or new kitchen furniture was simply an unachievable goal for us. And now, I own my own house".⁵ The new residents in the Tatabánya suburb were the beneficiaries of a state organised programme to help solve the chronic housing shortage in mining areas through granting aid to miners and their families to build their own homes. On 2 July 1952 the Ministry of Mining and Energy initiated a campaign to supply private house builders with materials and practical assistance. It envisaged that 500 private houses would be constructed nationally by the end of 1952, and a total of 1500 would be built by August 1953. Credit up to 70% of the cost of building the house was offered, 23,000 Forints for a one room house, and 30,000 Forints for a two room dwelling. The remaining 30% was met by the miner-builder personally and would amount to around 6-7000 Forints (about eight times the average monthly wage).⁶

The promotion of private house building and "petty-bourgeois" attitudes by a Stalinist regime seems a little strange. During the Stalinist years officially permitted discourse amongst architects and town planners revolved around the

⁵ - *Harc a Szenéért*, 26 June 1953

⁶ - Szakszervezetek Országos Levéltár (Central Archive of the Trade Unions, hereafter SZKL) Szakszervezetek Országos Tanácsa (National Council of Trade Unions, hereafter SZOT) Szociálpolitika/16d./1952; *Feljegyzés Bányász lakásakció helyzetéről*, pp. 1-2

best means to plan new environments in ways in which the use of collective services would be promoted, co-operative forms of living would be encouraged and the development of privatised mentalities would be prevented. When the notion of building family houses was publicly discussed at the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s it aroused bitter controversy among the planners. Given widely held assumptions about the extreme collectivism of the Stalinist regime the widespread encouragement of private house building in Hungary from the 1960s onwards has been seen as a natural consequence of the reformism of the post-Stalinist state.⁷

Furthermore the homes of the “garden suburb” – single storey private houses, set in individual plots – contrasted strongly with much of the new building of the Stalinist years, in both Tatabánya and the country as a whole. Tatabánya was one focus of Stalinist urban policy – an amalgam of four villages it had become a significant mining and industrial centre by the time it was formally given town status in 1947. Tatabánya did not have the infrastructure of a town and therefore in 1950 a plan was adopted to create it. In addition to the construction of new roads and public buildings the plan contained a major flat building programme to re-house miners living in run-down company accommodation built at the turn of

⁷ - For a sample of the kinds of debates which were conducted by architects in particular during the period see the contributions reprinted in Máté Major & Judit Osskó (eds.) *Új építészet, új társadalom 1945-1978. Válogatás az elmúlt évtizedek építészeti vitáiból, dokumentumaiból*, especially pp.97-144, Művészet és elmélet, Corvina Kiadó, Budapest, 1981; for a sample of the existing literature which associates private house building with economic reform and the development of a "second economy" see István Kemény "The Unregistered Economy in Hungary", *Soviet Studies*, Vol. XXXIV, No.3, pp.349-366, July 1982; Endre Sik "Reciprocal Exchange of Labour in Hungary" in R.E. Pahl (ed.) *On Work: Historical, Comparative and Theoretical Approaches*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1988

the century.⁸ Tatabánya's new town suburb, which was beginning to take shape by the mid-1950s, provided the showcase for this re-housing programme. Buildings containing 56 small family flats were built for miners' families, close to schools, shops and other facilities that would – at least in theory – allow miners to use collective facilities for eating, shopping, childcare, and certain chores like washing that had previously been done within the household. The flats were conceived only as places of rest for the miners and their families.⁹

Why then did the regime encourage private housebuilding by miners, and why did its propaganda organs at local level support owner-occupancy? Official histories of the town written in the socialist era explained this in two ways. The first was to explain it through housing shortage – for many miners to build a private house was the only way to secure reasonable family accommodation. The second was to argue that the miners who built houses were predominantly “new” workers recruited from agriculture who wished to retain something of their old way of life.¹⁰ The account presented here substantially differs from these versions of events.

The state had a more ambiguous attitude to the private sphere than attention either to the debates of Budapest-based architects, or an examination of the ideas that informed the construction of Tatabánya's new town might suggest.

⁸ - Géza Horváth “A Városépítés Története” in Gábor Gombkötő (ed.) et al. (eds.) *Tatabánya Története. Helytörténeti Tanulmányok I. Kötet*, pp.193-6, A Tatabányai Városi Tanács Végrehajtó Bizottsága, Tatabánya, 1972

⁹ - *Harc a Szénért*, 18 November 1953

Much propaganda argued that the male worker required a stable home environment in order to work productively, based on the nuclear family, and a modified version of traditional gender roles. In her analysis of pamphlets produced by the official womens' organisation Joanna Goven has shown how the expansion of female employment was accompanied by the publication of manuals that showed new "working women" how to combine work in the socialist labour force with household "duties".¹¹ Such assumptions permeated the way in which officials analysed the causes of worker "indiscipline". Officials connected the poor work discipline of "new" young workers living in workers' hostels to the fact that these workers were living collectively, rather than in what they regarded as a stable domestic environment. In such circumstances the assumptions generated by this ideology of Stalinist domesticity interacted with more "petty-bourgeois" social attitudes and pragmatic considerations to create official enthusiasm for the promotion of home ownership. During the mid-1950s the private house building schemes directed at Tatabánya miners were expanded to cover the workers in the power plants of the town. Both the management of the plants and local party officials welcomed these plans arguing that encouraging private house building had two advantages over state construction. The first was that "the workers would better care for their own house" than they would for state property and that "maintenance would therefore require less use of state property and the financial burden would be born by the worker". The second was

¹⁰ - Horváth, op.cit., pp.198-9

¹¹ - Joanna Goven *The Gendered Foundations of Hungarian Socialism: State, Society and the Anti-Politics of Anti-Feminism, 1948-1990*, pp. 30-108, PhD. dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley, 1993

that "labour discipline would be favourably affected if the loan for building the house was linked to their workplace. The building of private houses therefore helps the creation of a stable workforce".¹²

I argue that state encouragement of private house building drew on the notions of domesticity described above. This combined with the problems of housing shortage in Hungary's mining areas, and those of labour management and discipline pushed the state down this road. Private house building was enthusiastically supported by the relatively small number of miners who could afford to participate because it offered them the possibility of attaining a sphere of relative autonomy from the failures of the shortage economy and the socialist state around them. To both state officials and miners the private house symbolised a secure private sphere. The policy makers assumed that it offered miners a degree of security and as such would improve their work performance, while miners saw it as a means of securing a degree of household self-sufficiency in the face of a chaotic economy.

In order to develop this argument the chapter focuses on private house building in the town of Tatabánya during the early 1950s firstly considering the interaction between housing conditions, labour policy and the workforce thus setting the context for a discussion of the attraction of private house building to miners

¹² - See Komárom-Esztergom Megyei Levéltár (Komárom-Esztergom County Archive, hereafter KEML), Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt Komárom Megyei Bizottság Archiviuma iratai (Papers of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, Komárom County Committee Archive, hereafter MSZMP KMBA ir.) 32f.4/12ö.e., p.33

themselves. The chapter then concludes by assessing the effectiveness of the campaign and assesses what private house building reveals about social relations in industrial Hungary during the early 1950s.

The Politics of Labour and the Politics of Housing

The link between housing shortage and the problems of creating a stable workforce had been foremost in the minds of many officials when they designed the programme to encourage private house building in the early part of the decade ¹³. In Tatabánya, as in most of the mining communities across the country, patterns of settlement inherited from the pre-socialist period interacted with poor housing conditions and increased employment opportunities created by socialist industrialisation to drive both the politics of labour and the politics of housing in the town.

During the inter-war years the workforce of the Tatabánya mines was stratified by settlement in a way typical of mining in provincial Hungary, in particular by the process known as "colonisation" (*kolónizálás*). In part this term was used by social observers beginning with Zoltán Szabó in the 1930s to describe the way in which employers in heavy industry across provincial Hungary sought to integrate a workforce drawn from the peasantry, from different ethnicities and nationalities, and with diverse experiences of work into the rhythms and practices of industrial

¹³ - SZKL SZOT Szociálpolitika/16d./1952; *Feljegyzés Bányász lakásakció helyzetéről*, pp. 1-2

labour. The colony (*kolónia*) was the company housing and the facilities built around it for the benefit of the workers. Often distributed to the best paid workers within the core of the workforce this policy had a disciplinary objective. In the late 1930s one social observer reported that mineworkers who lived on the *kolónia* in Tatabánya complained that mine management sought to dictate the newspaper they should read and indeed to determine "which restaurants they were allowed to go in".¹⁴

Patterns of settlement were to interact with the social organisation of mine work to stratify the work force during the inter-war period. In 1939 the total number of mineworkers stood at 5,129, of which 3,367 worked underground and a further 1,762 worked above ground. While the division of skill within the labour process and the differentiation between overground and underground workers stratified workers within mining, division due to settlement had a much greater role. Those who lived on the *kolóniák* were made up of either those miners who had been brought from parts of the monarchy other than Hungary prior to 1914, their descendants, or those who had been recruited from among the rural poor. Of the underground mineworkers who lived in the *kolóniák* in 1939 28.6% had begun work in mining, 37.8% were former agricultural day labourers and 17.1% had

¹⁴ - For initial discussion of the concept of "colonialisation" based on observation of mining districts in north-east Hungary see Zoltán Szabó *Cifra Nyomorúság: A Cserhát, Mátra, Bükk Földje és Népe*, pp.127-67, Cserépfálvi Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1938; Ferenc Szvircsek "Kolonizálás, mint a Salgótarjáni Kőszénbánya Rt. munkáspolitikájának része" in Fűrészsné Molnár (ed.) *Tatabánya 45 Éve Város*, pp. 99-105; for Tatabánya itself see Anikó Molnár Fűrészsné "Lakáshelyzet, otthonkultúra az ipartelepeken" in Fűrészsné Molnár (ed.) *Tatabánya 45 Éve Város*, pp.87-98; Zoltán Magyary & István Kiss *A közigazgatás és az emberek. Ténymegállapító tanulmány a tatai járás közigazgatásáról*, p.99, Pécsi Egyetemi Könyvkiadó és Nyomda Rt., Budapest, 1939

been smallholders whose land had been too small to guarantee an income. On entering the mining *kolónia* they effectively left the land behind. ¹⁵

The second important group in the workforce was the worker-peasant one. Many had small land holdings of under 1.5 hectares, and could not make a living from them. They or family members went to work in the mines to guarantee the family an income, or where they could cover the basic needs of the household from the land, generate a surplus from which more land could be bought and their dreams of securing an existence as an independent smallholder be secured. Some of these workers were seasonally employed and took jobs in the mine during the winter leaving in summer for the harvest. Others were more permanent and sought to accumulate wealth to buy either land or build a house. From a total of 11,763 employees in the Tatabánya mines in 1947 some 3,832 fell into the category of commuting village dwellers. ¹⁶

Socialist industrialisation was to re-stratify the workforce and create problems of labour discipline and labour shortage. These problems were driven by the interaction of the dissatisfaction of young workers with working and living conditions, particularly housing, and the expansion of the workforce demanded by socialist industrialisation. In 1950 the increasing intensity of work, the poor

¹⁵ - Ferenc Szántó "A szénbányászat és a gyáripar fejlődése a két világháború között" in Gombkötő et al. (eds.) *Tatabánya Története*, especially p.162; Magyary & Kiss *A közigazgatás és az emberek*, p.101; Imre Bán "Szénbányászok" in Gyula Rézler (ed.) *Magyar Gyári Munkásság: Szociális Helyzetkép*, pp.222-5, Magyar Közgazdasági Társaság, Budapest, 1940

¹⁶ - See Bán "Szénbányászok", pp.222-5; András Tóth *From Agriculture to Industry*, unpublished manuscript, Budapest, 1992; Private papers of Samuel Droppa; *Munkavállalók Létszáma*,

safety record in the mines, a wage system which tended to depress wages exacerbated by a norm revision and the poor provision of food in the shops was leading to increased discontent. Many miners felt that the Communist regime was not delivering to its key constituents in the mining towns.¹⁷

Poor housing conditions were one major cause of this discontent, particularly among miners who lived in the nationalised *kolóniák*. In 1950 a report on housing conditions in the *kolóniák* in Tatabánya concluded that 5,860 mineworkers lived with their families in 4,987 flats with 5,905 rooms in total. This meant considerable overcrowding; it was stated that there was an average of 3.2 people living in a room in company housing, but there were rooms which had to be shared by as many as 12 people. The majority of the flats had been built at the turn of the century. They were contained in the so-called "six doored (*hat ajtósok*)" houses, so-called because each one contained six small family flats. With each house was a collective toilet and small yard. A minority, built in the inter-war years, consisted of four-flat houses. In addition to the overcrowded conditions inside, many of the houses were regarded as appalling. A journalist visiting with a group of doctors in 1948 remarked that "most miner's families live together in one room, even though on average they have 3 or 4 kids and often young married couples have to live with their parents". According to the local

Létszámváltozásai, Évi Munkanapok, Műszakok és Tejlesztmények; Private papers of Samuel Droppa; *Létszámkimutatás a közeli falvakban lakó munkavállalókról 1947, 1948, 1949*

¹⁷ - KEML MSZMP KMBA ir. 32f.4/17ö.e., p.211; KEML MSZMP KMBA ir. 32f.4/17ö.e., pp.217-9; SZKL Komárom SZMT (Komárom County Union Organisation) /42d./1950; *Titkári Jelentés 1950 év szeptember hónapról*, pp.3-5; SZKL Komárom SZMT/42d./1950; *Titkári jelentés 1950 év november hónapról*, p.1

newspaper in 1947 in one flat "ten live together in a one room flat There is only one bed. The road is at the height of the roof and because of it dust comes down into the flat as a result of the road traffic".¹⁸

Increasingly young miners anxious to set up families sought employment outside mining in order to guarantee better housing conditions. In 1950 with the beginning of socialist industrialisation an increasing number of miners requested that management agree to their departure on the grounds that "in Tatabánya they could not start a family". 1,672 underground workers had already left during 1949 and 1,264 left during the first half of 1950 alone. At the same time as the mines struggled to retain labour, they were compelled to prepare to shoulder their part of the burden of increasing national coal production in order to provide fuel for Hungary's rapidly expanding heavy industrial sector. Despite this no spectacular expansion of the labour force in the mines occurred between 1950 and 1955. In 1950 9,343 manual workers were employed by the Tatabánya coal mines, a figure that rose to 10,244 in 1955. Furthermore between 1950 and 1951 despite huge increases in plan targets the number of manual workers in the mines actually fell.¹⁹

¹⁸ - KEML MSZMP KMBA ir.32f.4/17ö.e., p.213; Pál Germuska *A fürdőszobát meg hírből sem ismerik. A tatabányai bányászok lakáskörülmények az 1948 és 1959 közötti időszakban*, pp. 2-3, unpublished manuscript, Tatabányai Múzeum Adattára, Tatabánya, 1992; Molnár Fűrészné "Lakáshelyzet, otthonkultúra az ipartelepeken"; *Forum*, Vol.2, No.5, pp.383, May 1948; *Komárom-Esztergom Vármegyei Dolgozók Lapja*, 22 June 1947

¹⁹ - KEML MSZMP KMBA ir.32f.4/17ö.e., p.214; Sándor Rozsnyói "A város nagyüzemei" in Gábor Gombkötő et al. (eds.) *Tatabánya Története. Helytörténeti Tanulmányok II. Kötet*, p.87, A Tatabányai Városi Tanács Végrehajtó Bizottsága, Tatabánya, 1972; Private papers of Samuel

The labour shortage these processes generated was not merely one of a shortage of unskilled workers that could be solved through organised labour recruitment. Skilled young coal hewers left Tatabánya in droves. As a result alongside campaigns to recruit unskilled labour for coal transportation in the mines, the state began to introduce crash courses to train coal hewers. Traditionally such workers had undergone an apprenticeship alongside a more experienced hewer for six to eight years. Under the terms of new crash training courses "new" workers would be able to work as hewers at the coal face after only a year's training.²⁰

These processes drove a huge re-composition of the workforce in the Tatabánya mines. In 1957 when the coal hewers were surveyed only 35% had been working in the mines for ten years or over, in other words just over a third of skilled workers in the coal mines had worked in the pits prior to the beginning of socialist industrialisation. 39.2% had begun work in the mines between 1947 and 1954 as plan targets demanded constantly increased coal production. Workers in the mines remembered the changes to the town as the children of older miners left during these years and they were replaced by new residents. These new

Droppa; *Munkavállalók Létszáma, Létszámváltozásai, Évi Munkanapok, Műszakok és Tejesítmények*

²⁰ - KEML MSZMP KMBA ir.32f.4/15ö.e., p.66; Magyar Országos Levéltár (Hungarian National Archive, hereafter MOL) XXIX-F-107-m/51d.; *Tb. Alsó Szénbányák Dolgozó Létszámkimutatása 1951 év dec. hó*; MOL XXIX-F-107-m/51d.; *Törzskönyvi (Állományi) Létszámkimutatása Tb. Szénbányák, 1951. június hó*; MOL XXIX-F-107-m/51d.; *Törzskönyvi (Állományi) Létszámkimutatása Tb. Szénbányák, 1951. április hó*; MOL XXIX-F-107-m/51d.; *Törzskönyvi (Állományi) Létszámkimutatása Tb. Szénbányák, 1951. február hó*; MOL XXIX-F-107-m/52d.; *Törzskönyvi (Állományi) Létszámkimutatása Tb. Felső Szénbányák, 1951. október hó*; MOL XXIX-F-107-m/52d.; *Törzskönyvi (Állományi) Létszámkimutatása Tb. Felső Szénbányák, 1951. augusztus hó*; KEML MSZMP KMBA ir.32f.4/15ö.e., p.26

residents were the children of the agricultural poor from the rural Great Plain regions in the east of the country. There was little improvement in housing conditions, the flats on the *kolóniák* remained overcrowded. There was little investment in state housing in the town during the early 1950s, and the plans for new housing investment in the town were never realised. "New" workers from agriculture who wished to settle permanently in the town had nowhere to go but the workers' hostels. As a result of the influx of "new" workers in a climate of housing shortage the percentage of the workforce resident in the hostels grew rapidly, in 1950 the State Supervision Agency calculated that 5.1% of the workforce in the mines lived in such hostels. By 1953 this proportion had risen to 30% ²¹.

The result was the creation in the hostels of a specific culture among the largely young male workers that were resident in them which was regarded by the state as a cause for some concern. For workers living in the Tatabánya hostels conditions were poor; in September 1951 it was reported that one of the hostels was constantly "dirty, the reason being, that there is often no water, as a result the workers cannot bathe and go to sleep dirty there is no water, cold or hot. There are no furnishings in the rooms, nowhere to put either food or clothes". Doctors came to believe that the condition of the workers' hostels was

²¹ - MOL XXIX-F-107-m/54d.; *Kimutatás az 1957. október 1-i állapotnak megfelelő adatokról*; Personal interview with T.J., Tatabányai Múzeum, 10 August 1995; SZKL SZOT Szociálpolitika/16d./1952; *Feljegyzés a Komárom megyei lakásépítkezésekről, Tatabánya-újváros, Oroszlány, és Eterniti építkezések ellenőrzése alapján*, p.1; *Harc a Szénért*, 17 July 1953; for overcrowded housing in the town in 1954 see *Komárom Megye Fontosabb Statisztikai Adatok 1952-1955*, pp. 120-46, KSH Komárommegyei Igazgatósága, Tatabánya, 1956; KEML MSZMP KMBA ir. 32f.1/17ö.e., p.213;

responsible for a significant amount of illness among the mineworkers. Many of the hostels were originally intended to be temporary. They were originally buildings with other uses and had been quickly converted for the purpose of accommodating "new" workers. As a result of the lack of investment in housing in the town such "temporary" accommodation had become semi-permanent. They were reported to be "messy, they are cleaned rarely, the beds are changed only every 6 to 8 weeks". In addition theft was reported to be a major problem. ²²

For residents of the workers' hostels life was one of relative isolation from the world around them, punctuated only by weekend visits to their families and mitigated by the temporary community of the hostel residents; "after a hard days work people didn't really go out" reported one resident. Another described his leisure activities as walking "to the cinema. If I had enough money I went into the cinema, but most of the time I didn't have enough for a ticket" or reading "forbidden paperback westerns" published in the 1930s. Alongside this a solidarity built up between most of the hostel residents, "the residents would not have betrayed their neighbours" remembered one. Often they spent their spare time listening to western radio stations "if they could find the station". Listening to western radio often formed a kind of initiation into the culture of the hostel "the guys watched each other to see how they all reacted to the things they heard,

MOL MDP- MSZMP Központi Szervek iratai (Papers' of the Central Organs of the Hungarian Workers' Party – Hungarian Socialist Workers' Part, hereafter M-KS-)276f.88/249ö.e., p.13

²² - SZKL Bányász Szakszervezet (Mineworkers' Union, hereafter Bányász)/460d./1951; *Jelentés Tatabánya női- és legényszálló: Budapest, 1951. szeptember 18.*; SZKL Bányász/542d./1952; *Jelentés a tatabányai ankétről és a tatabányai Bányagépgyártó Vállalat Szakszervezeti munkájáról*, p.1; *Harc a Szénért*, 22nd November 1951; SZKL Bányász/460d./1951; *Jelentés, 1951 július 11*, p.2

how they behaved. To those who had just arrived we warned them that if they told anybody, there would be problems made for them" ²³.

This culture, one of alienated, young, "working class" males forced out of agriculture by an oppressive state, was one that bred political dissent – something recognised by the state. Young workers from Tatabánya who escaped to the West in 1953 recounted how under cover of darkness they would go from the workers' hostel into the town to tear down posters inviting them to produce "More coal for the homeland", or exhorted them to "sign up for peace loans, build a future for your family and your children", and replaced them with their own home-made posters with slogans like "Long live the Americans !", or "don't work for such low wages !". ²⁴ More importantly the state was confronted with a major problem of absenteeism and other forms of "indiscipline" in the mines. This they linked to the culture of the workers' hostels. In response the state sought to enact punitive legislation to control the behaviour of the young male workers within them while it sought in the long term to domesticate hostel residents. In its propaganda it pointed to examples of "disciplined" workers leaving the hostels, taking state aid to build houses and settling down with their families as an ideal to be followed. ²⁵

Miners and Private House building

²³ - Open Society Archives (OSA) Radio Free Europe, Hungarian Research Materials (RFE Magyar Gy.6)/ Item No. 06852/53, p.13; OSA RFE Magyar Gy.6/ Item No. 06687/53, pp.3-6

²⁴ - OSA RFE Magyar Gy.6/ Item No. 06687/53, p.5

²⁵ - *Harc a Szénért*, 13 May 1954

For the authorities private house building offered the potential of both alleviating housing shortage and easing the problems inherent in the management of labour. By offering those workers who could afford to do so the chance of aid to build and own their home they aimed to tie them to the mine. By allowing workers the chance of creating their own private space and granting them the promise of autonomy from the privations of Stalinist Hungary they sought to create more disciplined, contented workers. The miners who participated in the private house building schemes bought in to the promise of autonomy and privatisation that their own home offered, even if their precise motives were often not appreciated by the representatives of either the local or the national state.

A private family house as opposed to a state flat, or worse renting a bed or living in a workers' hostel offered private house builders the opportunity to become more self-sufficient especially in food. In Summer 1953 the local newspaper in Tatabánya reported on the case of one "new" worker and his family. The family was characterised by clear gender division of labour, while the husband worked in the mine the wife took responsibility for managing the household. She pointed to the importance of the garden of the house which made such management easier stating that "my father didn't like houses but his daughter is growing cucumbers in her own garden to eat during the winter". The garden contained more than cucumbers as the wife aimed to meet a substantial proportion of

household needs through growing tomatoes. In addition she was growing corn and potatoes for the winter and kept chickens. ²⁶

State propaganda at the time and official explanations during the socialist period sought to portray state encouragement of private house-building as part of a bargain between the authorities and “new” miners who had recently left agriculture. Of the articles written on families moving into their new homes published in the town’s local newspaper in 1953 and 1954 most dealt with “new” workers and their families. In each case the “new” miner had come from an agrarian household and had been recruited into the workforce during the 1950s. After an initial, unhappy period living in a workers’hostel while his wife and children lived on their smallholding at the other side of the country their enterprise offered them a loan to build a private house. They accepted allowing miner and family to move together to an adequate family home in Tatabánya. ²⁷ This impression is backed by an official history that argues private house-building was designed to accommodate those miners who “would readily live in a family house with a garden in accordance with their previous way of life”. ²⁸

Although we lack precise information on the social composition of those who took out state loans, there is considerable evidence that such workers did not constitute a majority of private house-builders. Archival evidence suggests that

²⁶ - *Harc a Szénért*, 28 August 1953

²⁷ - *Harc a Szénért*, 13 May 1954; *Harc a Szénért*, 28 August 1953; *Harc a Szénért*, 13 February 1953

²⁸ - Horváth, op.cit., p.199

miners whose families had lived on the *kolóniák* constituted a majority of those who took up the state's offer. It points to the attraction of programme to large numbers of miners seeking to escape inadequate accommodation.²⁹ This is backed to some extent by evidence from the town's local newspaper – among the families they wrote about were several who left the *kolóniák* to find better accommodation.³⁰

Why might a miner and his family who had lived in the *kolóniák*, probably whose grandparents left the land for good and had adopted an urban miner's lifestyle, wish to build a private house? Part of the answer lay in the access a private house gave to a garden in which vegetables could be grown, or chickens cultivated. The period immediately following World War Two was one of tremendous inflation in post-war Hungary. Money, and with it wages became valueless during the first post-war years. In Tatabánya this had led to the spread of a culture of cultivating allotments in the town. In households where the men were still prisoners of war the women cultivated the allotment.³¹ As wages rose and many men returned home from the prisoner-of-war camps in the late 1940s the importance of growing food lessened, yet the desire for a garden close to the place of residence remained strong. Sz.J., a worker in the machine repair plant attached to the mines, remembered being allocated a flat in four-flat house built at the end of the 1940s. For him a key advantage of this accommodation over

²⁹ - SZKL SZOT Szociálpolitika/16d./1952; *Feljegyzés a bányász sajátlakás építésakció helyzetéről*, p.1

³⁰ - *Harc a Szénért*, 13 February 1953

³¹ - MOL Magyar Általános Kőszénbánya Személyzeti Osztály iratai (Papers of the Personnel Department of the Hungarian General Coal-Mining Company) Z254/10cs/38t., p.493

flats built both before and subsequently was the small garden, which he could use to keep chickens, and grow vegetables. ³²

The onset of socialist industrialisation was to strengthen the importance of the role that a garden might play in satisfying household needs as real wages declined and shortages increased. Goods and food shortages caused considerable discontent among Tatabánya mineworkers from 1950 onwards. Official organs received complaints in 1950 from consumers who had had to queue for sugar, especially from members of households where all members worked and as a result were unable to queue forcing them to go without for weeks on end. ³³ As far as workers in the VI pit of the mines were concerned the fact "that workers had to run around after them (groceries)" as a sign that the regime "continually talks about rising living standards and gives us nothing". Another stated that living standards were declining because "on the market there aren't any goods". The shortages meant that the workers "only earn salt and paprika now". ³⁴

These shortages and the general inadequacy of public services led to the rise of an ideal of privatised autonomy from the ideologised, shortage-ridden, insecure

³² - Personal interview with Sz.J., Tatabánya Múzeum, 15th August 1995

³³ - SZKL Komárom SZMT/42d./1950; *Titkári jelentés 1950 év november hónapjáról (Secretarial report about November 1950)*, p.1

³⁴ - SZKL Komárom SZMT/43d./1950; *Szakszervezetek Országos Tanácsa Esztergom-Komárom Megye Bizottság 393./1950 sz. Hangulat jelentés (National Council of Trade Unions. Komárom-Esztergom County Committee. Report on the climate of opinion 1950/303)*, pp.1-2; SZKL Komárom SZMT/43d./1950; *Szakszervezetek Országos Tanácsa Esztergom-Komárom Megye Bizottság 419./1950 sz. Hangulat jelentés (National Council of Trade Unions. Komárom-Esztergom County Committee. Report on the climate of opinion 1950/419)*, p.2

public realm directed by the Stalinist state. This fed a desire for household self-sufficiency which was not attainable, but was nevertheless craved. A private house functioned as a means of giving concrete expression to the desire to become more self-sufficient. One miner who had become a new home owner expressed his desire to apply for a fishing licence in order that he could therefore help to feed his family. ³⁵

The development of such privatised ideals pushed “new” and “old” miners and their families together at least in terms of their attitudes within the community. The circumstances of socialist industrialisation increased of the importance of wage labour to the rural poor. The maintenance of a garden along with an industrial job was one of the forms by which industrial and agricultural activity were combined in socialist Hungary. Miners whose families had been employed in industry over several generations bought into an ideal of self-sufficiency, and many began to look toward combining work in a garden with a wage as a hedge against the shortages experienced in the world outside. ³⁶ In the attitudes which made the construction of private houses in Tatabánya’s garden suburb attractive to miners, traces of longer-term social change can be seen. The sharp differentiation between the urbanised worker and the member of a rural smallholder household who, perhaps occasionally, took work in industry that characterised the world of the poor in inter-war Hungary was breaking down. A

³⁵ - *Harc a Szénért*, 28 August 1953

³⁶ - Mark Pittaway *Retreat from Collective Protest: Household, Gender, Work and Popular Opposition in Stalinist Hungary*, Paper presented at the workshop “From household strategies to collective action”, Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedens, Amsterdam, 28-29 May 1999

unified culture embracing all of “the working people” was beginning to emerge whose members would be differentiated by access to different sources of income.³⁷

The attraction of the private house was driven by the same attitudes that were beginning to re-shape “working class” culture by the mid-1950s. They were in large part a reaction to the failure of the state to satisfy the needs of its working constituency. This can be illustrated by returning to the emerging “garden suburb” and to the “new town suburb” while paying particular attention to the experiences of the new residents of both as they took up residence during mid-1953. Both were plagued by the failure of the local authority to provide adequate public transport, electricity, or shopping facilities. In the new town suburb housewives had to queue daily for vegetables. Consequently, reported the local newspaper, lunch in the new flats was not prepared until late afternoon.³⁸ In the garden suburb one housewife was able to cook what she had cultivated in the garden of her house.³⁹

Conclusion

The growth of an ideal of household self-sufficiency throughout Hungary during the 1950s affected miners as much as it did other groups of workers and clearly fuelled their attraction to the ideal of building their own home. The actual ability of

³⁷ - *ibid.*

³⁸ - *Harc a Szénért*, 10 June 1953

miners to build their own homes was restricted. Between the launch of the campaign in 1952 and 1954 only two hundred and forty family houses were built in the garden suburb in Tatabánya. In a climate of endemic poverty the amount of money a miner had to find from their own resources represented a serious constraint unless the miner concerned had either savings or his employer was able to secure for the miner a larger loan. Furthermore in order to build a private house the miner had to negotiate the bottlenecks and shortages of the socialist economy in order to secure the necessary cement and other construction materials required.⁴⁰

Nevertheless the examination of the motives of both the state and of working class house-builders at a local level is important in that it opens to examination many commonly held assumptions about Stalinism and its nature. It has been assumed that Stalinism was highly collectivist and that the state aimed to destroy or at least undermine traditional institutions. In this context it seems surprising that the state supported private house-building at all, or that a propaganda organ even at the local level could celebrate the promotion of owner occupancy or household based food production as an achievement of the regime. Those who have studied the gender politics of the regime in Stalinist Hungary would find this perhaps less surprising. While the early socialist state nationalised enterprises

³⁹ - *Harc a Szénért*, 26 June 1953

⁴⁰ - For the figures on the number of houses built see *Harc a Szénért*, 6 May 1954; on the financial problems of workers in joining the programme see SZKL SZOT Szociálpolitika/16d./1952; *Feljegyzés Bányász lakásakció helyzetéről*, pp. 1-2; for one case where management assisted one worker see *Harc a Szénért*, 28 August 1953; for the problems with the

and politicised production it seems to have been much more conservative where the sphere of reproduction was concerned.

When faced therefore with the shortage of labour and its perceived indiscipline and when the state sought solutions in the sphere of housing it tended to be more conservative in its solutions than the discussions of avant-garde architects and planners suggests. Furthermore the acceptance by miners of an ideal of household self-sufficiency openly contradicts the notion of early socialist Hungary as a collectivist society. As this author has argued in much greater depth elsewhere ⁴¹, the need to survive the shortage economy and the despotism of the Stalinist state forced industrial workers to resort to strategies which were often individualistic or based on the membership of highly particular groups or the adoption of particular social identities. Such identities and patterns of behaviour were highly corrosive of broader social identities and solidarities.

Although the initiative described in this chapter lay at the margins of Hungarian social policy in the early socialist period it is important because it enables us to illustrate themes which must be central to any consideration of the nature of state socialism or its social impact. Firstly the case of private house-building draws our attention to the fact that the assumptions many of its policy makers made about the private sphere were often quite conservative. Secondly, it

supply of construction materials see SZKL SZOT Szociálpolitika/16d./1952; *Feljegyzés a bányász sajátlakás építésakció helyzetéről*, p.1

⁴¹ - Mark Pittaway *Industrial Workers, Socialist Industrialisation and the State in Hungary, 1948-1958*, PhD. thesis, Department of Economic & Social History, University of Liverpool, 1998

illustrates the degree to which society responded to shortage within the economy and the radicalism of the state by adopting strategies which promoted social privatisation. This led – to borrow a phrase from one anthropologist who studied Romania in the 1980s - socialist societies to be characterised by "solitude within an intense social field".⁴²

⁴² - David A. Kideckel *The Solitude of Collectivism: Romanian Villagers to the Revolution and Beyond*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1993