

The birth of modern household in Hungary in the 1930s

Choice of the topic, previous history of research

The picture of the renewing urban environment and the use of public and private spaces in the 1930s in Hungary has become clearer and clearer due to social history research, although a major part of the everyday life of that period has been uncovered yet. The most instructive of all the diverse elements for me seemed to be the study of households due to its complexity and wide context. The present thesis aims at highlighting and explaining the importance of this exciting issue which also involves tradition and innovation. Instead of a meticulous reconstruction of the operation of households the study focuses on the single phenomenon of modernisation, which is considered by social historians as one of the most determining feature of the period. The modernisation of households is most traceable in the capital and other cities with developed infrastructure, thus references used in the present thesis as well as the information and experience that I have gathered are mostly related to the capital Budapest. This trend of modernisation was primarily perceptible in middle class families. The aristocracy and the upper class households, which employed large staff are rather different in many aspects and their example might be more appropriate to illustrate the survival of traditions.

On the other end of the social scale deprivation hindered the free flow of information about innovations though, and quite naturally, under a particular income level it was impossible to buy new appliances. This has led to a further limitation of the subject matter: the thesis focuses on the modernisation of urban, middle class households. The definition of the term middle class is an issue which from time to time divides researchers. According to current sociological and socio-historical practices middle class is defined mostly by education, property, income level and housing conditions as well as the criteria of consumption. The details of the discourse can be read in Zsombor Bódy's publication on private employment. As the present thesis does not deal with middle class households in general but with their modernisation, in this respect I was guided by the principles laid down in his book and the definition itself is not discussed here. The data mostly come from families of skilled workers, white collar workers and intellectuals. The severe social crisis that occurred after World War II in Hungary also deeply affected the lifestyles of middle class families. Refugees (mostly civil servants) arriving in Hungary from the former Hungarian territories experienced a terrible crisis resulting from housing shortage, which they would

never have imagined. The middle class norms of consumption had to be fundamentally redefined due to the increase in the price of food and services. Middle class lifestyles led before the war were more and more difficult to maintain and those living on their wages and salaries definitely had to devise new strategies. The employment of women increased sharply in the inter-war period, meanwhile fewer and fewer families were able to afford maids for housekeeping. However, there was a quick response to the new situation coming from the state propaganda and public discourse. Housewives were provided with useful advice in abundance by magazine articles, leaflets and public lectures. The reduction of consumption and a simple and sensible way of housekeeping was not only motivated by economic reasons but also by the transforming ideals of the family and the role of women. As far as household duties are concerned, the period brought only few new tasks, although the order of importance changed considerably. The food shortage and the world war put an end to the overemphasised cult of eating of the turn of the century and the following decade. Eating took on a new role in middle class families as the way they were thinking about the human body had also changed: which was once a social event and source of pleasure became the means of maintaining one's health and fitness. The major requirement housewives had to meet in the given period was the impeccable order of their homes. Conspicuous and continuous housework was taken over by the quiet and hardly noticeable completion of household tasks as a social value.

The modernisation of households involves the genuine transformation of organisation, tools and appliances, material resources, the management of time and tasks as well as the views and dilemmas about these issues. The investigation of these topics requires the knowledge of the material component of lifestyles as well as familiarity with the propaganda and social discourse of the period. The modernisation of households cannot be restricted to a single discipline of study – it is a borderline among several other disciplines. Recent comprehensive works in cultural history have been dealing with the general tendencies and importance of the modernisation of households. Research into architecture and applied arts has contributed with information on modern flats and furnishing. The usage of household appliances is a popular area of study in universal technical history although it has been trying to gain attention in Hungary as a relatively ignored field. The history of everyday urban life in Hungary has not been deeply investigated yet, although some key areas of this research have been dealt with in a few fundamental, comprehensive socio-historical publications. In this respect the methods and the findings are determined by the work of Gábor Gyáni. Studying the operation of urban households in Hungary is traditionally carried out on sociological

grounds, here taking the works of Tamás Faragó and Rudolf Andorka as a starting point. Gender studies have much to contribute to the research of households with inevitable conclusions and viewpoints by the complex examination of the role of women, but this knowledge becomes especially important at the point where social reflexes are transformed by the change of these roles. Quite naturally ethnography and its findings, the way it deals with its sources as it studies lifestyle from every aspect can be a reliable point in this different medium as well. Research into rural households – tools and appliances, time, resource and task management, types of duties, the concepts of a „good housewife and a good household” – can provide appropriate analogies for studying urban households. After having defined the common points we have to state that Hungarian academic life so far has not been really interested in the research of urban households in the inter-war period including the changing role of women.

Methods and approach

Apparently there is plenty of information on lifestyles in the inter-war period. Written and visual sources, objects, written and oral recollections in abundance would help us reconstruct the story of everyday life in the past. However, the question is raised: what do these objects and photographs tell us, to what extent can one rely on the written sources? How can we use the recollections, or the occasional and disorganised systems of objects? What is the role of the researcher's preconceptions in the choice of data providers and locations? How much information and material has to be gathered to allow us to draw general conclusions and to what extent?

Apart from collecting and interpreting data on urban household management, the choice and use of methods to be applied became a fundamental issue during the research prior to composing the thesis. Without the stone of wisdom in my hand I refrained from following the process of household modernisation all along. Instead of the reconstruction of everyday life I put an emphasis on the understanding and discovering possible ways of interpretation of the topic. This method allows a certain degree of distance and prevented me from writing about middle class life strategies of the period with too much enthusiasm which is completely unusual in this genre anyway.

The thesis is divided into chapters according to the possible sources instead of topical structure: a built environment as the venue of housekeeping, the ideal household as in selfhelp books, objects in the middle class households of the time, consumption- the world of housekeeping books, fiction as a source, and finally the use of memory. Sources were treated as separate units, information gained from them was not projected towards other sources if

possible. This method inevitably resulted in relatively independent parts with their own contexts instead of a continuous story. My aim which was obviously difficult to achieve, was to provide a complete picture of the topic or at least to draw up as much as possible by using the details and information described in the particular chapters.

Making the sources speak

The chapter called „Up-to-date home and modern kitchen” was based on the latest results of modern architectural studies and traditional sources, the architectural journals of the time, mostly „Tér és Forma” (Space and shape), photographs, design plans, recollections, and publications for propaganda. Architects all around Europe were challenged by the demand for small but modern and affordable flats between the two wars. The issue of new requirements for space and comfort rising from the new lifestyle were also raised besides architectural and aesthetic questions at the conferences of their international association CIAM. The most important achievement to create a functional kitchen was made by Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky: in Germany several thousands of fully fitted and equipped Frankfurt kitchens were implemented on the smallest possible area based on her designs. In her theoretical writings she explained her unusual innovations in the kitchen with the changed role of womenemployment

and a simplified household. The CIRPAC group of Hungarian architects also

joined the work of the international association of modern architects. The articles written for propaganda by Farkas Molnár and Bertalan Árkay are especially important for the topic of this thesis: their ideas of the small, rational flat also deal with the problems of life and household management. The housing estate consisting of small flats which would have provided low-income families with affordable and healthy homes remained an unrealised dream for Hungarian architects between the two wars. Modern architects mostly received orders from private customers. They designed houses and blocks of flats of extraordinary aesthetic standards and infrastructure commissioned by wealthy clients. Although the criteria for a modern home – a lot of sunlight, optimised plan, access to a garden or a terrace, bathroom, central heating- were commonly shared values, were affordable by only a few. However, large masses of the urban population were not completely deprived of the feeling of modern comfort: their quality of life in their homes was highly improved by the widespread introduction of electricity and cheap gas.

The longest chapter of the thesis is called „The ideal household- the world of self-help books on household and life management”. This genre was in its heyday in the 1930s; these publications ranged from unpretentious leaflets to ornamental publications of studies

compiled by professionals. They contained plenty of advice and guidance on life management and home culture and tricks and tips on housework and childcare. The self-help books voiced the dominant view of the period on the changing role of women. They emphasised that the work of women working in the home was useful and valuable for the society. Publications reflecting or quoting word by word the works of German household literature drew attention to the importance of ergonomic aspects. Life management guidebooks, cookery books and women's magazines came out with a nearly endless amount of tips and advice. These guidebooks were considered as models which were more or less followed by their users, although researches of everyday history still try it difficult to accept their content as elements of reality. While the brochures can serve as indirect sources for household management research, they can become of primary importance in the investigation of social discourse on modernisation. The guidelines are also worth examining as texts: the paternalistic style used to address readers is very characteristic of the mentality and values of the period.

Naturally, it would be ideal to have the modern fitted kitchens, cupboards and storerooms containing household tools at our disposal in an intact condition. However, the chances are very rare to come across such places as more than half a century has passed since the „birth of the modern household”. What has been left of the former homes – and even that in a fortunate case –has been continuously transformed by time and the owners and hardly resembles the original version. Certain objects have been lost; others became useless and were disposed of. Instead new objects were integrated into the system of household objects but not at all cost- some had become unnecessary. As a result of new ideas of household operations objects that had never been used before appeared beside the old ones. The third chapter of the thesis deals with the objects in the modern household and the operations carried out with them. These objects can be found and seen by the researcher of the topic on their original locations, kept as a memory by the descendants, in antique shops and in private and public collections in museums. Household tools found in antique shops are mostly individual objects originating from different homes, without the personality and the social background of the former owner – their value for the dealers and the buyers comes from the age, perfect condition, high quality or connotations, although they do not contribute much to the ethnographic or socio-historical interpretations of the household due to the lack of background data. The artificially created systems of the objects in museum collections can provide opportunities for different, richer interpretations. Modern principles in museology necessitate the recording of the social background, information on the user and the use of the object. As everyday objects become parts of a museum's collection they seem to be minor

contributions, although they prove to be invaluable details in the academic examination of everyday life.

The second part of the chapter is an attempt to adapt the meticulous methods of highlighting and recording even the seemingly obvious details, used in ethnography into the research of urban housework. The tools and appliances of an average urban household are presented beside the tasks and duties to be carried out. This is the only part of the dissertation where reconstruction is used as a research method. The average middle class was dominated by a strict daily routine. The fixed time of getting up and taking the meals, the daily and weekly routine of household duties all served the purpose of a well-balanced housework routine. The change of seasons brought annually repeated tasks: spring was spent preparing for the summer; summer was the time to prepare for the autumn and winter, besides its own tasks. Objects, the supply and maintenance of appliances as well as the storage of temporarily unnecessary things always played a great role in this preparation.

The fourth chapter studies the application of handwritten household diaries as sources, and illustrates their possible use through a particular example. The diaries and housekeeping notes provide the „reality” that was so sought after besides the set model of the guide books. The writers of the notes or their families who have kept the notes usually find them too personal. These booklets and notebooks often reach the collections or antique dealers as part of a bequest, depriving researchers of the opportunity to study the notes along with the story and the changing living circumstances of the consumers from the past. The most informative items are diaries which have a social background attached to them, the writer’s income level, social status and family structure are known. The housekeeping diary of a Latin teacher Alajos Györkösy proved to be highly useful from several aspects. The most remarkable of them is that we can attach a precise biography, a location, social and familiar background. The diary records an exceptionally wide range of products from the period – foods, toiletries, personal and home care products, clothing and services. It stands out from the other housekeeping books that I have studied not only because it is very detailed, but also because the writer quite often noted down the quantity of the purchased products, enabling the orientation in prices in the given period. The teacher Jirka noted down the expenses day by day, recorded monthly income and drew a balance at the end. We can follow everyday habits, the change of the seasons, festivals, holidays, preserving fruits, cultural expenditure, and in one case we can see how they spend the extra money coming from the publication of his textbook. The notes taken during the period of 12 years, between 1929 and 1941 let us learn about the puritan consumption habits and values shared by a childless middle class couple.

The little brown booklet from which we can precisely trace back the structure of consumption is a testimony to a well-balanced middle class way of life.

Fiction, especially novels, which contain long descriptions are generally used as sources in cultural history. The heroes' clothes, homes, furniture, or meals are often described or referred to. Occasionally socio-historical works quote literary texts, although mostly to reinforce and support data gained from other sources. These minor facts, however, are rarely surprising as their credibility contributes to the credibility and acceptance of the story itself. Literature also provides ample data on urban households of the period. I have selected three excerpts from novels in which we can find lengthier descriptions of the changing role of women and household management in the 1930s. The heroines in the novels written by László Németh, Zsigmond Móricz and András Komor are all struggling with making money and doing self-realising work and at the same time they are facing the difficult problems of a perfect household. The gathered data must be treated carefully however reliable they seem to be. „There are very strict limits to the use of fiction as a direct means in discovering factual reality. LaCapra calls this practice the documentary reductionism of the literary text, which leads to the redundancy of literature as it only tells us what can be learnt from other sources as well.”- as Gábor Gyáni puts it in his study called „History and Novel: the historical novel”. I do not deny his words as I do not think that the minor data that can be picked out of a novel or the mentality itself could be directly applicable sources. Nevertheless, the researcher of the everyday life stories is inevitably influenced by the world of novels as well. The existing ideas or concepts of women's life of the time can be reinforced or on the contrary, they can be denied.

The last chapter of the dissertation analyses the memory and recollections as an opportunity to study the history of everyday life. While traditional ethnographic data collection is often carried out during some kind of outdoor activity, in an urban flat it always means a longer, repeated conversation and recollection. During my work in museums in the past two decades I have had plenty of opportunities to do this. Most typically I talked to elderly women who had preserved their pre-war material world or at least they were able to give a recollection of it. Only a few of the objects were taken out of the system to be preserved in the museum collection but dozens of life stories were recorded during the data collection stage and I was also provided with plenty of valuable information on the use of flats and household management of the examined period. My experience gained through field work also helped me in handling the different sources including recollections. Household is an especially unstable part of the memory as there are no outstanding events that could

facilitate the consolidation of the memory. Recollections though hardly traceably, carry the comprehensive knowledge of the interviewee originating from other sources – literature, films, books and hearsay. The data providers' responses are also strongly determined by norms: would anybody talk willingly about the untidiness or extravagance of their past household? Old people always exclusively remember the household of their youth with nostalgia, their recollections are dominated by the pleasures and experiences provided by urban life.

The example which concludes my thesis illustrates the typical middle class attitude of the 1930s with the help of an album of family photographs and the remarks made by the owner. For me the album which used to depict the Christmas in the Nemere family year after year served as a valuable source in the interpretation of the holiday. For its owners it is the manifestation of the long-disappeared home and the deceased parents and also the subject of remembering which helps recall the past and involves the researches as well.

It already became clear to me during the long years of research that this topic is immense and extremely diversified. At the same time I became more and more convinced that getting hold of the everyday life of the past has been blocked or at least hindered by severe unspoken methodological problems. I was able to solve only a minor part of them, just as some other issues of urban household research. However I wanted to initiate a discourse about the topic.