

PhD. Dissertation theses

G a á l Z s u z s a n n a

FORMATION OF THE GENTRY

**Transformation of the medium-sized landowner
nobility of the Age of Reform in the neo-absolutism and the
dualism period.**

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In the modern history writing, the picture drawn by Péter Hanák about basic questions of the Hungarian civilization was the etalon for decades. According to him, the characterizing elements of the middle class are the gentries, the preservers of the patrician spirit and tradition, who shape the civilian element – that tries to assimilate with them - to their own values. With this view, Hanák created a tradition that is followed even in the recent times. But preserving the tradition is nowadays only one – many say narrowing – trend, searching for the new, continuously reviewing the decades old cultural habits and traditions, is also present. Empirical studies made by the representatives of the new social history school – Benedek, Hajdu and Mazsu – are strongly questioning our present picture of the cultural development, and the specific characteristics of the feudalization in Hungary - framed up by Hanák -, among ministry workers, army officers and intellectuals of the dualism. Not only Hungarian, but also German and British researchers are interested in the problem of gentrification, this topic brought a series of debates. There is no consensus even in the interpretation of the basic terms. The questions: “who is a citizen”, and “who is a gentry” brought many different answers. Regarding the latter, we agree with the opinion that

identifies the gentry with the former medium sized landowner nobility, the wider interpretation that covers the whole middle nobility would make it difficult to explain the processes after 1848 and the debates responding to this. Because, in essence, these processes are about the reactions of the landowners to the situation brought by the emancipation from serfdom, and about how these farmers can transform their farms into capitalist enterprises.

Starting out from the view that identifies the gentry with the medium sized landowner nobility, we have chosen those families from Tolna county as the topic of this paper, who belong into this category according József Glósz's researches. Our choice was also supported by the fact, that the financial – and in part also the societal – relations of this class in the early 19th century are already worked up, so there is a good chance for comparison, and following the changes in longer periods.

We await a better and more differenced understanding of the change process from using the method of micro-history writing. The nobility's archives are of high importance from the sources used, but we also gained useful information from reports of general assemblies, from the deputy lieutenant's

documents, from materials of different legal cases and from the local press. From the families, we pay emphasized attention to the Dórys, on one hand because of the available information about them, on the other, because the lifelines of some individuals in the populous family represent in many aspects the variegation of possible answers to the challenges of the age.

II.

The medium sized landowner nobility in Tolna County got strongly differentiated into the era of reform. Several factors played a role in the development of the differences. Besides the original land size and the date of attainment, inheriting and random incidents also played a great role in the development of differences. At this time, the decrease of average land size contained risks only as a permanent process; but the general condition of the farms – caused mainly by serious indebtedness - led already in the 1930's-40's almost to financial hopelessness, and eventual bankruptcy for many families from the medium sized landowner nobility. But the feudal law -, primarily the law of entail – hid the real situation from those concerned. So, it is not surprising that the first publications about the financial declension of the nobility came

up only from the 1870's, in which a part of authors marks the 1848 crisis as the beginning point of this situation, and did not recognise that the legislation of the revolution only accelerated, but not started the process, which led to hopelessness of the nobility.

But there were some, who benefited instead of loosing in consequence of the changes. During the grain boom of the Napoleon wars, a part of the medium sized landowner nobility broke up with the traditional socage based farming and began with the profit-oriented production (like Dániel Csapó, István Bezerédj, Antal Gindly, Imre Sztankovánszky, Gusztáv Vizsolyi, Sámuel Magyar Kossa). The effective farming was undoubtedly influenced by such objective makings like location of the land, quality of the soil or the proportion of the fief lands to the allodium (demesne). Besides all of this, mental characteristics that distinguish the above mentioned landlords from the average nobles played also a great role.

III/1

In spite of the difficulties in the change, the limited credit- and labour availability, the first years of absolutism

brought temporary economical stabilization to the medium sized farms because of the grain prosperity induced by the twice extended moratorium and the Crimean war. These favourable conditions disappeared to the second half of the decade, which accelerated the differentiation (that started decades earlier) of the medium sized landowner nobility. The economic elite of the era of reform did not only survive those hard times, but they came out in a strengthened position. They were those farmers, who were able – in spite of the general shortage of money – to finance their production and to wait with selling their produce, thanks to their reserves. Unlike most of others, they pushed the advantages of the grain prosperity better, and aimed to do an intensive farming instead of changing to one-sided grain growing. Rudolf Gindly made important investments on his farm in Tengelic; he built new buildings and bought sheep, cattle and pigs. He eliminated the fellow grounds until the 1850's, and sowed the manured land with forage to feed the expanded animal stock. Taking advantage of the opportunities provided by the market economy, a part of the medium sized landowner nobility was – in contrast to the general tendency - even able to extend his lands. (Imre Sztankovánszky, Rudolf Gindly)

But these success stories were far from being general, most of the medium sized landowner nobility came only through the period of changing with losses. The incomplete land-loss data concerning Tolna County reflects the national tendencies, showing first of all that the depression period reached its peak in the early 1860's. The majority of the medium sized landowners got through the first decade of the despotism relatively well, there were just a few property sales even in the couple of years after the cancellation of the moratorium. The main reason for this was that the short-term survival tactics used in the feudalism still worked. But this mock-world soon collapsed, the number of those forced to sell a part, or the total of their lands increased, and many went bankrupt. The lifeline of Mihály Dóry -, which is introduced in detail in this paper- is considered as typical for this class. Main features are: a few hundred arpents of land, decades old debts completed with some new credits, and a mentality alien to that of the competitive capitalism, showing shallow characteristics of the orientation to the changing times, while not understanding the systems essence, which is based on utilitarianism. Those like Mihály Dóry were the first losers of the transformation, the lack of reserves led to losing the whole

property. The situation for those with some reserves looked more favourable; they managed to consolidate their status for a time with selling a part of their lands, and creating the chance to a possible development with this.

III/2.

It is uneasy to draw an objective picture about the extent of passive resistance among the medium sized landowner nobility in Tolna County. There was undoubtedly a relatively small group, who consistently supported the despotism as committed followers of the Habsburgs from the beginning. There is a similar clear picture by the emigrants too, and also by those, who actively took on the radicalism leading to the dethronement of 1849. A speciality of the situation is that the developed lines of force often divided families. The best example for the degree of this process is the Perczel family's case. But the extreme lifelines of the Perczel family's members, which led to their confrontation, were not common among the medium sized landowner nobility, especially not in Tolna; most of them were far from being radical in any way.

Although some elements of the bureaucracy appeared in the era of government of estates, but the whole system primarily served the demands for power of the county's nobility. In the era of reform, the leadership of Tolna County was definitely in the hands of the prestigious families of the medium sized landowner nobility. This changed radically in the 1950's. The statement, according which Austrian and Czech officials were dominating the government of townships – was true in Tolna county, although - regarding the county level - this was gainsaid successfully by the researches of Gábor Benedek and József Papp. This, however does not mean, that there was no continuity between the officials of the times before 1848 and the of the Bach era. As a result of a slow evolving process, numerous positions developed in the county level administration already before the changes of 1848, which were held by intellectuals, who did their job as a profession. More and more members of the impoverished noble families started to act as an official to finance their living. The period of despotism brought delightful office career opportunities for them, they could achieve such high positions, which were before available to those with extraordinary abilities or luck.

The problem of passive resistance can be better understood by dividing the levels of societal requirements and of the practice. In respect of the former, there was a wide acceptance, but in terms of the realization the principle was repeatedly distorted. The situation was most difficult to those like Mihály Dóry, who met the expectations of the society and of themselves in the first decades of the despotism, but later were forced to become officials against their convictions due to financial problems. Only those were able to act in practice according the principles, who could sustain their independence based on property even in the period after the 1848 changes. Tolna County undoubtedly had such social elite.

IV/1.

According estimated data from the period after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise (1867), the number of noble landowners was slowly, but still decreasing, and it halved until 1900. There are no country-level estimates in point of the medium sized landowners, but the investigations regarding Tolna county show, that the level of decrease is far lower in this circle. Moreover, if we take the lands cultivated as tenancy

also into consideration, then we can say that medium sized landowner families worked on larger territories than after the emancipation from serfdom. Regarding the evolved property relations, we can generally say that the economical elite families of the reform era still preserved their position. Especially prosperous were Frigyes and Lajos Dőry, together with their children, who rented almost 30 000 arpents of land from the Eszterházy-entail. The Bezerédjs, Sztankovánszkys, Jeszenszkys, Gindlys and Szeniczeis did effective farming on their own lands. The Preczels were the counter-example among the prominent families; almost nothing remained from their huge latifundium.

To prove the increased role of the individual and the mental idiosyncrasy, we present two case-studies. The performances of Rudolf Gindly and of Vilmos Csapó can be compared well, because they became nearly at the same time owners of very similar, modern operating lands. It is obvious that from these two types of behaviour resulting from their specific lifelines, Csapó's is the more typical; the threat of "coming down" was common, and the available measures against it were limited for this stratum. There was a lack of institutional protection of the medium sized lands in this

period; the landowners exposed to the free market competition could only count on themselves and on the reform era's tradition, basing on the dual values of the reasonable husbandry and the thrifty way of living. These values – in our opinion – were preserved in the second half of the century, even in the minds of those, who were doing just the opposite of them in practice.

Regarding the property relations at the century's turn, the typical property size was near, and over 1000 arpents. The small number of properties not reaching the medium size alludes to the processes of the last fifty years, during which several property-concentrations took place. This resulted in a remarkable differentiation not only between families, but also between the family members. The basis of the differentiation was on one hand the heritage from the era of reform – that means the general state of the properties -, with which the owners stepped into the civil age, and on the other hand – as we can see on the example of Rudolf Gindly and Vilmos Csapó - the presence or lack of personal performance, of the ability to adapt to the free market.

IV/2.

Looking at the traditional professions of nobles, we see a strongly diversified picture. The competition-based capitalism affected also this field, the role of the personal performance and of the individual became more important than before. Those, who started with nearly same conditions, came to different solutions, while those in different situations came to similar results. It is difficult to delineate according the biographies definitely distinguishable types. A possible borderline could be set up between those who got landless and those who managed to keep their property, but this does not reflect the changes in social status and prestige. Loosing the property could result either in impoverishment of the person or his successors, and also in keeping the status, or even in the rise of the prestige.

If we examine the question from the aspect of the chosen profession, we also get a quite mixed picture; due in part to the relatively common changes of the profession, and also because loosing or keeping the property can hardly be considered as a group-building aspect in this regard. The motivation was obviously different, but being a county official

or making a political career as a mandated politician in the parliament was an attractive and reachable goal for the landless and also the landowner nobility, while both were averse from a ministry position.

Besides the uniqueness of the lifelines, they could be fitted into a process with well definable characteristics. Regarding the orientation, it is a definite, but slowly developing change, beginning at the end of the 18th century, and having important stages later. The first to mention was the law declaring the office-holding of the non-nobles. The next one is the regulation that binds the election right to the financial census, and we can continue the line with all the orders concerning the officials and law-authorities. All this resulted – in interaction with the running economical and social changes - the gradual strengthening of the bourgeoisie, and, on the other side, the weakening of the nobility, especially of the former elite. Not only the monopole position disappeared, but until the century turn, this stratum got even into minority in some of their traditional professions. In terms of the changes in the proportions we have to consider, that the mentioned processes brought a remarkable expansion of the bureaucracy, so we can only talk about a relative weakening. This

relativeness is also underlined by fact, that despite the above introduced changes, the majority of the former elite still chose professions, which were considered as being “gentlemanlike”. But some chose – and this is much less talked about – instead of the traditional professions new ways of living.

IV/3.

Tolna County is one of the losers of the industrial development after the Austro-Hungarian compromise; and this is only in part due to the factory’s concentration in Budapest, the development of the two other centres of the South-Transdanubian Region reached also much higher levels. Whether this was the cause or the result of the low level, and late started building up of the railways, could be the subject of a separate examination, but the fact is, that the capital’s interest in the territory remained very moderate, and several of the established companies went soon bankrupt; others decided to move their seats to Budapest to ensure further development. So we have to adjudge the role of the medium-sized landowner nobility in the local industry-deployment in respect of the above mentioned facts.

Concerning industrial investments, Béla Perczel's name has to be mentioned on the first place, who established in 1909 a domino producing company in Bonyhád, which soon changed to enamel-ware production. The success of the factory-establishment is proven by the fact, that the development was undiminished until World War I, the small company starting with 13 workers, employed almost 50 people in 1914. Later, the factory was shocked by several crises, but it came over all of them, and is still operating near to the 100th anniversary of the establishment.

Perczel's enterprise counted as unique among the nobility in Tolna County, as it did not operate in the field of agriculture, in contrary to all other initiatives, like Géza Perczel's steam mill (1863), Stefánia Dóry's cheese factory (1882) and Etelka Dóry's cannery (1883).

Pál Bezerédj has established the two companies, employing the most workers in the county. After his assignment for the Government Commissioner's post, he initiated and led the establishment of the National Supervision of Silk Production in Szekszárd, which aimed besides supporting silk production also the naturalization of silk industry in Hungary. The units in Tolna and Szekszárd of the

Hungarian State Royal Silk Spinning Mill worked with over 600 employees. In connection with Bezerédj's industry-organizing role we can mention a speciality, that the investments were protected from the market mechanisms to a certain extent, as they were carried out with state financing instead of using private capital.

IV/4.

The traditional picture about women is undoubtedly simplifying; however, on a certain level of generalization it is true. The women were generally considered as weak, as those who had to be looked after, and whose place in the society was determined by the men: their fathers, husbands and brothers. Because of their status, their existence left only a few remarkable things behind. But the new tendencies of social history-writing deal with them, and try to draft the history of the woman; not that of the prominent personalities, but that of the everyday's woman. By using the materials of the family correspondence, we call up the lives of three female members of the Dóry family, to introduce how the changes in the medium-sized landowner nobility's status affected them. The

scale by the women is also – as by the men – quite wide; besides the need for early emancipation, there was also the possibility to preserve the traditional family-model.

There is no other social stratum in Hungarian history that had been given as much attention to as the gentry. It had been criticized and judged all the time, and even so it was an attractive model. This phenomenon can be explained by the specific historical role of the landowner nobility, which resulted that the general opinion - seeing the earnest of national independence in them – regarded them as the only nation-sustaining power. Their performance in the age of reform strengthened their self-awareness remarkably, and they reacted to the crisis of the new period with trying to preserve as much from their past as possible. In case they lost their property, which ensured the financial independence, and together with this a scope for societal and political acting, then they focused on other elements of noble existence, which were manifested in externals and behavior norms. The criteria of being a gentry – and later “gentlemanlike” - were gradually easier to meet for those with no noble birth, and for those who just started to realize their noble descent. Belonging to the gentry meant step

upward on the social ladder for them. Probably they are those, who strengthened the often rightfully criticised gentry features.

The evolved picture in the society's general thought about the gentry is undoubtedly undifferentiated, because it does not really consider those achievements, which point in direction of the embourgeoisement and preserve the traditions from the reform age. With the help of the examples in this paper, we wish to draw attention to this deficiency.