DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

PhD Theses

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Spa life in Gömör in the „long“ 19th century

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I. Choice of theme, aims and methods of research

In my thesis, I am presenting spa culture of Gömör from the last third of the 18th century until the end of the First World War. Within this time, I have focused on the bath life after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, to illustrate the historical diversity of Gömör-Kishont County in nature, balneology, cultural and architectural heritage. In the 19th century, spas were not only for personal hygiene and for the recovery of the body, but also for leisure, recreation, entertainment and vacation. In this era “bathing” was the socially expected form of behaviour. I present the first steps in the field of balneology in Gömör County, the first mineral analysis of water, compare each spa within the county and also at national level. How much had spas influenced the everyday life of citizens and how were they influenced by national trends? Due to the stated purposes of the thesis, I chose to examine the elements of monography and local history as well as attempt to combine regionalism in the background of national movements.

Historical Upper Hungary, which is known today as Slovakia, was one of the richest regions in mineral waters. Baths reached their peak popularity during spa tourism at the last third of the 19th century. Bártfa, Szliács, Pöstyén, Trencsénteplic, Stubnya, Korytnica, Szklenó, Vihnye, Ránk-Herlány, Rajecfürdő, Stósz, and last but not least, the Magas-Tátra recreation centres attracted thousands of guests in the Highlands. I could only continue the line of Gömör baths with Csízfürdő, which dynamically elevated its station with its salty iodine-bromine water. The ministerial owned Ajnácskő bath, Várgede which is famous for its Valeria-water, the most popular spa Csíz., Lévárt the so called "Hungarian Gastein", Dobsina also known as the "Hungarian Ischl", Rozsnyó and its famous bumpy roads, Nagyrőce and its famous garden parties or a family oriented Jolsva - all of them represented different categories of baths in both the county and nationwide. Except Csíz, the common factors they all shared, despite the excellent natural conditions, was low infrastructure, low investment, lack of vision for the future and minimum attendance of guests. Jolsva and Nagyrőce did not belong to the well-known spas in the county, therefore, they have rarely been frequented by out of town guests. Instead, they were the centres of local social life. Ajnácskő, as a ministerial bath, which functioned more as a private summer estate, became the meeting place of society’s nobility of neighbouring counties. Thanks to the excellent railway network, Várgede became the place of spa and garden parties for
the county seat, Rimaszombat. With its subalpine climate, Rozsnyóżfurdő was intended to fulfil the same role, and thanks to the resources built around the villa-colony, it brought out dozens of city dwelling families into to nature. Although Lévárt advertised itself as the "Hungarian Gastein" due to the chemical composition of its water, the baths were predominantly visited by rural peasants during the weekends. Dobsinas represented a separate category all together, which was the only special climate holiday destination in Gömö r. It owed its international reputation to its ice caves, however the resort failed to provide equally high calibre services. In comparison, the imperial bathing resort located in the Alps – Ischl - in Salzkammergut, paralleled with the contemporary public opinion, however Dobsina was far lower in quality, even than the closer Tatra resorts. The cultural spa life of bath houses in Gömor County has so far not been processed from a historical perspective, they had only been mentioned in few lines in several lexicons or in the balneological literature. The area is fairly uncharted, which is the reason for my choice of topic, to explore and to unite them in one historical context. My focus is not on the patients, but on a bath house guests as vacationers. In all cases, I concentrated only on local baths with thermal waters or hot waters, and not on urban swimming pools, public baths and beaches.

II. Sources and structure

The dissertation has two major types of resources and a minor one. During my research, I put great emphasis on the use of the largest number of contemporary literature and resources. Since there has been no comprehensive research done of the 19th century spa culture of Gömö r, I did not have any previous scientific documents available from the previous generations. Surprisingly, I found poor documentary material on the topic in the archives as well. The lack or destruction of the contemporary documents of Gömö r baths might be explained with the change of government in 1918, and with its national unimportance. I researched in six Hungarian, respectively Slovakian archives. In the Hungarian National Archives I studied documents of the National Association of Balneology, registry books of Cultural Engineering and papers of Rimamurány – Salgótarjáni Vasmű Rt. The Semmelweis Museum, Library and Archives helped my work account for the Special Migratory Assembly of the doctors in Rimaszombat in 1867, and the Semmelweis University Archives helped me with lists of graduates from the faculties of medicine, where several bath doctors can be found from Gömö r.
In the State Regional Archives in Besztercebánya, I conducted research in the documents of Gömör-Kishont administrative committee, operating between 1876 and 1919, as well as the existing Gömör County until 1803. The Kassa State Regional Archives in Rozsnyó provided available fonds of the city council in Rozsnyó and Jolsva.

The main resource base of the thesis represents press material, especially regional newspapers and balneological literature. The press had an important role in shaping opinions, which made it an indispensable source of information in the reconstruction of the spa life in Gömör. Therefore, my primary aim was to process the local press. I went through all of 13 papers from the second half of the 19th century until 1918, published in the territory of Gömör-Kishont. The most resourceful item is undoubtedly the county's official "leader bulletin" Gömör-Kishont, which was published in 1880. Additional major contributing sources of contemporary literatures are the medical studies, balneological bulletins and tourist guest books, whose authors were bath doctors, university professors, doctors and balneologists. In addition, my work is also supported by the careful study of small prints and artefacts found in museums.

My work has been built from a perspective of a "global to local" structure, in progressive thematic units, according to the preface and summation with five chapters. The presentation of certain types of sources, as well as the clarification of the methodological issues will be illustrated in the preface. The first chapter describes the spread of the domestic bathing culture on a national platform, which will be explained within the conceptual framework. The second chapter’s thesis is of a narrower scope, focusing only on Gömör County with a detailed overview of the historiographical list, presenting its first steps in balneology as well as its most important representatives placing Gömör on the national field. The third chapter specifically focuses only on the spa life of each bath house. My research is comprised of seven spas and one high-altitude holiday resort in Gömör, and while analyzing them individually I tried to reconstruct the most important moments of everyday life.

III. Conclusion

Mineral waters represented a great value in Upper Hungary and as such inspired the creation of famous bath houses. Gömör spas were frequented only by the middle class and neighbouring counties. They were rarely visited by other spa guests due to their inferior quality. Only Csíz
attracted prestigious clientele, where guests arrived from all parts of the Monarchy, however its unfavourable natural environment prevented it from becoming top spa.

Gömör offering bath houses with acidic waters, thermal springs and hot and cold thermal waters, became the main social scene in the regional cultural history of the 19th century. Its water's chemical analysis had demonstrated extraordinary composition and beneficial medical properties. The thesis focused on the balneological representation of the county and Gömör baths, on both national and regional platforms. Gömör-Kishont spas were also promulgated through multiple sources, such as scientific balneological books for doctors, exercise books and journals, guides and brochures for future spa guest, and also in the news. However, the appearances and efforts have proven insufficient to reach a national top level.

In my thesis, I tried to give a taste of the Gömör citizens 'domestic' bathing habits within the researched era trends. I tried to answer questions such as: Why weren't Gömör's natural mineral waters and spas able to compete with Hungary's other popular resorts? What about their mineral waters? Can we talk about bath life at all in Gömör at national and regional levels? I presented the topic by describing each spa one by one, to afford better transparency, and also to illustrate the uniqueness of each individual bathing area. Since all spas represent a different category, their history, composition of clientele and entertainment tools, further illuminate the uniqueness of each individual spa. The result of this local historical research is especially seen through the history of these small, local spas, detailed presentation of everyday life, which was first put under the microscope uniformly from a cultural history perspective, which were before neglected by historians. Through the exploration, it became evident that this region's infrastructure was much more underdeveloped than the country's other geographical units. Gömör, as an administrative unit, with the same historical-geographical regional spas did not belong to the contemporary notable bath regions in Hungary. It has only one nationally famous bathing place, while its other spas only bear local significance, and were labeled as a “peasant baths.” This natural - historical determination significantly influenced the anticipated results of the research. I pointed out that the areas were especially visited by local citizens and peasant societies, were commonly owned, privately owned and some operated as a stock companies. Due to their mineral springs or natural environment they could be compared to other foreign, large spas visited by bigger crowds: Lévárt with Gastein, Dobsina with Ischl , Csíz with Hall, Ajnácskő with Előpatak, Rozsnyó would have become Charlottenbrunn 's spa. The archival research and
press release revealed that the energy, endurance and sacrifice of the examined period in our example had benefited Csíz alone, which as a result turned itself to a nationally distinguished spa that operates even today.

I came to the conclusion that there was no sufficient interest generated by the other Gömör spas, leaving them all labeled, now only living in the memory of the older generation, as "peasant baths". Gömör-Kishont was equal in natural features, entertainment and relaxation possibilities as well as spa resorts to other counties, however, it lacked the necessary financial capital, entrepreneurship, dedication and advertising campaign that would have attracted a large, regular customers base in the County. Behind the missed opportunities and unrealized plans, I discovered self-denial and poor taste that plagued many local spas. The real breakthrough in this field undoubtedly would have been if the local spa owners would have united among themselves and formed a mutually beneficial alliance by searching for new breakthroughs in their field and advertising their services together. For the spas in Gömör, the joint propaganda campaign would have been one of the most effective solutions and it would have also generated money for the local economy. Unfortunately, the baths in Gömör, as important economic factors were doomed to fail without proper financial support derived from visitors and investors, which could have been used to modernize and update these bathing facilities. My investigations have also shown that for the majority of the population, these outdated baths were fully acceptable for the intended use. Besides the "good old days" of peace and social life of spas, the World War I era has to be mentioned as well, during which the prominent flame of spa life has died out somewhat. Most counties could have capitalized on the opportunity of setting up military spas and recreational centers, however, only Csíz and Várgeđe made the best of this opportunity.

Gömör's spa life, however, has not been completed with this dissertation, for this topic leaves a countless unanswered questions and open issues that urge the completion of further independent studies. The out of town bathing habits of Gömör's citizens, comparing baths with their equivalent counterparts, the analysis of mineral waters and therapies focused on medical history and architectural study of spa facilities focusing on art-historical approach, highlights new, uncharted areas and opportunities to be explored by dedicated researchers.
IV. The publications of the author in the subject:


