

A Life in Central Europe (János Horváth, 1938-2021)

Chris Hann, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

Hungarians perceive themselves and their country as an integral part of *Mittleuropa*. Within Hungary, a state that lost two thirds of its territory at the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, the zone between the rivers Danube and Tisza is geographically central. Administratively, as in the socialist era, it falls mainly within the county of Bács-Kiskun. At the center of this county is the village of Tázlár and its outlying farmsteads, scattered across a flat inhospitable landscape with generally poor soils. The construction of parcels of private property to bring these tracts of *puszta* under cultivation epitomized the country's economic backwardness in the generations that preceded socialism. At the center of the modern community is a primary school, opened in the 1960s, perhaps the most important new institution of the decades of socialist modernization. At the center of this school, for almost all his working life, was János Horváth, who died peacefully at his home in January 2021, just around the corner from the school on which he left an indelible imprint.



The location of Tázlár in the Danube-Tisza Interfluve

One of the first things I learned about János during the year I spent in his village in 1976-77 was that his original family name was not Horváth. He was baptized János Mayer in a village near the Danube where the *Sváb* (Swabian German) minority dominated and his first language was *sváb*. Following the Second World War, this minority was deported to Germany (this later became known as ethnic cleansing – see Hann 2010). János's father did not return from the front. Distant Hungarian relatives in a nearby settlement provided a refuge for him and his mother. János learned Hungarian in his new family, whose surname he took when the Horváths formally adopted him in 1951. He excelled at school and trained as a teacher in the high school at Baja. Meanwhile,

Stalinism and the revolution of 1956 gave way to a slow process of normalization and reform under the leadership of János Kádár.



At the age of 19, János was posted to an isolated elementary schoolhouse in the sand dunes of the Tázlár *puszta*, where he taught the children of mostly poverty-stricken families. He met Gizella, daughter of a relatively prosperous farmer with Transylvanian, Reformed Church (Calvinist) heritage, and they married in 1960. When Gizi became the secretary/administrator at the new doctor's surgery (another important institution in the development of the village), the young couple's central role in the public sphere of the village was secured for decades to come. Electrification and clean piped water were further key elements in the construction of the new socialist civilization (Hann 2015). These

transformations were accompanied by considerable out-migration to join the industrial labor force. However, those who continued as farmers were generally unsympathetic to socialism. The loose forms of cooperative imposed in Tázlár in 1961 left households as the main unit of production and bore little resemblance to the Soviet *kolkhoz*; but the old semi-feudal hierarchical social order, grounded in private property rights and the symbols of nation and church, was permanently undermined.

Not a key informant

My PhD project was an investigation of these socio-economic changes. I spent much of my time hanging out in the company of agronomists at the headquarters of the recently unified cooperative, very close to the central school. By this time the isolated schoolhouse where János had begun his teaching career had been torn down. He was now deputy principal of the central primary school – and a longstanding member of the local cell of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. Several other teachers were also members. Joining the party was not obligatory; but declining to do so if

it was suggested to you (for example, because you preferred to be left in peace and have more freedom to attend church services) effectively eliminated any chance of promotion. Given that my research authorization specified the village's economic organization, there was no reason for me to set foot in the school. Had I done so, there might have been awkward consequences, both for the teachers and for me. Already a longstanding member of the local council, after my fieldwork János also served several terms as a member of the county council. When it was decided to merge culture house, school and library into a single organization in 1981, János was the obvious choice as director. For three years (1987-1990) he was acting chairman of the village council, after the incumbent of this key post was caught up in financial malpractice. Everyone, villagers and external powers alike, agreed that only János Horváth had the ability and the moral authority to take charge and restore trust in local governance.

Due to these political roles, for me in that era János was not eligible to become what some anthropologists call a key informant. He and Gizi occupied a spacious house which they built in a brand-new street a few minutes away from their workplaces. The doctor built a similar home on the plot next door. For me this was evidence that the opportunities which the Kádár regime opened up for “socialist embourgeoisement” (Szelenyi 1988) benefited everyone, not just the farming population. János obtained further educational qualifications and was held in high esteem for his contributions to the new culture house as well as the school. As a teacher, he was inspirational. He had no favorites, but dedicated himself to nurturing the abilities of all of his pupils – not just the most deprived from the poor strata of the periphery but also the offspring of more prosperous families, who progressed to the grammar school run by a Catholic order in the county town. János was also an enthusiastic sportsman, and we interacted occasionally in scratch games at the village football field. Above all, he was admired and appreciated for his musical talents. The “teachers’ band” that János formed with a few colleagues and friends was in constant demand across the county at large-scale wedding parties, which experienced their greatest efflorescence in the era of reform socialism.

Not electable as mayor

The change of system (*rendszer váltás*) in 1989-90 brought sweeping changes. János was among the first to resign his party membership. For a time, the insignia of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party were replaced at the local council offices by the symbols of the Independent Smallholders' Party. The revival of this pre-socialist party was motivated by a wish to restore an old order to which many farming families remained profoundly attached. However, the first democratically elected mayor of Tázlár in 1990 was a senior official of the old regime, a sign that the electorate was opting for continuity. Four years later, the smallholders were successful in organizing support for an independent candidate, the scion of a well-respected farming family, who was elected with a large majority.

János did not enter the mayoral contests in 1990 or 1994. This was the period in which I got to know him better. He explained that he had more than enough to do in guiding the school and its affiliated cultural institutions through troubled post-socialist waters. But by 1998, having reached the age of retirement and received every possible prize and professional recognition, he decided to run as an independent against the incumbent mayor. Though he achieved a very respectable result, he lost – in part at least due to mischievous allegations by smallholder activists. A significant section of the farming population, including some elected councilors, simply could not accept that a man who had been as prominent as János under the old regime should be elected to the highest office in the new system. It was impossible to impugn his personal integrity or his commitment to the collective life of the village. But for all his undoubted merits, in the eyes of his opponents he was nonetheless a turncoat, the symbol of an alien social order. These reproaches, cultivated systematically in the 1990s throughout the country by the smallholders, were soon taken over by Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party, which outsmarted its right-of-center rival and triumphed across the country in the general election of that same year.

If this political disappointment in 1998 must have hurt, János did not let it show. He never ran for office again, but he became even more active than before in promoting new initiatives at the culture house while continuing to teach part-time at the school. With the demise of the successful synthesis of socialist cooperative and household farming, and the privatization of land for the vast majority an economic fiasco, villagers now had more time available for socio-cultural

activities. Perhaps János's most notable accomplishment was the creation and leadership over decades of the Zither Orchestra, in which males of all ages perform well-known pieces from all eras of the repertoire for this distinctive Hungarian instrument. For the men and women who took part in theatrical performances or the annual gala of modern folk music called *Nyílik a Rózsa* ("The Rose Is Blooming"), as well as for the audiences, these events in the culture house were the winter highlight that made life worth living, as the local economy disintegrated and families were torn apart by out-migration.



János, far left, and the village zither orchestra he founded.

In more private contexts, the “old boys” football club of which János was a founding member in the 1970s continued to meet regularly when its core members were well into their seventies, gathering at the school gymnasium before proceeding to the home of the host for the week for hospitality that often extended well into the night. János also enjoyed regular get-togethers with old comrades from his days as a member of the ruling party and the county council: for the camaraderie, for wistful nostalgia for the decades of socialist modernization, and ironic comparisons with the political situation in rural Hungary in the 2010s under the new one-party monopoly of Viktor Orbán. He also took pleasure in renovating an old wine cellar in the village

of his birth, which has become a popular rural heritage destination for tourists since the end of socialism, including many Germans whose families were deported from Hungary in the 1940s.

But an organic intellectual and animator of local civil society

One of János's last major contributions was to research, write and publish a social history of the modern community (Horváth 2017). He joked that he only embarked on this academic project when prodded to do so by me, conceding that he was indeed better equipped than anyone else to undertake such a study. In August 2017, I participated in the book launch in the culture house (the building is still popularly known by its old socialist name). The evening opened with a speech by the new mayor, in which János was presented with a commemorative medal for his services to the community. Behind the scenes it was whispered that the mayor had done all he could to persuade the councilors to make János an honorary citizen of the community (an accolade which several others of his generation had already received, including his close friend the doctor). But given dogged smallholder opposition, the mayor had been compelled to settle for an unfamiliar form of public recognition, for which the assent of the council was not needed.

The mayor who took office in 2014 defeated the long-serving independent with a campaign alleging that the community had been stagnating for decades, and that only a new team headed by a member of Fidesz (by now firmly entrenched at the national level) would change things for the better. Perhaps I should not have been surprised that János, though certainly not a member of Fidesz, sided with the opposition (between János's defeat in 1998 and 2014 the independent mayor had no serious challenger). Róbert had joined the new dominant party only recently. He was a teacher, originally hired by János himself, and a native of the village. His expertise lay in physics and IT rather than in music and culture, but his enthusiasm for sport and his general dedication and integrity were comparable. Perhaps Róbert has a stronger claim than János to be recognized as an organic intellectual. His worldview is congruent with that of his electorate, grounded explicitly in the Christian national discourses that now dominate at the national level. Yet János had the greater talent for galvanizing popular culture and making it central to village conviviality over decades.

Neither of these organic intellectuals is an isolated individual. Róbert is married to Gizella's close relative and successor at the village surgery, a popular councilor in her own right. Since 2014, this husband-wife team has worked closely together on a range of initiatives. Some of these are tailored to emphasize the ideological messages of the present government, such as the observation of a plethora of national rituals and the consolidation of religious teaching in the kindergarten and primary school. If you are employed by the school or by the local state, in the contemporary village it has become as difficult to maintain a strictly secular identity as it was to maintain a strong religious identity under socialism. But many events and activities are appreciated for the sociality they enable, not the ideology in which they are packaged. It was not so different under socialism. Fidesz has fewer active members in Tázlár than the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party had in its heyday. For the community, it is not the party ideology that counts, just as loyalty to the dogmas of Marxism-Leninism was hardly relevant in local eyes when János signed to join the only show in town half a century earlier.



COVID-19 prevented me from paying my usual summer visit to the Horváth family in 2020, but I had an inkling from the strangely pinched writing in János's Christmas greetings that all was not well. He died just a few weeks later and was buried in the village's Reformed cemetery. In his entire life, János Horváth hardly ventured outside the county of Bács-Kiskun, in the heart of Central Europe. The world of NGO political activism in Budapest had no significance

for him. Yet persons who animate their local communities as he did, and as Róbert does in the one-party system that prevails in rural Hungary today, contribute hugely to what cosmopolitans call global civil society.

Acknowledgment:

My thanks are due to Amy Kósa (granddaughter of János Horváth) for copious fact-checking and providing the illustrations.

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