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WORKING PAPER

MÁRKUS KELLER

Old Global Problems, New Local Actions

The Old People's Home
at the Experimental Housing Estate in Budafok

2021



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WORKING PAPER

A publication of the MTA-SZTE-ELTE History of Globalization Research Group, Szeged – Budapest

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HU ISSN 2732-172X

Publisher: Department of Contemporary History, University of Szeged,
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Citation is permitted where properly referenced.

Suggested citation

Keller, Márkus, "Old Global Problems, New Local Actions. The Old People's Home at the Experimental Housing Estate in Budafok," HistGlob Working Paper 5, MTA-SZTE-ELTE History of Globalization Research Group, Szeged. 3–33.

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Summary

In addition to the information revolution and the population explosion, longevity is one of the global social challenges which is now facing humanity in the twenty-first century. It is a serious issue in Hungary, where the proportion of the elderly (i.e. people over the age of 60) is constantly rising, much as it is in other advanced industrial societies. It is no exaggeration to claim that by the end of the twentieth century Hungary (too) will have become a society of retired senior citizens. The present study connects the challenges faced by an aging society to another major social issue: housing. It searches for answers to the question how, as it began to face the problems caused by an aging society and the unsolved problem of housing, the Kádár government tried to meet massive demands for housing among the elderly. What needs did the government acknowledge as legitimate? What kinds of housing did it use in its attempts to address the problem? How did it communicate about the elderly to the public with regards to housing? These are the main research questions raised in this essay, the answers to which will hopefully also offer a more nuanced understanding of the self-image of the socialist society of the era.

Keywords

housing, ageing society, experimental homes, globalization, Hungary

* This publication has been financially supported by the MTA-SZTE-ELTE History of Globalization Research Group (project number: 0322107).



“Technology does not kill humanity. Rather, in the hands of socialist society and socialist planners, it helps it reach its culmination.”¹

The Elderly in Post-1945 Hungary

Who is regarded as elderly? Stages of life are given different classifications and names in the secondary literature.² Both in Hungary and in international research, theoretical literature on demographics links the concept of old age to the most prevalent retirement age of 60, although many believe that the age of 65 would be more suitable as a dividing line, since it tends to mark the beginning of the loss of mental and physical strength.³ Along these lines, there are some who suggest the creation of an index based on a combination of physiological and functional performance.⁴ While these points are unquestionably relevant and justified, following the standard practice in the secondary literature of the era, in this essay, I consider the population of those over 60 as elderly. It must be noted, however, that one of the most important findings in the research then and now is that the population aged 60 years and older is rather heterogenous in terms of financial background and family situation, and also from the perspective of how active the people belonging to this large group are.⁵

Naturally, a population, unlike an individual, has no age. In this sense, the demographic aging of a population means that, from the perspective of age, the composition of a population changes and

¹ Szabolcsi, Gábor, “A XXII. kerület [District 22],” *Budapest* 5, no. 11 (1967): 42.

² Ibid.

³ Dr. Tamásy, József, “Az öregedés és néhány egészségügyi vonatkozása Magyarországon” [Aging and Some of its Health Implications in Hungary], *Statisztikai Szemle* 62 (1984): 801.

⁴ Vukovich, Gabriella, “A népesség növekedésének néhány társadalmi-gazdasági összefüggése” [Some Socioeconomic Relations of the Aging of a Population], *Statisztikai Szemle* 64 (1986): 109.

⁵ Cseh-Szombathy, László, “A nyugdíjasok helyzete és problémái” [The Circumstances and Problems Faced by Old-Age Pensioners], *Demográfia* 7 (1964): 89.



the rate of old people in society rises, but it may also refer to a change in the average age of a certain community. Obviously, this is not a one-way process, as a given population may also become younger.⁶

While the issue of aging has always been one of our preoccupations, the economic and social effects of aging were only given attention by economically advanced societies after World War II, in the early 1950s.⁷ This is tied to the institutionalization of gerontology, i.e., the study of aging and old people. Although in Great Britain and the USA this process had ended by the 1970s, in continental Europe it began some ten years later. One of the consequences of this delay was that European gerontology built on the findings in English-speaking countries for quite some time and also on the perceptions that shaped the European discourse. For example, the still often quoted mantra, “To add life to years, not just years to life”, was used by the American Society of Gerontology as early as in 1949.⁸

The primary reasons for the growing problems with aging were the need for and necessity of expanding the pension scheme to increasingly widening social strata and the impact of decreasing fertility and increases in life expectancy on composition of the population from the perspective of age.

The demographic research in Hungary has been of a comparatively high quality in part because the issue of aging society was the subject of research as early as 1955. It was then that György Acsády’s writing was published in *Statisztikai Szemle* [Statistical Review], analyzing “the aging of the population” on the basis of the data

⁶ Valkovics, Emil, “A népesség öregedésének tendenciái” [Tendencies of the Aging of a Population], *Statisztikai Szemle* 68 (1990): 869.

⁷ Dr. Tamásy, “Az öregedés és néhány egészségügyi vonatkozása Magyarországon,” 800.

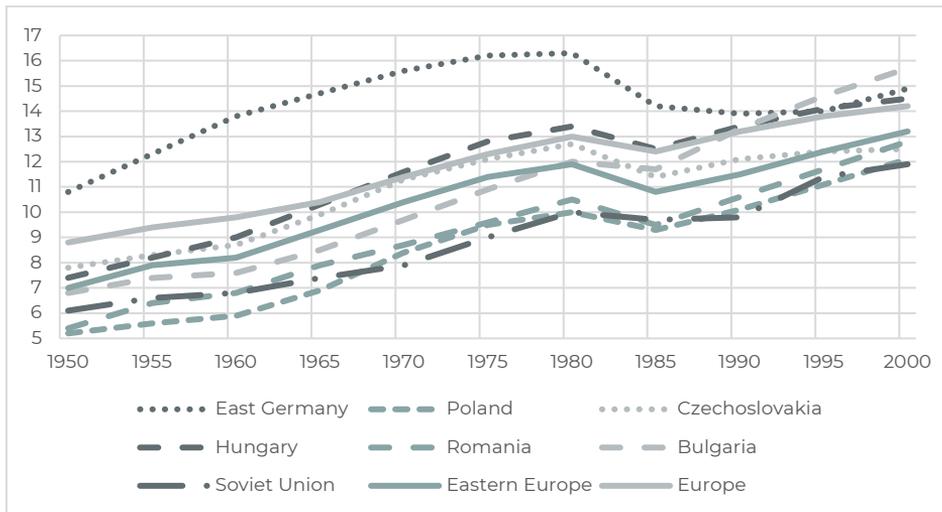
⁸ Matthias Ruoss, “»Aktives Alter(n)« in der kapitalistischen Arbeitsgesellschaft,” in *Prozesse des Alterns. Konzepte-Narrative-Praktiken*, hrsg. Max Bolze et al. (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015), 162–63, 166.



of the 1949 Census and providing a frighteningly accurate estimate concerning future tendencies.⁹

With regards to the process by in which societies have been aging at accelerating rates, the secondary literature on demographics categorizes societies as “young,” “mature,” or “old” on the basis of the proportions of elderly people in these societies. These categories are created on the basis of whether the proportion of elderly people in a given society is below 7 percent, between 7 and 10 percent, or above 10 percent.¹⁰ József Tamásy determined the age of 65 as the beginning of what could be called “old age” (somewhat contradicting common practice in the secondary literature).

Chart 1 Changes in the proportion of population 65 or older in Eastern European Socialist countries and in the Soviet Union, 1950–2000



Source: Dr. Tamásy, “Az öregedés és néhány egészségügyi vonatkozása Magyarországon” [Aging and Some of its Health Implications in Hungary], 803.

⁹ Dr. Acsády, György, “A népesség öregedése” [The Aging of the Population], *Statisztikai Szemle* 33 (1955): 879–99.

¹⁰ Dr. Tamásy, “Az öregedés és néhány egészségügyi vonatkozása Magyarországon,” 802–03.



Based on Tamásy's research, although in 1950 Hungary was below the European average in terms of the proportion of elderly people in its population, it was already a mature society. Among the Eastern European countries in a similar situation and lending themselves to comparison, only Czechoslovakia finished higher on the list, along with the GDR, which in many respects had a special position and was categorized as an "aging" society as early as 1950. Hungary was only listed in this category from the mid-1960s on, but by the 1970, it was above the average, and it came in second after the GDR as the oldest socialist country (i.e. with the highest rate of citizens over the age of 65). This trend continued in the 1970s, almost unaffected even by the lapse caused by the great number of children not born during the First World War. It is also clear that all socialist countries followed the same path, albeit at different rates.

Census and statistical data from the period provide reliable information on the elderly segment of society, meaning above the ages of 60 or 65.¹¹ At the time of the 1949 Census, 11.6 percent of the population of Hungary was above the age of 60. This figure increased to 17.1 percent by 1980. If one further divides this group according to age, one sees that the rate of older people among the elderly grew considerably. In other words, the group of old people also grew older. While in 1949 the rate of those 80 years of age or older within the group was only 7.1 percent, by 1980 it had increased to 11.5 percent. An even greater rise can be detected in the age group of people between the ages of 70 and 79. It grew from 29.9 percent in 1949 to 37.8 percent in 1980.¹² Similarly to international trends, the rate of women among those 60 years of age and older was higher than that of men, and in those three decades, it grew from 56 percent to 58.6 percent.¹³

¹¹ Henceforth, following the practice in the Hungarian and international secondary literature of the era and today, we regard those 60 years of age and older as elderly.

¹² Vukovich, "A népesség növekedésének néhány társadalmi-gazdasági összefüggése," 111.

¹³ Dr. Tamásy, "Az öregedés és néhány egészségügyi vonatkozása Magyarországon," 805.



In addition to general characteristics of the group of old people, it is also important to consider what it means for a society when an increasing number of its citizens reaches the age of 60 and becomes a pensioner, that is, someone who no longer works. It comes as no surprise that many of the publications on old-age pensioners and the elderly examined the costs of having individuals leave the workforce. The dependency rate of the elderly population (the number of people aged 60 and above compared to 100 citizens between the ages of 15 and 59) helped demographers provide a quantifiable answer to this question. A dramatic increase is seen in this area: the number of “old” people who depended on 100 citizens between the ages of 15 and 59 rose from 18.27 in 1949 to 27.99 in 1980. This increase seems even greater when considering the number of inactive wage earners (i.e. pensioners) per 100 active wage earners. It grew from 7.27 in 1960 to 29.64 in 1980, which means a more than four-fold increase in 30 years.¹⁴ If one puts these data in an international or, more precisely, socialist bloc context, one sees that Hungary came in second only to the GDR in terms of the number of old people (60 years of age and older) for 100 active wage earners (between the ages of 15 and 59) in 1980.¹⁵ This kind of increase in the rate of dependent citizens has financial consequences. In 1952, the Hungarian state spent 1.9 percent of its national income on pensions. This figure had grown to 3.8 percent by 1962, and it reached 8.9 percent of the GDP in 2018.¹⁶

Despite rapid growth in financial sources for pensions, the amount of pensions paid for individuals ages 60 and over in the 1950s and 1960s was relatively low. The table below shows the distribution of the amount spent on pensions in 1963.

¹⁴ Vukovich, “A népesség növekedésének néhány társadalmi-gazdasági összefüggése,” 112.

¹⁵ Dr. Tamásy, “Az öregedés és néhány egészségügyi vonatkozása Magyarországon,” 806.

¹⁶ Dr. Szabady, Egon, “Az öregedés gazdasági és társadalmi következményei Magyarországon” [Economic and Social Impacts of Aging in Hungary], *Statisztikai Szemle* 41 (1963): 1060.; *Nyugdíjak és egyéb ellátások* [Retirement Pensions and other Provisions] (Budapest: Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 8. 2019), <https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/idoszaki/regiok/orsz/nyugdij/nyugdij19.pdf>



Table 1 The distribution of pensioners according to the amounts of their pensions

The amount of the pension [forint]	All pensioners	Old-age pensioners
	percent	
-200	3.4	0.7
300-399	21.4	5.7
400-599	29.0	32.2
600-799	23.5	30.8
800-999	11.2	15.1
1000-1199	5.5	7.4
1200-1399	3.2	4.4
1400-1599	1.2	1.6
1600-1999	1.2	1.5
2000-	0.4	0.6
Together	100,0	100,0

Source: Dr. Szabady, "Az öregedés gazdasági és társadalmi következményei Magyarországon" [Economic and Social Impacts of Aging in Hungary], 1060.

The data indicate that 88.5 percent of old-age pensioners received less than 1,000 HUF pension a month. Furthermore, the majority (53.8 percent) was paid less than 600 HUF. This amount is especially low in light of the fact that in 1963 the average monthly salary of those employed in the state sector was 1,684 HUF.¹⁷ In addition to the huge difference between the average salary and the average pension, retirement meant considerable financial losses in the lives of individuals. In the winter of 1963–1964 Rudolf Andorka and László Cseh-Szombathy examined (as part of a KSH [Hungarian Central Statistical Office] research project) the situation of old-age pensioners in Budapest. Their investigation revealed that 69 percent of pensioners in Budapest received only between 50 and 69 percent of their salaries at the time of retirement as pensions, and 19 percent of them were paid less than 50 percent of their former salaries.¹⁸

¹⁷ Cseh-Szombathy, "A nyugdíjasok helyzete és problémái," 96.

¹⁸ Cseh-Szombathy, László and Andorka, Rudolf, "Budapesti nyugdíjasok" [Old-age Pensioners in Budapest], *Statisztikai Szemle* 43 (1965): 685.



Clearly, this kind of drop in income at such a scale had to lead to a restructuring of personal expenses and thus to a transformation of one's lifestyle.

Given this, many individuals did not necessarily retire when they reached the age of retirement. The percentage of those who continued to work or remained employed after having reached the age of retirement was 19.8 percent in 1960, or in other words, one out of every five people who reached the age of retirement continued working.¹⁹ The necessity of working after retirement is even more emphatic when the data are examined by sex ratio, since 32.4 percent of men above the age of retirement were still active wage earners at the time. Another significant explanation for this, in addition to the meager pensions, was the simple fact that in the 1950s and 1960s, not every old person had the 10 years of state-provided employment required for retirement.

There are relatively few data available on housing conditions for the elderly (and for the various ages in general) due to the particularities of census statistical records.²⁰ Surveys on pensioners conducted by KSH provide some points of reference, but the first research specifically discussing and analyzing the housing conditions of the elderly was conducted only in 1980. Gabriella Ernst examined the housing conditions of the elderly primarily from the perspective of the possibility of maintaining an independent lifestyle. Her analysis revealed that the housing conditions of people at the age of 60 and above were, in every respect, worse in the period (and perhaps in the previous periods as well) than those of younger generations.²¹ Concerning the amenities of the dwellings, it is quite striking that 49 percent of the apartments inhabited by old people did not have a bathroom and 26.4 percent had no gas installed, while the same was true of only 29.6 percent and 15.6 percent of the lodgings used

¹⁹ Dr. Szabady, "Az öregedés gazdasági és társadalmi következményei Magyarországon," 1057.

²⁰ Farkas, E. János and Vajda, Ágnes, "A lakásstatisztikai adatközlések, 1920–1990 (III.)" [Statistical Data Concerning Housing, 1920–1990], *Statisztikai Szemle* 68 (1990): 245–46.

²¹ Ernst, Gabriella, "Az öregkorú népesség lakáshelyzete" [The Housing Conditions of the Elderly Population], *Szociálpolitikai Értesítő* 3, no. 3 (1985): 127–47.



by those under the age of 60. If one analyzes the data according to types of settlements, one clearly sees that in Budapest, other cities, and villages those over 60 lived in dwellings with a much lower comfort level than the homes of people who belonged to younger generations.²² Likewise negatively affecting the quality of life and making individual living more difficult, homes inhabited by the elderly were more likely to be farther away from grocery stores, drugstores, and public transportation than the accommodations of people under the age of 60 (although the difference is only a few percentage points).²³ Problems with housing were intensified by the fact that the elderly had to pay the costs of maintaining their domiciles, which were of a lower quality and situated in unfavorable places, mainly on their own. According to various studies, this was a consequence of the fact that most old people above the age of 60 owned their dwellings or were family members of the owner, and only a fraction of them lived in rented (state or council) apartments.²⁴

The Issue of the Elderly in Scientific Discourse

Given the statistical data available, the issue of the elderly and the problems faced by an aging society became increasingly prominent for the Hungarian scientific community beginning in the mid-1950s on. In this early stage, scholarship approached the issue primarily from the perspective of demographics. In the second half of the 1950s, attention was called predominantly to the economic burdens deriving from the increasing rate of the elderly population.²⁵ A change in approach and a more thorough discussion of the age group of old people came with research conducted by Rudolf Andorka,

²² Ibid. 131, 134–35.

²³ Ibid. 139.

²⁴ Andorka, Rudolf et al., *Az öregek helyzete és problémái* [Status and Problems of the Elderly]. Statisztikai Időszaki Közlemények 249. (Budapest: Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 1972), 220.; Ernst, "Az öregkorú népesség lakáshelyzete," 145–46.

²⁵ Acsády, György, "A népesség öregedése" [Aging of Population], *Statisztikai Szemle* 33 (1955): 879–99.; *Az öregedés* [Aging], ed. Acsády, György (Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1957).



László Cseh-Szombathy, and Egon Szabady between 1963 and 1965²⁶ on behalf of the KSH. These were the first systematic investigations that aimed at assessing the conditions of the elderly. Alongside the general tendencies, the research focused primarily on old-age pensioners' cultural consumption, financial situation, and their positions within families. One important finding of this research was the comparatively diversity of this group.

In mid-1960s Hungary, "social care" for the elderly was provided only through nursing homes, as official home care did not exist at the time, so the research carried out in 1965 by KSH analyzed problems in these social institutions. The extensive research included the investigation of all state institutions and administrative departments, as well as questionnaire-based interviews with a third of the residents.²⁷ The research revealed that these institutions offered housing not exclusively but predominantly for the elderly, and they provided nursing care and homes for the lonely. This means that they had to fulfil quite different functions which were difficult to coordinate. Another important finding of the research showed that the discipline which was characteristic of these homes and which resembled the routines and rules one would find in a hospital made difficult or even well-nigh impossible to keep residents who were still relatively healthy mentally and physically active, and this made these individuals increasingly apathic. At the same time, due to the lack of a suitable staff, these institutions could not actually provide proper nursing care. Thus, the KSH report concluded that the nursing homes had to be reorganized and restructured, and hospital-like and home-like institutions should be separated and further developed.²⁸

²⁶ A *nyugdíjasok helyzete* [Status of Pensioners]. A Központi Statisztikai Hivatal Népeségtudományi Kutató Csoport Közleményei 2. (Budapest: Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 1963); Dr. Szabady, "Az öregedés gazdasági és társadalmi következményei Magyarországon," 1055–62.; Cseh-Szombathy, "A nyugdíjasok helyzete és problémái," 88–103.; Andorka and Cseh-Szombathy, "Budapesti nyugdíjasok," 675–700.

²⁷ Heinz, Ervin, *A szociális intézetek és gondozottaik helyzete* [The Condition of Social Institutions and their Inhabitants] (Budapest: Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 1966), 99–100.

²⁸ Szabady: "Előszó" [Prologue], in Heinz, *A szociális intézetek és gondozottaik helyzete*, 9–10.



In the scientific discourse on the elderly, a change in approach took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s. KSH research which formerly had been conducted according to a demographic approach opened to new directions, and the issue of aging became “socialized,” or in other words, several state institutions and social organizations joined forces to find a solution to the problems arising from the aging of society.²⁹ The most fundamental sign of this process was a symposium entitled “An Increased Involvement of Social Forces in the Social Support of Senior Citizens,” organized by the Department of Health in September 1970, with the participation of the Department of the Treasury, the Information Office of the Council of Ministers, the Central Commission For People’s Oversight (Központi Népi Ellenőrzési Bizottság), the National Council of Trade Unions, the National Council of the Patriotic People’s Front, the National Council of Agricultural Cooperatives, the Hungarian Young Communist League, the National Women’s Council, and the Red Cross.³⁰ The problematic issues outlined by László Parádi, the first deputy of the Minister of Health, were the following: symposium participants found the attention focusing on the problematics of aging inadequate, and they expressed a need to nurture more empathy for the elderly in Hungarian society and greater readiness to provide help. In order to achieve these objectives, increased cooperation was needed between the state and social organizations, and more effective methods needed to be developed, they claimed.³¹ The participants suggested creating a national action plan and setting up a working committee.³²

It was probably in preparation for the symposium that a study commissioned by the Ministry of Health in 1968 to conduct a new, comprehensive survey of social institutions and care leavers was

²⁹ “Az időskorúak helyzete és problémái (1955–1980)” [The Circumstances and Problems Faced by the Elderly], in *Öregek az írások tükrében* [Elderly People in Writing], ed. Andrásy, Márta (Budapest: Marx Károly Közgazdaságtudományi Egyetem, 1989), 10–20.

³⁰ *Increasing social support for the elderly by developing social aid: Proceedings of the national conference of national and social organizations on September 7–8, 1970* (Gyula, 1971), 11.

³¹ *Ibid.* 13, 21.

³² *Ibid.* 48–49.



carried out. However, the findings of the project were only published after the conference. One of the most exciting results of the study with which the research initiative came to a close was the fact that it was the first time the following opinion appeared in the secondary literature: old age and poverty do not always go hand in hand. Furthermore, the proportion of elderly people who had relatively high incomes had risen. For this reason, their needs should be considered when developing new institutions, and new types of institutions (which responded to the needs of those with a higher income) and new forms of care were required.³³

The 1970s was the period when, in addition to “socialization,” gerontology, the study of aging and the elderly, also began to thrive in Hungary. More and more books were published which did not simply examine old people as a group in need of help but (drawing on Cseh-Szombathy’s and Andorka’s research) also tried to analyze aging from a complex demographic, medical, and sociological perspective with reference to the research conducted. The first volume on socio-gerontology was published in which an argument was put forward in support of the value of aging workers, and in 1976, the first handbook on gerontology was written.³⁴ Meanwhile, KSH continued collecting data on senior citizens who were reaching the age of retirement.³⁵

Despite the increasing diversity of the research field and the increasing intensity of the work being carried out, the conclusions drawn by these publications were always the same: first, they contended that the proportion of citizens 60 years of age and older was rapidly growing in Hungary (even more rapidly than in Western

³³ Malinszki, László, *Szociális otthoni statisztikai felmérés és tanulmány* [A Statistical Survey and Study of Social Housing] (Budapest: Szociális Intézetek Központja, 1971), 14.

³⁴ Hun, Nándor, *Bevezetés a szociális gerontológiába* [Introduction to Social Gerontology] (Budapest: Medicina, 1972); Pogány, György, *Öregedés – foglalkoztatás* [Aging – Employment] (Budapest: Kossuth, 1971); Villányi, Piroska, *A szociális gerontológia* [Social Gerontology] (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1976).

³⁵ Illés, György, “A nyugdíjasok foglalkoztatása 1970-ben” [The Employment of Pensioners in 1970], *Statisztikai Szemle* 50 (1972): 1142–54.; *Az öregek helyzete és problémái; Magyarország legöregebb lakói* [The Oldest Inhabitants of Hungary], ed. Cseh-Szombathy, László et al. (Budapest: Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 1977).



European countries) and, second, they concluded that Hungary was not prepared for the situation which had to be (or should have been) dealt with in its entirety at an economic, social, and individual (psychological) level. Based on these conclusions, the researchers identified similar potential steps to be taken. Pensioners needed to be given adequate representation so that they would not suffer passively from the changes which were to be made but would be able to participate actively in them, and improvements had to be made to the general circumstances in which pensioners lived, much as improvements also had to be made to the regional care that was provided and the institutional care, in part by drawing a clear distinction between the two. Providing training for a suitable professional staff and, eventually, elaborating a national socio-political plan were seen as vital ongoing tasks. From the position of today, one notes all too clearly that these tasks were not really addressed until the late 1970s.

The Old People's Home at the Experimental Housing Estate in Budafok

The Old People's Home

In the light of the discussion above, it is quite clear that growth in the rate of the elderly in Hungarian society was not only detectable on the basis of statistical data, a fact that became the subject of scientific research, but also turned into a problem to which state institutions sought to respond. This is true of the questions which arose when it came to providing housing for the elderly as well. When it came to the steps taken by the government to address housing problems in general, the elderly could not be left out. In 1961, László Zoltán and Éva V. Spiró published an article entitled "Housing for the Elderly" in *Magyar Építőművészet* [Hungarian Architectural Art] in which they called for a solution to the issue and, drawing on examples from abroad, identified the dilemmas to be resolved and suggested some possible answers. The type of building ensemble that they proposed, which was given the name "hotel home",



essentially bore all the features of the Old People's Home later designed by Spiró.³⁶

The early proposal was realized partly because, in 1965, the European Economic Committee of the UN dedicated a colloquium to problems concerning housing for the elderly. Hungary was represented by László Zoltán, the senior engineer of Lakóterv [Housing Design],³⁷ who (as noted earlier) was one of the main advocates of designing different building types which would meet the needs of elderly citizens. It was no coincidence, then, that the designs for the new building which was planned specifically for the elderly as part of the newly built housing estate were made at Lakóterv. Several factors made it necessary to explore innovative solutions, including the growing number of the elderly as a percentage of the population, the high number of apartments they occupied and struggled to maintain, the unmanageable burdens placed on social housing and the lack of clarity concerning their precise responsibilities, and the growing desire of those over 60 to maintain their independence but at the same time have services readily available. These needs and expectations were most likely to be met by a rather new type of housing which had already been tried in some places in Europe: "hotel homes" or "apartment homes".³⁸ The first very deliberate implementation of this new type of building was the Old People's Home constructed at the experimental housing estate in Budafok in 1968. The building was designed by Éva Spiró, a celebrated, Ybl Award-winning architect at Lakóterv.³⁹

³⁶ Zoltán, László and V. Spiró, Éva, "Az öregek lakáshelyzete" [Elderly People's Housing Conditions], *Magyar Építőművészet* 10, no. 5 (1961): 44–5.

³⁷ Residential and Communal Building Designer Company, operating between 1952 and 1995.

³⁸ Naturally, there were several "boarding houses" and "apartment hotels" built in Europe and Budapest that offered various services for their residents, but their target community was not the elderly or pensioners.

³⁹ "Líra és Logika. Beszélgetés Spiró Éva Ybl-díjas építésszel" [Lyrical Poetry and Logic. An interview with Éva Spiró, Ybl Award-Winning Architect], *Budapest* 7, no. 5 (1969): 15–6.; Kovács, Judit, "Éva mérnökő" [Architect Éva], *Lányok, Asszonyok* 26, no. 7 (1970): 14–5.; Csákváry, Margit, "A fogadalom" [The Pledge], *Lányok, Asszonyok* 31, no. 12 (1975): 13.



The Experimental Housing Estate in Budafok , including the Old People’s Home, was built between 1966 and 1975. The plans were made at the Design Development and Type Design Institution (TTI). The aim of the people who designed and constructed the building was to provide a practical response to the problems arising from the “communal, welfare, cultural, and housing needs of huge building estates established on the basis of manufactured housing”.⁴⁰ The emphasis was on manufactured housing, and the designers were not simply looking for new technological solutions but also set out to develop a socialist lifestyle and socialist use of dwellings. The intention was to go beyond traditional uses of residential buildings with the help of modern technology. The result of this lifestyle experiment was the concept of “managed housing”.⁴¹ According to this conception, the functions that had traditionally been filled by apartments could and could be socialized, or in other words replaced by communal services. For Tibor Tenke, one of the main architects of the estate, these functions included cooking, washing, hosting hosts, and providing oversight for children. According to the logic at the time, this would have two advantages: it would enable the construction of smaller individual dwellings and the residents could be guided towards a more communal use of residential space which was seen as more in harmony with the ideology of a socialist society. The idea of liberating people from the burden of housework also played an important role in the designs for the Old People’s Home in Budafok. Almost all of the newspaper reports on the subject made note of this consideration. Furthermore, even years later, the Old People’s Home in Budafok and the homes modeled on it were referred to as examples of the way in which, in Hungary, collective housing had been achieved.⁴²

⁴⁰ Csorba, Tibor, “Építési kísérletezések – kísérleti lakótelepek” [Building Experiments – Experimental Housing Estates], *Műszaki tervezés* 12, no. 1 (1972): 34.

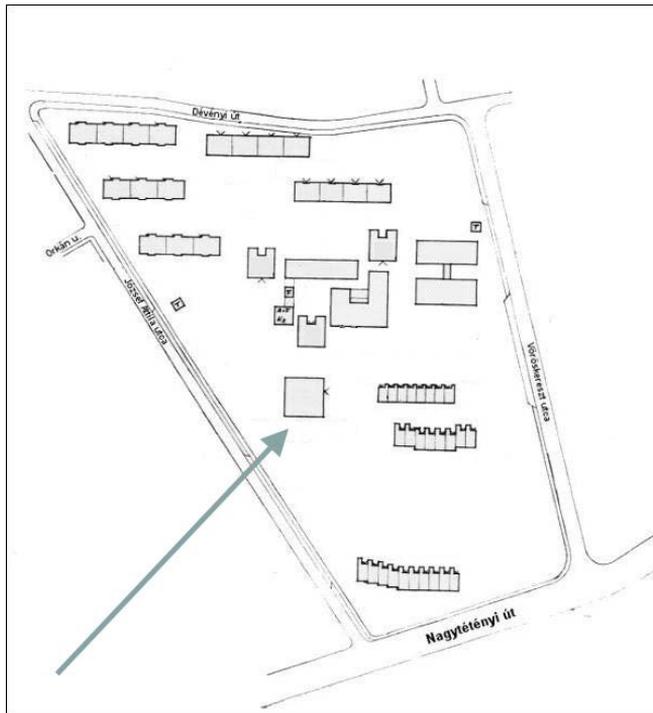
⁴¹ *Budafoki kísérleti lakótelep* [The Experimental Housing Estate in Budafok], written and directed by Babura, László, Budapest: ÉM Építésügyi Tájékoztatói Központ Filmstúdiója, 1966, accessed July 20, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2DKn18c>.

⁴² Varga, Zsuzsa, “Családi szálloda” [Family Hotel], *Népszava*, December 29, 1979, 4.; Szinai, János, “Korszerű lakásforma – korszerű életforma” [State-of-the-Art Flats – State-of-the-Art Lifestyles], *Budapest* 14, no. 3 (1976): 1–4.



The three high-rise buildings at the center of the experimental housing estate were designed by Tibor Tenke and built using technology which was new at the time, the so-called sliding shuttering system, between 1966 and 1968. The service building, which played a crucial part in the estate and the concept of managed housing as well, was finished by 1968.⁴³ With this service building, the Old People's Home fit into an environment "in which families can live together with their parents".⁴⁴

Picture 1 Site plan of the Experimental Housing Estate in Budafok, with the Old People's Home indicated by an arrow.



Source: Csorba, "Építési kísérletezések – kísérleti lakótelepek" [Building Experiments – Experimental Housing Estates], 35.

⁴³ Csorba, "Építési kísérletezések – kísérleti lakótelepek," 36.

⁴⁴ "Budafokon épül az első öregek háza" [The First Old People's Home is Being Built in Budafok], *Népszava*, December 19, 1963, 8.



Along with other main buildings of the estate, the Old People's Home was completed by 1968. It had 25 residential units. Upon entering the building, the residents found themselves in a spacious lobby. The dwellings (modest apartments) were arranged around the lobby on the ground floor and the first floor. The most important and largest room in these small dwellings was the 17.1 m² living room, and there was also a 3.77 m² bathroom with a toilet and a 4.62 m² hallway with a small cooking table. This table was deliberately designed to be suitable only for minor cooking purposes, as catering was to be provided by the service building of the housing estate.⁴⁵ Other communal rooms were created where the residents could engage in various pursuits. These rooms included a radio, television, and card game room, a library, and heated workshop areas overlooking the garden.⁴⁶

The apartments were all furnished. The furnishings included two beds, a dressing table, a desk, a chair, an armchair with a colorful slipcover, and a spacious, "larger than standard" wardrobe.⁴⁷ The residents' life was made more comfortable and secure with central heating, hot water, a refrigerator, wall-to-wall carpeting, a sunken tub with bars which one could use to keep from slipping, a hotplate which gave a warning if it overheated, and a bell to call the nurse.⁴⁸ The services offered by the Old People's Home also included weekly cleaning, a professional nurse who resided in the building and worked flexible hours, and a general practitioner who received patients on site. For an extra fee, the residents could order lunch as well.⁴⁹ In subsequent years, old people's homes in Budapest

⁴⁵ Szamosi, Miklós, "Öregek háza a budafoki kísérleti lakótelepen" [The Old people's Home in the Budafok Experimental Housing Estate], *Műszaki Tervezés* 8, no. 8 (1968): 16.

⁴⁶ Csorba, "Építési kísérletezések – kísérleti lakótelepek," 37.

⁴⁷ Szamosi, "Öregek háza a budafoki kísérleti lakótelepen," 16.

⁴⁸ Fedor, Ágnes, "Felépül az első »öregek háza«" [The First "Old People's Home" is Being Built], *Magyar Nemzet*, December 30, 1967, 5.; Pongrácz, Zsuzsa, "Házak – nyugdíjasoknak" [Houses – For Pensioners], *Budapest* 13, no. 5 (1975): 12–15.

⁴⁹ Vándor, Pál, "Az első albérlők háza Kelenföldön, az első öregek háza Zuglóban épül" [The First Tenants' House and the First Old People's Home are being Built in Kelenföld and Zugló], *Népszava*, January 24, 1971; Pongrácz: "Házak – nyugdíjasoknak," 12–15.



and Tatabánya were built with minor alterations but generally according to the same parameters.⁵⁰

Target group

One of the main arguments for building the Old People's (later Pensioners') Home was the need to draw distinctions among the benefits provided for elderly citizens, since research conducted at the time indicated that too many people with diverse needs were being packed tightly together in social housing facilities which were already inadequate. As a result, these homes were unable to meet their residents' needs.⁵¹ Of these needs, which ones did the Old People's Home try to address? In other words, which group of old-age pensioners was the target group of this new type of social care?

Based on press reports, official statements, and admission criteria from the period, a rough picture emerges. First, the apartments in the Old People's Home were intended for relatively healthy retirees, as one prerequisite of moving in was the ability to live independently and care for oneself, as certified by a general practitioner. Second, the pensioners who were admitted to the Old People's Home had real estate of a relatively high quality, because the only applications that were accepted were submitted by elderly people who, in return, were willing and able to give up a council flat with all modern conveniences in the capital.⁵² Third, the Old People's Home opened its doors to wealthy pensioners whose pensions were higher than 1,400 HUF or, in the case of two people, than 1,900 HUF a month in 1969 (and this limit amount was later increased).⁵³ This kind of requirement seems rather stringent, especially in light of the fact that in 1969, when the Old People's Home in Budafok was opened, the average pension in Hungary was 664 HUF, and even five years

⁵⁰ Újhelyi, Jenő, "Zuglói lakótelep, »öregek háza«" [The Housing Estate in Zugló and the "Old People's Home"], *Műszaki Tervezés* 11, no. 8 (1971): 16.

⁵¹ Heinz, *A szociális intézetek és gondozottaik helyzete*, 99–100.

⁵² Dr. Dobos, Ödön, "Nyugdíjasok Háza Budafokon" [The Old People's Home in Budafok], *Budapest* 6, no. 8 (1968): 24.

⁵³ Vándor, "Az első albérlők háza," 24.; Szenes, Imre, "Nyugdíjasok háza – több és olcsóbb lakás" [Old People's Home – More and Cheaper flats], *Népszava*, February 28, 1969, 3.



later it was still only 1,120 HUF, or in other words well below the amount the City Council required from prospective residents.⁵⁴ The justification given for this comparatively high income as a requirement for admission was that the residents would have to pay utilities costs of first 400 HUF and later 600 HUF (including everything but lunch and electricity), so it was important to ensure that this would not place too heavy a burden on them.

Thus one sees that, with the Old People's Home in Budafok, the Kádár regime responded to the needs of a well-defined group of pensioners who were in a particularly favorable situation. To the question concerning who the designers ultimately expected to move into the Old People's Home, Éva Spiró replied, "lonely elderly people who have a decent pension but no one to talk to".⁵⁵

What were the advantages of the "Old People's Home"?

A turn away from the question of need as a criterium also appears in discourse about the old people's home in the part which is intended to describe the advantages and positive aspects of the institution. Arguments in support of the Old People's home can be divided into two groups. One placed emphasis on economic questions, probably not irrespectively of the new economic mechanisms introduced by the Kádár regime. The other placed emphasis on alleged psychological and lifestyle benefits.

At the core of the economic arguments was the fact that the construction of old people's homes was in itself financially profitable for the state. This was true in part because the elderly citizens who moved into these new dwellings gave up their council flats, which had all the modern comforts and which were usually larger than

⁵⁴ Dr. Baranyai, István and Eiler, Erzsébet, "A nyugdíjasok számának és ellátásának alakulása" [Developments in the Number of Pensioners and Care Provided for Pensioners], *Statistikai Szemle* 47 (1969): 679.; Barta, Barnabás, "A társadalmi szolgáltatások fejlődése" [Developments in Social Services], *Statistikai Szemle* 53 (1975): 693.

⁵⁵ Várkonyi, Margit, "Tatabánya már jelentkezett" [Tatabánya Has Already Signed Up], *Népszava*, September 19, 1969, 3.



the apartments that they were given in the new homes. This helped decrease the shortage of housing, and the state received a larger flat in return for a smaller one. Furthermore, according to calculations done at the time, it was cheaper to build an apartment in an old people's home than it was to build a small flat of the same size, so the costs of accommodating senior citizens in this type of housing were more less burdensome than the costs of building new flats for them. This reasoning was further strengthened by the observation made a few years after the homes had been built and put into use according to which, with the 600 HUF usage fees, the old people's homes were self-sustaining and did not require any support from the state.⁵⁶

As a logical continuation of this line of thought, a rather optimistic argument began to be put forward in many places according to which soon there would be a stratum of senior citizens with pensions so high that they would be able to cover the costs of old people's homes. Indeed, some believed there was a realistic prospect that active wage earners could independently solve the issue of their own housing when they retired. Thus, according to this (ultimately mistaken) reasoning, it would not be necessary for the state to undertake large-scale construction of flats for the elderly.⁵⁷ There were those who recommended the construction of old people's homes in which the residents would actually purchase their own apartments (thus, the buildings would resemble condominiums). These proposals also put emphasis on relieving the state of the financial burdens of providing housing for the elderly, and they also called attention to the possibility that citizens would have savings.⁵⁸ Some of those who placed emphasis on economic considerations also suggested turning over the task of construction the buildings to companies. (These proposals met with at least some support,

⁵⁶ Szinai, "Korszerű lakásforma – korszerű életforma," 4.

⁵⁷ Zoltán, László, "Öt tudományág közös gondja: milyen legyen az öregek lakhatása" [A Common Issue of Five Disciplines: What Housing for the Elderly Should be Like]. *Népszabadság*, February 2, 1965, 9.

⁵⁸ Kovács, Judit, "A lakás" [The Apartment], *Magyar Nemzet*, December 17, 1967, 5.



as one such home was built in Tatabánya. It was co-financed by the City Council and the coal mines.)⁵⁹

The arguments which placed emphasis on alleged lifestyle benefits can be grouped around the concept pairs individual-community and care-independence.⁶⁰ From this perspective, one of the primary advantages of old people's homes over social housing was the fact that residents of the former could choose the degree of their involvement in social life. If they found the amount of interaction too burdensome, they could retire to their own apartments. This meant a kind of housing that would enable the elderly to preserve their former way of life to the greatest extent possible, despite the newness of their surroundings. This argument was further strengthened by the possibility, for instance, of having guests or the reminder that "nothing is compulsory here," which appeared in various sources at the time. Naturally, the reverse argument was also used, or in other words the claim was made that the Old People's Home was the best cure for loneliness, since the floor plan and layout of the building "as such made the individual's isolation impossible," because "most of the shared spaces would become living spaces," and "the apartments can be reached from a large communal room."⁶¹ Thus, residents would always have opportunities and (communal) spaces to chat and spend time with others. It was also claimed, in connection with this, that it would be easier for the elderly to keep in touch with members of younger generations and family members, as the old people's homes were always built as integral parts of the housing estates, where many young people also lived.

Another (often mentioned) advantage of the Old People's Home was that it offered a high quality of life through the quantity, quality, and selection of available services. The interviews published in the press at the time suggested that the elderly were willing to put

⁵⁹ Várkonyi, "Tatabánya már jelentkezett," 3.

⁶⁰ Dr. Gábor, József, "A szociálpolitika néhány kérdéséről" [On Some Socio-Political Issues], *Budapest* 13, no. 7 (1975): 2.

⁶¹ Szamosi, "Öregek háza a budafoki kísérleti lakótelepen," 15–16.



with intrusions on their independence if it meant relief from the burdens of housework, heating, cleaning, and even cooking.⁶²

It is thus hardly surprising, in light of these kinds of positive assessments, that the experiment with the Old People's Home was deemed a success by the state and the construction of several such buildings was scheduled in the fourth five-year plan.⁶³ Due to this, in 1976 the capital city council official responsible for socio-politics could boast about 600 rooms for old-age pensioners, a massive leap from the 50 rooms available in 1968.⁶⁴ Furthermore, not only the state but also pensioners considered the Old People's Home a success.⁶⁵ Right after the first press releases in 1968, more than 3,000 elderly citizens applied (for the 50 places!) to Lakóterv, and if we can believe reports in the press at the time, interest in the homes did not wane later on.⁶⁶

Naturally, some negative assessments were also voiced with regards to the old people's homes. Interestingly, these criticisms did not come from the outside, i.e., from gerontologists, sociologists, and architects, but were always formulated from the perspective of the pensioners themselves. One typical critical assessment touched on the question of maintaining one's former way of life. Naturally, the objects one has accumulated over a lifetime are closely connected to one's lifestyle. Furniture, an essential group of these kinds of objects, could not be taken to the furnished apartments in the Old People's Home. Many perceived this as limitation on their independence, since they would thus be left with no furniture if they

⁶² "Olvasói levél" [Reader's letter], *Magyar Nemzet*, December 3, 1967; Pongrácz, "Házak – nyugdíjasoknak," 12–15.

⁶³ Csorba, "Építési kísérletezések – kísérleti lakótelepek," 37.

⁶⁴ Csizmadia, Tibor, "Jelentős fejlődés előtt az egészségügy" [Health Care on the Verge of a Major Development], *Budapest* vol. 14, no. 1 (1976): 2–3.

⁶⁵ "A budafoki nyugdíjas ház lakói (levél a szerkesztőségnek)" [Residents of the Old People's Home in Budafok (letter to the editor)], *Budapest* 6, no. 10 (1968): 24.; "Olvasói levél" [Reader's letter], *Magyar Nemzet*, December 3, 1967.

⁶⁶ Miklós, Dezső, "Első lépések a korszerű gondozási formák felé. Beszélgetés a Lakóterv főmérnökével" [The First Steps to a Modern Form of Providing Care: In Discussion with the Senior Designer of Lakóterv], *Népszava*, November 5, 1967, 4.; Ráthonyi, János, "Öreg-lak" [Old Home], *Hungary*, September 20, 1970, 32.



decided to move out. Others complained that they had to sell the pieces of furniture that they had accumulated at prices below their value.⁶⁷

Another group of complaints concerned the communal spaces which were so frequently mentioned in reports by journalists and architects. According to these critical remarks, these spaces went largely unused and took up too much space. The contention was made that the private apartments should have made larger at the expense of these collective spaces. This feedback from pensioners is particularly interesting, as it constituted a criticism of the lifestyle associated with the old people's homes. Washing, cleaning, cooking, and other household chores were "socialized" to guide the individual's life towards the community, and not to increase private space at the expense of communal space. This incomprehension and insensitivity to communal vision was not unprecedented.⁶⁸ In any case, it is important to note that the individuals who were critical of these homes were precisely the people who were regarded as the main target group by the people who had designed the experiment.

The Old People's Home and the World

The questions concerning housing for the elderly clearly were not only raised in Hungary, and the old people's home as a response to these questions was hardly a Hungarian invention. Indeed, Hungarian experts on the issue repeatedly tried to stress the importance of dealing with the problems faced by an aging society and the specific question of housing needs for the elderly by alluding to international examples. It is hardly surprising that, with regards to the growing rate of the elderly population, western industrial societies were used as the basis for comparison, but it is worth noting that, in the search for the most suitable type of housing for senior citizens, the secondary literature tended to focus on attempts

⁶⁷ Pongrácz: "Házak – nyugdíjasoknak," 12, 14.

⁶⁸ *Az öregek lakásproblémáiról. Az EGB Kollokviumának rövidített anyaga* [On Issues Concerning Housing for the Elderly. Abridged version of the European Economic Committee Colloquium] (Budapest: VÁTI Dokumentációs Osztály, 1967), 53.



by Western European countries to address this issue, and only then were the practices prevalent in socialist countries, and especially the Soviet Union, taken into consideration.⁶⁹

From the perspectives of its size and thoroughness, the published proceedings of the colloquium organized by the European Economic Committee of the UN stood out among volumes on the problem of providing housing for the elderly.⁷⁰ The Hungarian version of the publication was compiled by the aforementioned László Zoltán, who published one of the first major articles in Hungary on the issue. The colloquium and the resulting report strove to deal with the problem systematically. They approached individual characteristics of ageing through a general analysis of the aging of society, and they examined how the health and socioeconomic status of a given individual changed as he or she aged. They then drew conclusions concerning the housing needs of senior citizens.⁷¹

Referring to international research, participants in the colloquium posited the possibility of continuing one's individual way of life as the most essential need of the elderly. The most natural way for this need to be met was to receive the help one needed while remaining in one's home. If it was too difficult or demanding for an elderly person to maintain his or her dwelling, a possible solution was, to use the phrasing used at the colloquium, apartment homes, in other words old people's homes, or, as a last resort, nursing homes, since the latter would be suitable only for those who were essentially helpless and in need of continuous supervision and care.⁷²

⁶⁹ Zoltán and Spiró, "Az öregek lakáshelyzete," 44–5.; Szinai, "Korszerű lakásforma – korszerű életforma," 1–4.; Zoltán, "Öt tudományág közös gondolja," 9.; Joós, F. Imre, "Eltartási szerződés helyett: öregotthon" [Instead of a Contract of Support: The Old People's Home], *Tükör* 3, no. 22 (1966): 22–3.; Lukács, Teréz, "A negyedik életkor" [The Fourth Period of Life], *Esti Hírlap*, June 29, 1979, 5.; Horváth, Anita, "Rózsadombon áll az öregek háza" [The Old People's Home Stands on Rózsadomb], *Vas Népe*, October 11, 1970, 7.

⁷⁰ *Az öregek lakásproblémáiról*.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 11–30.

⁷² *Ibid.* 32–33.



In the discussion below, I compare the framework for the institution of the apartment home as discussed in detail by the colloquium with the Old People's Home constructed in Hungary. The first two vital questions raised in the document concerned who would serve as directors of these institutions and how much rent the residents would pay. The committee did not make any specific recommendations with regards to this. Rather, it examined international examples. The report established that in most cases these apartment homes were directed by some institution (e.g. the Socio-Political Department of the Capital City Council in Hungary). In connection with the rent, the report only stated that (and here Hungarian practices were in line with international practices) the amount of the rent to be paid was generally determined by the costs of maintenance, and only rarely would social considerations play a part in this type of housing intended for the elderly.⁷³

In contrast, specific recommendations were made concerning the size of the apartments and the amenities that would be provided. Since the elderly tended to spend much time at home (or at least this contention was made), the studio apartments had to be big, at least 15–25 m² each, and there could only be two floors in each building.⁷⁴ Apartments in old people's homes in Hungary were constructed in similar sizes, thus conforming to the recommendations. The report also stressed the importance of heating (the elderly required a room temperature 2 or 3 degrees above the needs of the average population), lighting, the importance of fitted wardrobes, and household appliances which were easy to use.⁷⁵ To the extent that we can tell, these expectations were all met in the case of the Hungarian buildings. The old people's homes in Budafok, Kelenföld, and Zugló were equipped with storage space which exceeded the average, larger windows, and kitchens meeting the needs of the elderly residents. When it came to the bathrooms, the Hungarian practice even exceeded the recommendations. While the colloquium materials found it acceptable to equip these institutions

⁷³ Ibid. 36–38., 40.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 47.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 48.



with communal bathrooms on each floor, this option was not even considered in Hungary, and each apartment came with its own bathroom. The services offered by the Old People's Home met all the international standards: catering, cleaning, ensuring a live-in nurse, and the organization of community programs were included in the services provided both abroad and in Hungary.⁷⁶

However, the question of how many such apartments should actually be included in the complexes and the precise locations of the buildings that were being constructed for the elderly were subjects of debate. With regards to size, economic considerations and the desire to create communal spaces collided (as usual). Apparently, the more apartments a building contained, the cheaper the cost of construction was, but when too many apartments were built, it was impossible for the residents to develop a meaningful sense of community. With its old people's homes containing 22 to 25 apartments, Hungary was among the countries building smaller institutions. The "record" was held by Switzerland and the USA, in which the comparable edifices had 150 apartments per building.⁷⁷

The issue of location consisted of two problem areas. First, it had to be decided whether the elderly residents should be accommodated separately, in a kind of colony, or as part of a larger community. Second, it had to be determined whether the buildings should be close to the city center and public transport hubs or situated in a more peaceful area distant from nodes of urban life.⁷⁸ In this respect, in the case of old people's homes (but not nursing homes!), Hungary followed the majority approach of Western European countries and built the apartment homes as parts of housing estates in areas with good transport links.

In summary, the old people's homes built in Hungary in the 1960s and 1970s met Western European standards with regards to the methods of maintenance, the amenities and services provided,

⁷⁶ Ibid. 51–54.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 58–59.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 60.



and the approach to providing care. This is a crucial fact in light of the frequency with which the secondary literature at the time constantly emphasized (though justifiably, as the statistical data indicate) the notion that Hungary was a step behind and the infrastructure for providing care for the elderly was inadequate. This is true even if we keep in mind the fact that the old people's homes in Hungary provided a comfortable old age for only a handful of wealthy senior citizens.

What are old people like? The elderly in the discourse about the old people's home

Finally, I now turn to the question of the image of old people/the elderly in reports and discussions on old people's homes. As noted earlier, both international recommendations and domestic architectural concepts gave priority to independence and the possibility for the elderly to continue living independently. To what extent was this approach, which shows a certain degree of respect for the elderly, also part of the discourse about the Old People's Home?

If one analyzes the discourse on housing for the elderly, it is quite striking that, with only a few exceptions, the public discourse on the Old People's Home appeared mainly in daily and weekly papers. There were, of course, scholarly publications on questions which arose in connection with an aging society, but the first sociological study focusing specifically on the housing conditions of the elderly was only published in 1985.⁷⁹ This may be the result of the fact that discourse on housing for the elderly was actually initiated by architects, and it was architects who appeared in the press as experts on the issue.⁸⁰ As the experts, they then invited representatives of other disciplines (demographics, sociology, gerontology, and economics) to analyze the issue together.⁸¹ Conspicuously, it was also always architects who spoke about dealing with loneliness

⁷⁹ Ernst, "Az öregkorú népesség lakáshelyzete," 127–147.

⁸⁰ Zoltán and Spiró, "Az öregek lakáshelyzete," 44–45.

⁸¹ Zoltán, "Öt tudományág közös gondja," 9.; Miklós, "Első lépések a korszerű gondozási formák felé," 4.



and building a community.⁸² This observation is even more exciting if one keeps in mind the fact that the position of architects as intellectuals, as social engineers was gradually undermined from the 1960s on, both in Hungary and the rest of Europe. From this point on, voices complaining about the importance of technology and of profits over architectural thought grew increasingly strident.⁸³ Naturally, alongside the “experts,” journalists, reporters, and article writers also shaped the picture that emerged of the Old People’s Home. Much is revealed about the ways in which people thought about the elderly by the simple fact that pensioners themselves were hardly present in the writings on the issue. If they were, they appeared as mere illustrations, snapshots, and definitely not as individuals who exerted influence on the discourse.⁸⁴

As discussed above, according to the official stance, the two primary concerns of the elderly were to maintain their independence and to lead an independent life. This desire appeared in public discourse written by non-professionals as well. Of course, the press also wrote about other needs attributed to old people, such as an alleged longing for a community. This need appeared in public discourse in two different ways: the desire to be together with one’s family members and the desire to remain in contact with (other) elderly people. The desire among the elderly to belong to a community was always mentioned alongside the importance of providing opportunities for retreat and seclusion. At the same time, both expectations were presented as problems to be solved by society, and old people’s homes offered a solution to both because of their location within housing estates and because they offered both private and communal spaces. Another element of the image of old people’s needs was work. Naturally, the need for calm and health services came up as well, but work, engagement, and the feeling of usefulness were much more frequently mentioned. It is worth

⁸² Szabolcsi, “A XXII. kerület,” 42.; Fedor, “Felépül az első »öregek háza«,” 5.; Várkonyi, “Tatabánya már jelentkezett,” 3.; Varga, “Családi szálloda,” 4.

⁸³ Keller, Márkus: *Szocialista lakhatás* [Socialist Housing] (Budapest: L’Harmattan – OSZK, 2017).

⁸⁴ Joós, “Eltartási szerződés helyett: öregotthon,” 23–4.



noting that work was rarely presented as a productive form of activity and was cast more as a form of entertainment, a hobby, or sometimes simply spending time with grandchildren. In other words, the insistence on the importance of work had nothing to do with taking advantage of the possible experience or knowledge of the elderly. Rather, it was seen as a way of keeping them busy. The notion that they might actually perform some socially useful function was thus secondary from this perspective.

So what characteristics were used to paint a picture of the elderly in the discourse at the time? The predominant image was one of a lonely, sick old person in need of financial and moral support, afraid of being left alone, and not being able to look after him or herself. This image is best summarized by the words of László Zoltán, senior engineer of Lakóterv: “aging people require institutional, complex social care just like children do”.⁸⁵

If one takes the question of providing care for the elderly out of its national framework and examines what people thought of the elderly and what “image of the old” was used in Europe at the time, this casts an interesting light on the situation in Hungary. In Western Europe after the Second World War, with the development of the pension insurance system and in parallel with the growing number of those retiring, ideas about the elderly and about old age itself changed considerably. The idea of leading an active old age came to be valued over the notion of a more reclusive, contemplative way of life. According to the view which finds support in the scientific research in gerontology, the secret to a happy, well-balanced old age is an active, productive, and socially useful lifestyle. If one examines the discourse on the old people’s home from this perspective, the differences are clearly visible. Although the notion that it is important to remain active and creative is certainly present, it is hardly given the same emphasis that it is given in the discourse in Western Europe. On the contrary, the image of the lonely, abandoned old person in need of support is much more prevalent.

⁸⁵ Miklós: “Első lépések a korszerű gondozási formák felé,” 4.



Conclusion

Socialist Hungary was unable to give a typically “socialist” answer to the problem of providing housing for the elderly, which arose when the problems of an aging society collided with the housing crisis. From the outset, the Hungarian authorities and professionals dealing with the issue of housing for the elderly turned to global examples in the search for solutions, and they then adopted approaches which were surprisingly in line with international trends and recommendations. The global strategies and solutions were used even when they were in clear contradiction with the official socialist ideology, as illustrated by the fact that the Old People’s Home only provided accommodation for wealthy pensioners. The latter were treated as a priority by the state, while poorer old people with no real estate were relegated to nursing homes which were openly declared to be dysfunctional. By doing this, the state seems to have abandoned everything it had once proclaimed concerning the importance of eliminating financial disparities.

The scholarly discourse on aging and the elderly is often normative. It does not strive to determine and pass on specific facts and experiences. Rather, it formulates expectations concerning how the elderly should think of the young and how the society as a whole should consider the elderly. In this sense, these discourses are thus moral discourses. If we look, through this lens, for an answer to the question of what image Hungarian socialist society of the 1960s and 1970s painted of itself with relation to the Old People’s Home, we come to an interesting conclusion. Based on the expert reports, Hungary was unable to deal with accumulating social problems, and it turned its eyes to the West but also fell behind advanced industrial societies. It was a country which was increasingly incapable of solving the problems faced by the older generation. In the broader public discourse on housing for the elderly, a picture emerges of a prosperous, increasingly wealthy socialist society looking westwards and comparing itself to advanced industrial societies, a socialist society in which an increasingly populous, wealthy pensioner class is emerging. Thus, in contrast to the discourse among experts, in lay public discourse, when Hungary looked to the west



in the 1960s and 1970s, it did so not to determine the extent to which it was lagging behind, but rather as a deliberate means of “catching up,” and it was proud of the achievements it had reached. This tension between professional and public communication of the time, often not even consciously experienced, still determines the image many people have of the Kádár system and the regime change, and their attitude and expectations towards the social care system. This tension between expert and lay perceptions at the time, often not even consciously felt, still shapes the image many people have of the Kádár system and the change of regimes, as well as their attitudes towards the social care system and the expectations they place on this system.