The Komárom / Komárno Case,  
or  
from the ‘Iron Curtain Feeling’ to the ‘No-Border Feeling’  

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I. Introduction

This paper is an evaluation of a historical research which deals with the state border regime between the towns Komárno and Komárom from the 1950s to the 2000s. The main aim of the research is to analyse the influence of the physical and virtual/mental state border on people’s behaviour and mentality.

I have had two main types of sources for the research: (i) archival materials from local, regional and state archives, regarding the border regime during the Cold War period, and (ii) face-to-face oral history interviews conducted during a field research with the inhabitants of both towns.

I have to note at the end of this introduction that in years 2007–2009 a Komárom/Komárno research was done in cooperation with the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute, Vienna within a framework project The ‘Long European Post War Period’ in Communicative Memories and (Trans)National Public Spheres; for making the beginning of this research possible, I am still grateful to Dr. Muriel Blaive and Dr. Berthold Molden.

II. What is the speciality of the Komárom / Komárno Case?

There are several issues that make this research very interesting, from which it is necessary to pick out two: (i) the enormous changes which the state border in this locality has gone through in the last 50 years, and (ii) the ethnic composition of the towns.

Both towns are situated on the bank of the River Danube. Komárom is situated in Hungary on the southern bank, while Komárno is situated on the northern bank; this latter town used to be a part of Czecho/Slovakia until 1993, today it belongs to Slovakia.¹ Today, Slovakian Komárno is bigger both in its physical area and its number of inhabitants than Hungarian Komárom. Komárom is situated on 102 square kilometers and has 35 729 inhabitants, while Komárno is situated on 70 square kilometers and has 19 729 inhabitants.²

As to the ethnic composition, in both towns there have been ethnic Hungarians living ever since. Until 1918 there was one single town, called Komárom, situated in the north-western part of the Hungarian Kingdom. As one of the loosers of the World War I, Hungary lost all its territories north of the River Danube. So after 1918 (under the terms

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² Both data from 2011.
of the Trianon Peace Treaty) the northern half of Komárom became a part of the newly created Czechoslovakia. Yet, the ethnic composition of these towns is remarkable. According to the last censuses (in 2011), the inhabitants of the Hungarian Komárom are practically entirely Hungarians; while the inhabitants of the Slovakian Komárno are 60% Hungarians and 35% Slovaks. This means that both Komárom and Komárno still have a dominantly Hungarian population. However, the people living here had been severly isolated from each other by different kinds of state borders for nearly a century. Commencing with an entirely sealed off state border (by the Soviet Army in 1945/1946) through a semi-permeable border in the 1970s and 1980s, ending up in a 'totally free border zone’ after Hungary and Slovakia joined the Schengen Area.

What did the Cold War isolation mean to the local people, and what has the regained freedom been meaning to them? How have different types of state border systems affect their everyday life and mentality? And finally, does the recent 'state border without checking’ regime automatically mean free contacts between the local people? – these were the main questions my research was seeking answers to.

At the actual standing point of the research, we have come to two main conclusions. The first is that the state border at the Komárom / Komárno checkpoint caused much harm to the local peoples’ notion of unity. Different forms of strict border regime (in certain times in a very rough form, indeed) caused that during the Cold War period these two towns had lived a very separate life, as if they had never lived a ‘mutual life’ prior to 1918. In this respect, the Komárom / Komárno case is pretty much similar to the West Berlin / East Berlin story, despite the fact the the border line here was not a part of the ‘real’ Iron Curtain, since it was stretching out between two ‘friendly socialist states’. Yet, more than half of our interviewees spoke about their own experiences which were comparable to the darkest stories that happened at the Iron Curtain. The second conclusion rises from the first one. In our interviews we found that the state border without border guards and customs officers does not automatically mean that people feel themselves ‘closer to each other’; on the contrary, in many ways people still feel ‘far from each other’. In a longer term it means that local councils in both towns will have to go a long way to create such a living environment where people of both Komárom and Komárno will feel united.

We understand, that there had been or still have been many 'separated’ or 'twin’ towns in Europe. Just a few examples from these: Gmünd (Austria) – České Velenice (Czech Republic, former Czechoslovak Socialist Republic); Kapikule/Edirne (Turkey) – Kapitan Andreevo/Svilengrad (Bulgaria) – Orestiada (Greece); Gorizia (Italy) – Nova Goricia (Slovenia, former Yugoslavia); Narva (Estonia, former Soviet Union) – Ivangorod (Russia, former Soviet Union); Cerbère (France) – Port-Bou (Spain); Calais (France) – Dover (Great-Britain) etc. Naturally every case is slightly different. However, there are only two situations which are really comparable to the Komárom / Komárno case, and

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3 According to the latest research by the Ústav památi národa, altogether there were at least 42 people killed on the Slovak state border with Austria.

4 This process has already started in a form of several contemporary [economical, cultural, etc.] projects, from which I would like to point out to the plan of a new road-bridge above the Danube, and the joint webpage of the two towns [http://www.komarom.hu/index2.html]
these are the cases of Salonta (Rumania) and Méhkerék (Hungary), as well as Görlitz (Germany, former German Democratic Republic) and Zgorzelec (Poland). Though both are comparable to the Komárom / Komárno in a sense that they were towns situated between two communist states, however they ethnic composition is less compact than in Komárom / Komárno.5

I can conclude that Komárno and Komárom are particularly interesting places if we make a research into the affects of either the historical or the current border regime on peoples mentality. It is a spot where more than three levels of relations can be examined: (i) border relations between two states (as an overall perspective); (ii) relations between Hungarians and Hungarians on both side of the state border, ‘separated’ from each other (inter-Hungarian perspective); and (iii) relations of Slovaks (living in Komárom) with two ‘types’ of Hungarians, i.e. with Hungarians from Hungary, and with ethnic Hungarians living in the Slovakian Komárno. So basically both towns are a unique urban environment and are a very suitable spots where historical Hungarian and Slovak relations, including border and inter-ethnical relations can be examined very well.

In my understanding, there are four major historical issues that should be carefully examined in the Komárom / Komárno case. The first is the state border regime between Hungary and Czecho/Slovakia, including the forms and limits of the state border (e.g. smuggling), and the phenomenon of the ‘fake’ Iron Curtain. Secondly, Hungarian–Czecho/Slovak national-ethnical relations based on and reflected in a series of oral history interviews in Komárno and Komárom. Thirdly, the international cooperation of communist authorities at the Komárno and Komárom border checkpoints. Fourthly, local lieux de memoires also deserve attention in the context of the coexistence of Hungarians and Slovaks in the town, incl. the image of ‘the other side’; ‘official’ historical monuments in the town; present day conflicts right on or over the state border line, etc.

It would be worth analysing the phenomenon of the ‘lack of knowledge about the neighbour’. It means that neighbouring communities in Komárom and Komárno, who have lived freely next to each other for 20 years now (even if in two countries) do not know each other, and they lack even the most basic information about the other. For example, our interviewees in Hungarian Komárom simply did not know that there are some 12 000 Slovaks living in Komárno; they thought that Hungarians are living there exclusively. Some historians, such as Csaba Zahorán think that the ‘lack of knowledge about the neighbour’ was created during the communist era, when between 1945 and 1989 the contacts between these two towns (also between the two states) were strictly limited and over-politicised.

5 To my best knowledge, I can mention the following state-border-researches on international scale: (i) Helga Schultz, Katarzyna Stkołosa and Dagmara Jajeśniak-Quast have done similar research as we did; see for instance Twin towns on the borders as laboratories of European integration. Frankfurter Institute für Transformationsstudien, Discussion paper 4/2002 written by them. (ii) A research group led by Klaus-Jürgen Hermanik and Eduard Staudinger at the Historical Institute in Graz, Austria. (iii) A Border Project called EastborderNetled run at the Humboldt University Berlin. (iv) The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies. Ed. by Doris Wastl-Walter, University of Bern, Switzerland.
Last but not least it seems that Komáro as the biggest urban place where ethnic Hungarians are compactly living in Slovakia, might be an interesting spot even for Japanese researchers. I would like to mention here our scientific contacts with Prof. Susumu Nagayo, Prof. Osamu Ieda, Dr. Yuko Kambara, Dr. Tatsuya Nakazawa, and Dr. Tadaki Iio, and the last international workshop we conducted together, the ‘Transboundary symbiosis over the Danube – EU integration between Slovakia and Hungary from a local perspective’, held at University of Selye on September 12, 2012.

Unfortunately, in this study it is not possible to write in detail about all these research directions. Therefore in this paper, I would like to deal exclusively with the phenomenon how the state border regime between the two states (Czecho/Slovakia and Hungary) and the two towns (Komáro and Komárom) has evolved commencing from the post-World War II period until today. In my paper I would like to focus on the pre-1989 situation, especially on the 1960s and 1970s. This was the period of the Hungarian–Czecho/Slovak mutual state border relations when the toughest (sometimes even cruel) border regime was over, and both countries focused on harmonious and peaceful coexistence. It was also a time dominated by vivid economic relations and lively cross-border cooperation.

III. How has the state border regime between Czecho/Slovakia – Hungary, and Komáro – Komárom evolved?

The Hungarian–Czecho/Slovak mutual state border relations have to be understood as part of the Cold War overall internation relations. In other words, they have to be understood as part of the Cold War situation on the one hand, and as part of the inter-communist bloc relations on the other.

As it was beautifully described by Péter Becsik and Stefano Bottoni, the state border in Komáro/Komárom between Hungary and Czechoslovakia was practically sealed off in the period of 1946 to 1960. During this period crossing the border was almost completely prohibited for local people, therefore the state border was an impermeable obstacle for the locals of the two towns for some 15 years. It is no surprise that during our oral history interviews we heard the most horrible border stories from the 1950s.

Our interviewees told us stories about families torn apart from each other, literally trying to shout over to the other side above the dark waters of the River Danube. It was very typical for the Hungarian – Czecho/Slovak inter-block relations that these shoutings were considered as crime in both countries, and e.g. in Komáro the water of the river was swept with huge reflectors by night. In other cases, people, or livestock, or food was driven across the 200-300 metre wide border zone over the frozen water by night by sledges. The fact that not only elderly people but young ones could recall these events proves that these stories had strongly settled in local peoples minds and hearts.

The local border regime in the 1960s and the 1970s was influenced by two major factors. One was a significant intention on both sides to improve mutual inter-state relations that were spoilt and hybernated immediately after the World War II due to the violent actions of the Czecho/Slovak government against Hungarians living in Czecho/Slovakia. The
other major factor was the ‘discovery’ of Hungarians living in Czecho/Slovakia. The latter issue was not a general tendency in János Kádár’s foreign policy, for building connections to the Hungarians living beyond the state borders of Hungary was not a political line which János Kádár was fond of. But Komárno and Komárom were a special case; here the national as well as urban links were so tight that reaching over to the ‘other side’ of the river was inevitable.

IV. The Komárom / Komárno river harbour

Harbours on the Danube have been situated on both sides of the river, but the one in Komárno was older and bigger. It has long been an international waterway carrying mostly commercial ships from Germany through Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, to Yugoslavia, Rumania, Bulgaria and to the Black Sea, i.e. the Soviet Union. At the same time, the Komárom / Komárno river harbour was a suitable place for smuggling. The list of goods and items commonly smuggled in all directions, is very long. It commences with gold and hard currencies of the time, continuing with everyday consumer goods and food of different kind, ending up with human persons who tried to ‘smuggle’ themselves.

Ships coming from Austria, heading to Yugoslavia were welcomed with particular interest not only by the locals, especially the local workers who participated in packing in and out the ships, but also by the authorities of all kinds. It has to be noted that the Komárno/Komárom harbour was an important place where valuable intelligence information changed hands. Ships coming from Austria carried not only consumer goods completely missing from the communist markets, but also valuable information for secret services, and in the local harbours all ships had to be controlled/surveyed, except for the ones under Soviet flag.6

We have some delicate sources regarding the ‘Komárom harbour of a prominent operative importance’ which prove that secret service agents dispatched to Komárom/Komárno made different businesses with ship-crew of different nationalities crossing Austria, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, etc. For instance, sources reveal a story of a lady, marked as ‘VM’ who was a Hungarian ‘network person’, i.e. closely cooperating with the Hungarian secret services. She was born in Czecho/Slovakia, later moved to Hungary, and worked in a small cafe in Komárno. Here she was making a rich illegal business with shipmen, selling cigarettes and buying gadget armwatches. This all was done deliberately to camouflage her official network person identity.

Archival sources regarding Komárom / Komárno tell us basically two things. One is the phenomenon of smuggling that took place in the local river harbour, and the other is an extensive international cooperation of communist secret services, including counter espionage services. E.g. the Department of Foreign Relations of the Hungarian Ministry of Interior documented the following report from 1963: ‘At the very beginning of this year [1963], the Rumanian secret service had asked us for help. They have their own officer stationed in Komárno who needs some help form the Hungarian authorities. This

Securitate officer works under the coverage of the Navrom agency [a Romanian ship firm]. As the document further states: ‘The Rumanian officer who works in Komárno, sends time to time operative materials to Bucharest through the Czecho/Slovak state security services, and via this way he receives orders, and commands from the Rumanian authorities.’ Colonel Lajos Karasz had approved the operation on February 4, 1963.7

Smuggling in Komárno/Komárom operated in all possible directions. Some sources tell us stories about the greed of the Czecho/Slovak customs officers. The typical method of the corruption was that Czecho/Slovak customs officers, while checking a ship, were offered some gift for being indulgent/forbearing while doing the customs control in return. This procedure was so widespread and reached such a big scale on the Komárno side that it upset the Hungarian authorities:

‘This corrupt behaviour of the Czecho/Slovak customs officers became very destructive for our customs officers. […] When we objected at the head of the customs in Komárno, they had chosen a different way. They use their own personal cars to help Yugoslavs to smuggle in goods to Hungary. This unacceptable behaviour of the Czecho/Slovak customs staff is tolerated by the head of the station, what more, Arendas [Marek Árendás] himself is involved in the trafficking, and he regularly receives different gifts. Our counter espionage service has informations about the most well known officers, among others Karoly Behil […], Zoltán Danics and Mátyás Szabados. It can be observed – says the report furthermore – that a young Czecho/Slovak customs officers can buy a personal car and can build a house within a year, despite having an official salary of some 1600 Kčs.’8

Beyond the palpable tension between the customs officers on the Hungarian and the Czecho/Slovak side, it is worth noting that the Hungarian report calls the Czecho/Slovak customs personnel by their Hungarian names since they knew that many of the customs officers in Komárno were native Hungarians born in Czecho/Slovakia.

V. More and more tourists = more and more problems

During the 1960s, we can observe a significant increase in the number of visitors crossing the Czecho/Slovak border in Komárno/Komárom. From Stefano Bottoni’s figures we know that years from 1958 to 1968 were those when the Hungarian–Czecho/Slovak border connections reached their first peak time. Within this period, and especially between 1962 and 1966 we can observe a sudden increase when some two million passangers (one million in each direction) crossed the Hungarian–Czecho/Slovak border. Specifically, in Komárno in 1963 some 15,000 persons crossed the border from Czecho/Slovakia. The vast majority of the passengers travelling through the Komárno checkpoint were citizens of the Czecho/Slovak Socialist Republic and Hungary. Most of them came directly from the Komárno county, and in 95% of the cases their destination was Hungary. They mostly travelled collectively by buses, less typically individually by train or by car. According to the official figures of the Komárno customs office, the two peak-times for these visits in 1963 were in the period from March to August, then again

8 Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Leváltára, Budapest. 3.1.2, M–41473 Kékduna tmb. dossziéja.
from October to December. Local authorities also registered a strong increase in the number of passengers travelling by motor vehicles. E.g in 1962, some 4717 cars and 4504 motorcycles crossed the Komárom/Komárovo checkpoint, and within one year this number increased to 15 993 as far as personal cars were involved.9

It needs to be noted that local political authorities were able to react to the new situation rather quickly. Backed by a central government declaration from early 1963, in which Prague stressed and aimed at the strong increase of tourism incomes throughout Czecho/Slovakia, the Czecho/Slovak government literally stated that ‘this aim is especially important to reach in the counties [okresy] near the borderlands’.

In early 1964, the National Committee of the Komárovo County (in Slovak: Okresný národný výbor, ONV) made several steps to improve the tourist facilities right in the town as well as in the county. The department of commerce (Odbor obchodu ONV.), headed by František Bartoš made bold plans to increase the quantity of the tourist facilities. It was indeed a grand plan not easy to fulfill because the local authority knew that the situation in the field of tourism was far from sufficient. E.g. on the Slovak side of the border, in Komárovo there was only one hotel, Hotel Europa with a capacity of some 100 beds. In 1963, there were 27 566 visitors accommodated in this hotel, mostly Czecho/Slovak citizens, and only some 6% of them (1777 people) were citizens of other countries. There were neither enough nor sufficient catering facilities, cafes, wine bars, etc. It was for the first time in this development plan of the National Committee when and where the idea of a restaurant right in the border zone, ‘next to the dormitories of the border guards’ was raised.10

The National Committee of the Komárovo County (abbr. NC), the political authority of the Komárovo County soon realised that the task assigned by Prague is too big. The Plenum of the NC had a lengthy discussion over the plans in order to increase basic and additional tourist facilities, accommodation as well as catering. This was the very first time in the history of the NC as the main political decision-making body of the county, when it had to face the problem of raising money for such a purpose. Since the central budget was very limited, it was the NC who had to find money for making the main road wider, for continuously cleaning the streets (for the only main road from and to the border checkpoint lead right through the town centre), furthermore for maintaining the town parks, for creating fast food facilities, etc. The members of the plenum of NC realised by sheer horror that if not them than none else would create more car parks, or more cafes, or information placards that were needed to welcome foreign tourists. Also it was necessary to organize some German language training for the personnel involved in this enterprise.11

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A simple task for a town which has been situated on the state border with a friendly country, to create a decent environment for passengers travelling by, made serious complications in peoples’ life. This was the reason why the head of the local department of commerce often complained that it is unable to provide e.g. more beer in the shops, for the brewery was simply not able to produce more, and Hungarian travellers yearning for ‘Czech’ bottled beer bought of it more than they were expected to buy.

We also find written records of debates, or sometimes even quarrels of the members of the NC of the Komárnok County, about the ‘insufficient quantity, and insufficient quality of the tourist facilities’. E.g. the NC on June 3, 1966 had a long session over tourism. Here, while the NC of the County was evaluating the latest winter season, and was preparing for the forthcoming summer tourist season, a usual competency fight had broken out. On the one hand it was the head of the department of commerce, Zdeněk Kročák, who urged building of a car-camping nearby the town. Suddenly, however, a battle over the budget broke out, since establishing and development of car-camping facilities in Czecho/Slovakia was assigned to the Sväzarm, the Alliance for Cooperation with the Army. Of course, the quarrel was all about money: someone simply had to find some 350 000 Kčs in its budget to set up a decent car-camping facility.\(^{12}\)

VI. A New Checkpoint Building

As a consequence of these positive developments, between 1964 and 1966, a new customs office building was built between Komárno/Komárom on the Czecho/Slovak bridgehead. According to the plans, it costed well over 15 million Kčs, a rather substantial sum for an architecturally modest socreal building of some 200 square metres. According to the written explanation, ‘the traffic [through the Komárno/Komárom checkpoint] is already very heavy and it will surely increase’, so the passport and the customs personnel need a ‘decent place to work in, including a staff room, money exchange office, common rooms’, etc. Since the staff so far worked under the open air, ‘from now on, the passport and customs control of the automobiles will take place under a high roof’.\(^ {13}\)

The project of the new checkpoint building also included some limited improvement of the road infrastructure to and from the checkpoint, plus a restaurant designed practically right on the borderline. It seems that the authorities of the town were influential enough to achieve their earlier plan from 1963, and were able to persuade representatives of the customs that Komárno needed a restaurant right in the border zone. The plan became reality in the 1970s when the Restaurant Pokol ['Hell'] was built on the Slovak side, just a few metres from the checkpoint. (The place has been existing since then though changing owners a couple of times. Recently Pokol was mentioned in the Hungarian and Slovak press for the French actor, Gerard Depardieux had stayed in it when shooting the next part of Asterix and Obelix in 2011.)


\(^ {13}\) Štátny okresný archív, pobočka Komárnok. Fond Colnic Komárno. Sprievodná zpráva k štúdiu Colnica Komárno z 6. septembra 1966, taktiež spisy Krajského plánovacieho úradu vo veci Colnice Komárno.
VII. Relations not as bright as they might seem…

The development of the mutual Hungarian-Czecho/Slovak border relations were indeed promising, and the story of the Restaurant Hell might sound humorous. Nevertheless, these all positive events were in a very sharp contrast with the official and absolutely not public line set for the Czecho/Slovak border guards.

From the 1970s, we have some confidential or secret documents regarding the general safety procedures of the Komárno border checkpoint. Within the Organization matters, the guidelines assume the occurrence of some emergency situations. The papers literally assume the possible impact of ‘weapons of mass destruction’ as well as the possibility of ‘temporary stay of people in contagious environment’. Therefore the guidelines order all personnel of the checkpoint to undergo an ‘organization-operational military training’, including ‘getting familiar with the long term usage of protective equipment, such as gas masks, rubber gloves, etc.’ Though Komárno was situated on the border with a friendly, what more an allied country, interestingly enough these documents which were meant ‘for all personnel of the checkpoint’, in their general principles did not much differ from the safety procedures implemented on the real Iron Curtain border. In the letter sent to Komárno from Prague on December 8, 1978, the Central Customs Office in Prague called for ‘a constant vigilance […] especially among the young generations’. On behalf of the Ministry of the Foreign Trade (Ministerstvo zahraničního obchodu), dr. Zdeněk Vejvoda, Head of the Defence Department of the Central Customs Office (vedúci útvaru obrany Ústřední celní správa, ÚCS) called for attention, and warned customs officers throughout the country to be continuously prepared for ‘anti-chemical warfare […] and gradually reach the target to be able to wear gas masks without pause for six hours’. ‘It is also very important – Vejvoda writes on – that training has to be focused on pratical activities regarding the liquidation works in areas attecked by atomic or chemical weapons.’

To conclude it: increasing tourism meant disturbing new turns in the everyday life of Komárno. In an economic environment where free market was unknown, and where private enterprise was forbidden, and where the state budget was pretty limited – increasing local tourism was a really ambitious plan. The situation was secretly aggravated by the Czecho/Slovak secret services which in the context of the Cold War ordered local border checkpoints to get prepared for open military conflict even with the closest allies, and thus undermining the basic norms of mutual trust.

The positive development at the Komárno/Komárom checkpoint lasted roughly until 1967. The process was slowed down due to the great flood of 1965 in South West Slovakia, the biggest water flooding of the area ever. During the defensive and recovery works, the Army of the Peoples’ Republic of Hungary (PRH) was keen to help. This help was warmly thanked in a letter written by the County Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia (Okresný výbor Komunistické strany Slovenska) to the Ministry of the National Defence and Ministry of Interior of Hungary on July 14, 1965. In this letter,

Slovak political authorities of the region had thanked ‘for the help of the armed forces of the PRH for their friendly international help during the flood in 1965’.\footnote{Štátny okresný archív, pobôčka Komárno. Fond Mestský národný výbor v Komárne. Zápisnice Pléna ONV Komárno z 14. júla 1965. „Vážení súdrhuovia…”}

Again in 1968, it was the political crisis in Czecho/Slovakia that hindered further development of the Komárno/Komárom connection, since the border became an important military point for the invading Soviet Army. It is necessary to note that the Soviet Army was physically present prior to 1968 in both towns Komárno/Komárom, using the massive fortifications of the 18th Century huge fortress stretching over both sides of the River Danube. During the days of the international crisis in August 1968, the access through the Komárno/Komárom border checkpoint was completely halted. The bridge was sealed off by guards of the Red Army, and the local railroad and the railway bridge were accessible only for their units too.

It is interesting to notice in the sources what kind of discussions took place in Komárno over the critical days of August 1968. Not if there were no political fights over who was loyal and who was not in those critical days; of course, there were. But the main point for the local decision makers was the physical damage caused by the Soviet troops which crossed the border by heavy tanks, damaging the railway and the railway bridge too (the only such one on the Danube within 80 kilometres), also on the drawbridge leading to the town centre. The total harm was estimated to cca 56 million Kčs. It took four years, until the end of 1972 all damages were repaired.\footnote{Štátny okresný archív, pobôčka Komárno. Fond Mestský národný výbor v Komárne. Zápisnice Pléna ONV Komárno z 26. júna 1968, alebo z 6. septembra 1968.}

In the ripe years of the Kádár era, and in the context of an international thawing process, the two towns had found their way to each other. The border was pretty much open. It was open for the family reunions as well as for the purposes of the ‘consumer communism’, for shopping ‘on the other side’ was very tempting for the inhabitants of both towns. The border was open for simple weekend visits, e.g. many Hungarians living in Slovakia used to visit football matches in Budapest.

One very peculiar feature of the Komárno/Komárom connections was the presence of the Soviet troops on both sides of the border. Since they were there, Komárno/Komárom was a ‘privileged’ place where all political, social, or cultural activities were marked by the presence of the representatives of the Soviet Army. The Soviet presence was the reason that the two towns were forced to cooperate under the umbrella of the Soviet type of internationalism. From 1968 on, practically all public celebrations could be held in ‘international spirit’, and under the ‘auspices’ of the Soviet commanders. The representatives of the Soviet Army, either in a form of a high-ranking officer or in a form of a wind ensemble, obligatory had to be invited to all public events. From the mid-1970s, the Soviet anthem had also be routinely played on both sides of the border. In the one hand this was more and more obligatory, routine and dull. But local patriotic Hungarians on both sides secretly enjoyed it because it was at least some practical way to ‘meet the fellow Hungarians from the other side’.
While shopping and entertainment tourism were a limited way of consumer rituals, the border was open for nearly unlimited smuggling. Quietly in the shadow of the obligatory political routine meetigs, the throwing border meant a thriving black market in and around Komárno/Komárom. The years of 1970s were the peak time of the local illegal traffiking. There were at least three official Komárno/Komárom checkpoints – in the harbour, on the surface road, and on the railway station – where illegal exchange of western luxury spirits and cigarettes and gadgets like armwatches attracted the attention of harbour or railway workers as well as customs officers. Indeed, there was an official state border but there were people who were priviledge to overcome it. A selected ‘sect’ from the local political management, customs offiers but also ordinary workers who quietly created an invisible state border. It was an open secrecy that Komárno/Komárom was a place of unlimited smuggling: everybody knew it, commencing with ordinary people who fearfully crossed the checkpoint ending with the secret services of several coundtries.

Yet, when in 1989 free and democratic world came back to the lives of the Komárno/Komárom people, and even after the Border Checkpoints were dismantled in 2012, they had and they are still having problems to establish vivid relations with ‘the other side’.

Bibliography:


