

Ica Opre: Building houses in the 1960s. “Peasants had the skill for everything”

Translated from the Hungarian by Eszter Tarsoly

The second text, below, about adobe making and traditional housing is by one of the local contributors of our participatory research projects in Tiszavasvári. She joined our research team in summer 2022 and lives in the centre of town. She worked as a nursery school teacher and later headteacher in the nursery located near one of the Roma neighbourhoods, different from the one where our project is based. She has researched local folklore as an independent scholar. Her family live nearby.

In the Gypsy community an oft-repeated criticism about the Roma neighbourhood today is that town planners should not have allowed to build a row of houses on the edge of the village or town, thus segregating Roma from Hungarians. The sociologist Gabriella Lengyel discussed this in her paper entitled *The Gypsy Population of Tiszavasvári* (2012), in which she described, among other things, that Tiszavasvári officially became a town in 1985, and from that time on, according to research, the housing conditions of the Wlach Roma improved – if the move to a so-called C-house (a house with reduced degree of comfort) can be called an improvement compared to the traditional adobe houses. The paper argues that the expanding job opportunities encouraged Roma couples to move into the newly built houses, which remains controversial to this day because of disputable contracts. The Roma’s moving in to this quarter led to the growth of the neighbourhood because the number of children increased and the neighbourhood had a cohesive power. Despite the fact that after the change of political regime in the 1990s, there were fewer jobs for the Roma, too, the Roma quarter still saw an increase in its population. A strong network of kins and strong social ties were the main sources of population retention. New small houses, built by the residents themselves, appeared on the small plots, and this led to the overcrowding of the recently built rows of houses.

I do not think that the purpose of building on the edge of the city was to deliberately segregate the Roma there, to separate them from Hungarians. I think, based on my childhood experience and the history and structure of the town, that new plots can only be allocated by a municipality on the edges, because the inner parts of towns are already inhabited, and places like the area where reed grows inside the town are uninhabitable unless they are drained. Therefore, expansion can only take place on the periphery.

My parents bought a plot of land in 1965 on the outskirts of the then large municipality of Tiszavasvári. At that time, the grassland area originally designated for holding the old fairs was allotted to young families. My mum and dad went to the council and applied for a plot, which they succeeded in getting, along with about 60 other families. Five of my father's relatives were allocated plots. Not next to each other, of course, but the brothers and sisters, cousins, could still live in the same street. When the plots were allocated, the families who applied were called in, and the surveyor allocated each family a plot. A stake holding a sign was pushed into the ground with the name of the owner written in ink. Many were able to buy the land only on credit then, and construction could begin. It was down to individual talents and opportunities what type of house each of the new owners could build. Typically, two-room houses with kitchen and hallway were built at that time, which are now colloquially known as Kádár-cubes. We were very poor, so, at first my parents managed to build only a small, one-room adobe house with a kitchen.

How was our little house built? I interviewed my mother, who is now 85 years old.

Mummy, what was it like when the land was measured out, did you have to fence it off first and then build?

Oh, no. Each of us did it their own way. Some people made a fence out of planks, others made a fence out of stakes. For years, your uncle Laci’s street-front fence was made out of stalks, too, the public fence. It was made of sunflower stalks. They used the dried stalks to make a fence: they placed them side by side and attached them to slats at the top and bottom. This was used for both the fence and the gate.

How was our little house built? What was it made of?

Our little house was built of adobe. We made it ourselves. The men dug a big hole, dug up the black soil, and the yellow soil, mixed it with straw and other dried part of plants, and then poured water in it. The dried parts were from threshing; when the wheat was split by the threshing machine, the grains came out on a hole, the straw on a separate hole, and the empty head of the wheat on yet another hole, underneath. This was added to the mud, and also the water.

The soil was mixed in the pit that was dug?

It wasn't. As they dug deeper and deeper, the soil changes colour. First it is black, then yellowish. But you could not go down very far because the ground water would have come up. That's how we used to dig wells, too. The earth would be thrown out of the pit on the grass, and when they had dug up enough for the adobe to be made, the children would go and tread the soil with their feet. The adults were turning it with hoes. Some would keep watering it, to make it moist, but back then the water didn't come from a tap; it came from a well. When they saw that the soil and the straw were of the right density, they started putting the mix into the adobe-making frame. This had a handle. We filled it and flattened it by hand, and then we moved the form out of the way. We put the adobe bricks side by side so that the sun could reach them and dry them out.

When the adobe-making form was full of mud, we tapped it to make it level, flattened it, and pulled the form off. We put another row next to the previous one, leaving only a small gap. Like this, row after row... Then, as the mud hardened, we turned it around. We kept turning it, always leaving a gap between the bricks to let the air flow through. The second row of bricks was shorter, it started further in, also with gaps. And at the end there was only one brick in the top row. We poured a little bit of water over it, and when it was hard and dry, as hard as brick, then the building work could begin. But back then we did everything together, in collaboration. The men, all the relatives, were building the house, and the women cooked.

Yes, I remember when we went to Hajdúnánás by train, I saw a pile of adobe bricks. Who was making the adobe there? Hajdúnánás had a reputation as a big trough-making town. Was it the Roma or the Hungarians who were making it?

Hungarians. Everyone made the adobe for themselves.

When the adobe was ready, who took part in building the houses? The relatives?

Yes, the relatives. Later, the big house was built by a brick-layer in 1969. For the small house, the family got together. My husband's brothers and sisters, my brothers-in-law and my brothers.

I remember that initially the house had earth-plastered walls. The room, the kitchen was plastered with soil.

We plastered it with mud, yes, and when that got dry, we lived like that for a couple of years. In the kitchen there was a cupboard, a small table with two chairs and a laundry basket, and we cooked on a tea stove. In the room there was a small cylindrical iron stove, a mirrored wardrobe, a brown wardrobe with two doors, a double bed with straw mattresses, a chair on each side and a sofa under the window. We used petroleum lamps for lighting. I always did my washing in a metal tub. We carried the water from the well, and I heated it up in a washing pot. I used to wash clothes with a soap brand called Flóra. First I always soaked the clothes in the hot water, and then washed them by hand when the water was cooler. I rinsed and squeezed the clothes, and hung them to dry on a clothesline. The kitchen was open to the sky. The kitchen door led into the room.

I remember when, mummy, your brother introduced electricity in 1968. He was an electrician and brought in electricity from the road, just to help, as a family member. Did the brothers know how to build the roof and stuff like that?

In the old days, peasants had the skill for everything. It wasn't like... like I don't know how to do it, 'cause they saw it when they were kids. They followed the grown-ups around and saw how to do things.

What I remember is that inside, on the ceiling, you could see the wooden beam placed crosswise on top of the wall. The slats were nailed to it. Above the slats, there was the earth floor of the attic. Inside, the walls were plastered and whitewashed. Same on the outside, only the plinth was painted black. From my childhood, I remember the high threshold you had to cross as you entered the room from the kitchen. It seemed high because I was only two or three years old. That was my place, on the threshold. My mother sat me there and put a little stool in front of me. I put my outstretched leg under the stool and the stool became my desk. I used to eat there. Mostly brown bean soup.

Then I remember my father's smouldering cigarette in the darkness of the bedroom; he used to smoke even at night while lying in bed. He was a big smoker, he smoked Munkás, a workman's cigarette. Next to his bed there was a chair with a small metal bowl on it. My mother put it there for my father to put the cigarette ashes in it at night. Thinking back now, the air in that little room must have been very unhealthy. When my father light up a cigarette, the whole flat was filled with smoke even later, when we lived in the big house. "You could have cut through the smoke", as they used to say. And I am horrified at the thought that my elder sister and I, and later even my younger sister, grew up like that.

We often think back to our childhood with nostalgia, saying that everything was better then, everything had its value and its beauty. We were very poor, but we had time for each other. Families and relatives used to get together; they played cards, had a celebratory meal after pig-slaughtering, they visited neighbours. Then, in the sixties, we used to come together to watch TV in the house of relatives who owned one. But then, the more we came to own, the more we became isolated from each other. We stopped meeting and talking together. Everybody was just running around, going about their business. Although we now cook on gas or electric hobs, do our laundry in automatic washing machines, wash our dishes and plates in dishwashers. Entertainment started to mean having your own TV, VCR, radio, record player, tape recorder. And nowadays we have the Internet. When I was a child, we were poor. But is *that* really what you would call poverty?

References

Lengyel, Gabriella. 2012. Tiszavasvári cigány népessége [The Roma population of Tiszavasvári]. In Kemény István, Janky Béla & Lengyel Gabriella (eds.), *A magyarországi cigányság 1971–2003* [The Roma of Hungary 1971–2003], pp. 157–179. Budapest: Gondolat/MTA Etnikai-nemzeti Kisebbségkutató Intézet.