

# **The Komárom/Komárno Case or From the ‘Iron Curtain Feeling’ to a ‘No-Border Feeling’**

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## **Introduction**

This paper is an evaluation of historical research which deals with the state border regime between the towns of 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 used two main types of source 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 field research with the inhabitants of both towns.

I have to note at the end of this introduction that in the years 2007–2009 Komárom/Komárno research was conducted in cooperation with the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute, Vienna within a framework project called ‘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.)

## I. What are the special features 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 fifty 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.<sup>1</sup> Today, Slovakian *Komárno* is bigger both in its physical area and its number of inhabitants than Hungarian *Komárom*. Komárno is situated on 102 square kilometres and has 35,729 inhabitants, while Komárom is situated on 70 square kilometres and has 19,729 inhabitants.<sup>2</sup>

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 northwestern part of the Hungarian Kingdom. As one of the losers of World War I, Hungary lost all its territories north of the River Danube. So after 1918 (under the terms of the Trianon Peace Treaty), the northern half of Komárom became a part of the newly created Czecho-Slovakia. Yet, the ethnic composition of these towns is remarkable. According to the last censuses (in 2011), the inhabitants of Hungarian Komárom are practically entirely Hungarians, while the inhabitants of 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 severely 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

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1 For details regarding the terminology of the names Komárom (a Hungarian term) and Komárno (a Slovak term), see Bottoni, Stefano, ‘Komárom/Komárno, hivatalos és informális kapcsolatok egy közép-európai ikervárosban (1960-1985)’, *Regio*, 19. évf. 2008. 3. szám, p. 27.

2 Both data from 2011.

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 affected their everyday life and mentality? And finally, does the recent 'state border without checking' regime automatically mean free contact between the local people? – these are the main questions my research is seeking answers to.

From the actual standpoint 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 (at certain times in a very rough form indeed) caused during the Cold War period these two towns to live very separate lives, 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 border line here was not a part of the 'real' Iron Curtain, since it stretched 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 from the Iron Curtain.<sup>3</sup> The second conclusion arises from the first one. In our interviews, we found that a state border without border guards and customs officers does not automatically mean that people feel themselves to be 'closer to each other'; on the contrary, in many ways, people still feel 'far from each other'. In the 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 feel united.<sup>4</sup>

We understand that there had been or still are many 'separated' or 'twin' towns in Europe. Just a few examples of these are Gmünd (Austria) – České Velenice (Czech Republic, the former Czechoslovak Socialist Republic); Kapikule/Edirne (Turkey) – Kapitan Andreevo/Svilengrad

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

4 This process has already started in the form of several contemporary (economic, cultural, etc.) projects, from which I would like to point out the plan for a new road-bridge above the Danube, and the joint webpage of the two towns [<http://www.komarom.hu/index2.html>].

(Bulgaria) – Orestiada (Greece); Gorizia (Italy) – Nova Gorica (Slovenia, the former Yugoslavia); Narva (Estonia, the former Soviet Union) – Ivangorod (Russia, the former Soviet Union); Cerbére (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 these are the cases of Salonta (Rumania) and Méhkerék (Hungary), as well as Görlitz (Germany, the former German Democratic Republic) and Zgorzelec (Poland). Though both are comparable to the Komárom/Komárno in the sense that they were towns situated between two communist states, their ethnic composition is less compact than in Komárom/Komárno.<sup>5</sup>

I can conclude that Komárno and Komárom are particularly interesting places if we research the effects 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 sides of the state border, 'separated' from each other (inter-Hungarian perspective); and (iii) relations of Slovaks (living in Komárno) with two 'types' of Hungarians, i.e., with Hungarians from Hungary and with ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakian Komárno. So, basically, both towns are unique urban environments and are very suitable spots where historical Hungarian and Slovak relations, including border and inter-ethnic 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 pheno-

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<sup>5</sup> To my best knowledge, I can mention the following international-scale state-border researches: (i) Helga Schultz, Katarzyna Stkołosa, and Dagmara Jajeśniak-Quast have conducted similar research to ours; see for instance their 'Twin Towns on the Borders as Laboratories of European Integration', Frankfurter Institute für Transformationsstudien, discussion paper 4/2002. (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 Humboldt University Berlin. (iv). *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, ed. by Doris Wastl-Walter, University of Bern, Switzerland.

menon of the 'fake' Iron Curtain. The second is Hungarian–Czecho-Slovak national-ethnic relations based on and reflected in a series of oral history interviews in Komárno and Komárom. The third is the international cooperation of the communist authorities at the Komárno and Komárom border checkpoints. And the fourth is that local lieux de memoires also deserve attention in the context of the coexistence of Hungarians and Slovaks in the town, including 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 twenty 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 were 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 contact between these two towns (and also between the two states) was strictly limited and over-politicised.

Last but not least, it seems that Komárno 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 the University of Selye on 12 September, 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 of *how the state border regime between the two states (Czecho-Slovakia and Hungary) and the two towns (Komárno 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 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.

## **II. How has the state border regime between Czecho-Slovakia – Hungary and Komárno – Komárom evolved?**

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

As was described by Péter Becsik and Stefano Bottoni, the state border in Komárno/Komárom between Hungary and Czecho-Slovakia 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 fifteen 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 of Hungarian–Czecho-Slovak inter-block relations that these shoutings were considered to be a crime in both countries, and for example in Komárno, the waters of the river were swept with huge reflectors by night. In other cases, people, livestock, or food were driven across the 200- to 300-metre-wide border zone over the frozen waters by night on sledge. The fact that not only elderly people but young ones too could recall these events proves that these stories had strongly settled in the local peoples' minds and hearts.

The local border regime in the 1960s and the 1970s was influenced by two major factors. One was the significant intention on both sides to improve mutual inter-state relations that were spoiled and hibernated immediately after 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 Czechoslovakia. 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/Komárom was a special case; here, the national as well as the urban links were so tight that reaching over to the 'other side' of the river was inevitable.

### **III. 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, and Hungary, to Yugoslavia, Rumania, Bulgaria, and 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 foods of different kinds, 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 loading and unloading 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 the secret services; in the local harbours, all ships had to be controlled and surveyed, except for those under the Soviet flag.<sup>6</sup>

We have some delicate sources regarding the 'Komárom harbour of prominent operative importance', which prove that secret service agents dispatched to Komárno/Komárom conducted different businesses with ship crews of different nationalities crossing Austria, Yugoslavia, Bul-

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<sup>6</sup> Open Society Archives, Budapest, HU-OSA-300-8-13 RFE/RL Research Institute Publication Department East Europe Box 2, Feb. 1960, pp. 22-27.

garia, etc. For instance, sources reveal the 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 Komárom. Here, she was conducting rich illegal business with shipmen, selling cigarettes and buying gadget wristwatches. This all was done deliberately to camouflage her official network person identity.

Archival sources regarding Komárom/Komárno basically tell us two things. One is the phenomenon of smuggling that took place in the local river harbour, and the other is the extensive international cooperation of the communist secret services, including counter-espionage services. For example, the Department of Foreign Relations of the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior documented the following report from 1963: ‘At the very beginning of this year [1963], the Romanian secret service had asked us for help. They have their own officer stationed in Komárno who needs some help from the Hungarian authorities. This Securitate officer works under the coverage of the Navrom Agency [*a Romanian shipping firm*]. As the document further states: ‘The Rumanian officer who works in Komárno sends from 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 approved the operation on 4 February, 1963.<sup>7</sup>

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 corruption was that Czecho-Slovak customs officers, while checking a ship, were offered some gift for being indulgent or forbearing while conducting 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 to the head of the customs in Komárno, they chose a different

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7 Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Leváltára, Budapest. O-dosszé, 12021 – Komáromi MÁV 1963.

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, and what is more, Arendas [Marek Árendás] himself is involved in the trafficking, and he regularly receives different gifts. Our counter-espionage service has information 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 officer can buy a personal car and can build a house within a year, despite having an official salary of some 1,600 Kčs.<sup>8</sup>

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.

#### **IV. 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 the 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 passengers (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 Komárno County, and in 95% of the cases, their destination was Hungary. They mostly travelled collectively by bus and less typi-

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<sup>8</sup> Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, Budapest. 3.1.2, M-41473 Kékduna tmb. dossziéja.

cally 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, and then again from October to December. The local authorities also registered a strong increase in the number of passengers travelling by motor vehicle. For example, in 1962, some 4,717 cars and 4,504 motorcycles crossed the Komárno/Komárom checkpoint, and within one year, this number increased to 15,993 as far as personal cars were involved.<sup>9</sup>

It needs to be noted that the 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 a strong increase in tourism income throughout Czecho-Slovakia, the Czecho-Slovak government stated unequivocally that ‘it is especially important to reach this aim in the counties [okresy] near the borderlands’.

In early 1964, the National Committee of Komárno County (in Slovak: Okresný národný výbor, ONV) took 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 tourist facilities. It was indeed a grand plan not easy to fulfil because the local authorities knew that the situation in the field of tourism was far from sufficient. For example, on the Slovak side of the border, in Komárno, 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 (1,777 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.<sup>10</sup>

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9 See Bottoni, Stefani, ‘Komárom-Komárno. Határmenti mindennapok és párhuzamos életetek a szocializmus korszakában’, in: Államhatár és identitás – Komárom/Komárno. Monographiae Comaromienses 3. Selye János Egyetem Tanárképző Kara, Komárom 2011, pp. 148-151.

10 Štátny okresný archív, pobočka Komárno. Fond Mestský národný výbor v Komárne. Zápisnice Rady ONV Komárno. „Zpráva o rozvoji cestovného ruchu...” 17. jan. 1964.

The National Committee (abbr. NC) of Komárno County, the political authority of Komárno County, soon realised that the task assigned by Prague was too big. The Plenum of the NC had a lengthy discussion over the plans in order to increase basic and additional tourist facilities and 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 that 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 widening the main road, for continuously cleaning the streets (for the only main road from and to the border checkpoint lead right through the town centre), and furthermore for maintaining the town parks, for creating fast food facilities, etc. The members of the Plenum of the NC realised in sheer horror that if not they, then no one else would create more car parks, more cafes, or information placards that were needed to welcome foreign tourists. Also, it was necessary to organise some German language training for the personnel involved in this enterprise.<sup>11</sup>

For a town that has been situated on the state border with a friendly country, the simple task of creating a decent environment for passengers travelling by caused serious complications in peoples' lives. This was the reason that the head of the local Department of Commerce often complained that it was 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 more of it than they were expected to buy.

We also find written records of debates, or sometimes even quarrels, among the members of the NC of Komárno County, about the 'insufficient quantity, and insufficient quality, of the tourist facilities'. For example, the NC on 3 June, 1966 held a long session over tourism. Here, while the NC of the County was evaluating the latest winter season and preparing for the forthcoming summer tourist season, the usual competency fight broke out. On the one hand, it was the head of the Department of Commerce, Zdeněk Kročák, who urged building of a car-park near the

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11 Štátny okresný archív, pobočka Komárno. Fond Mestský národný výbor v Komárne. Zápisnice Rady ONV Komárno z 26. mája 1966. „Zpráva a vyhodnotení zimného trhu...“

town. Suddenly, however, a battle over the budget broke out, since establishment and development of car-parking facilities in Czecho-Slovakia was assigned to the Union for Cooperation with the Army, or Svázarm. 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-parking facility.<sup>12</sup>

## V. A new checkpoint building

As a consequence of these positive developments, between 1964 and 1966, a new customs office building was built between Komárno and Komárom on the Czecho-Slovak bridgehead. According to the plans, it cost well over fifteen million Kčs, a rather substantial sum for an architecturally modest so-called 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 had so far worked in the open air, ‘from now on, the passport and customs control of automobiles will take place under a high roof’.<sup>13</sup>

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 of 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 existed since then though changing owners a couple of times. Recently, Restaurant Pokol was mentioned in the Hungarian and Slovak press for the French actor, Gerard Depardieu, had stayed in it when shooting the next part of *Asterix and Obelix* in 2011.)

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12 Štátny okresný úrad, pobočka Komárno. Fond Mestský národný výbor v Komárne. Zápisnice Rady ONV Komárno z 3. júna 1966.

13 Štátny okresný archív, pobočka Komárno. Fond Colnic Komárno. Sprievodná zpráva k štúdiu Colnica Komárno z 6. septembra 1966, taktiež spisy Krajského plánovacieho úradu vo veci Colnice Komárno.

## VI. Relations not as bright as they might seem...

The development of mutual Hungarian–Czecho-Slovak border relations was indeed promising, and the story of Restaurant Hell might sound humorous. Nevertheless, all these 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 Organisation matters, the guidelines assume the occurrence of certain 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 a contagious environment'. Therefore, the guidelines order all personnel of the checkpoint to undergo 'organisational-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 and, what is more, allied country, interestingly enough, these documents that were meant 'for all personnel of the checkpoint' did not in their general principles much differ from the safety procedures implemented on the real Iron Curtain border. In a letter sent to Komárno from Prague on 8 December, 1978, the Central Customs Office in Prague called for 'constant vigilance ... especially among the young generations'. On behalf of the Ministry of Foreign Trade (Ministerstvo zahraničního obchodu), Dr. Zdeněk Vejvoda, head of the Defence Department of the Central Customs Office (vedúci útvaru obrany Ústřední celní správa or ÚCS) called for attention, and warned customs officers throughout the country to be continuously prepared for 'anti-chemical warfare ... and gradually reach the target of being 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 practical activities regarding the liquidation works in areas attacked by atomic or chemical weapons'.<sup>14</sup>

To conclude: increasing tourism meant disturbing new turns in the

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<sup>14</sup> Štátny okresný archív, pobočka Komárno. Fond Colnic Komárno. „Hlavní úkoly CO v celní správě na rok 1979. Tajné” zo dňa 8. decembra 1978.

everyday life of Komárno. In an economic environment where the free market was unknown, 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 prepare for open military conflict even with their closest allies, 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 Southwest Slovakia, the biggest 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 Komunistickej strany Slovenska) to the Ministry of National Defence and Ministry of the Interior of Hungary on 14 July, 1965. In this letter, the Slovak political authorities of the region had given thanks 'for the help of the armed forces of the PRH for their friendly international help during the flood in 1965'.<sup>15</sup>

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 of Komárno and Komárom, using the massive fortifications of the huge eighteenth-century fortress stretching over on both sides of the River Danube. During the days of the international crisis in August 1968, 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 railway bridge was accessible only for their units, too.

It is interesting to note in the sources what kind of discussions took place in Komárno in the critical days of August 1968 – not whether there were political fights over who was loyal and who was not in those critical

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<sup>15</sup> Štátny okresný archív, pobočka Komárno. Fond Mestský národný výbor v Komárne. Zápisnice Pléna ONV Komárno z 14. júla 1965. „Vážení súdruhávia...”

days; of course there were. But the main point for the local decision makers was the physical damage caused by the Soviet troops who crossed the border in heavy tanks, damaging the railway and the railway bridge (the only such one on the Danube within 80 kilometres) as well as the drawbridge leading to the town centre. The total damage was estimated to cost around 56 million Kčs. It took four years, until the end of 1972, before all damage was repaired.<sup>16</sup>

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 family reunions as well as for the purpose of '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 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 an 'international spirit', and under the 'auspices' of the Soviet commanders. Representatives of the Soviet Army, either in the form of high-ranking officers or in the form of a wind ensemble, had obligatorily to be invited to all public events. From the mid-1970s, the Soviet anthem had also to be routinely played on both sides of the border. On 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 was a limited style of consumer ritual, the border was open for nearly unlimited smuggling.

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16 Štátny okresný archív, pobočka Komárno. Fond Mestský národný výbor v Komárne. Zápisnice Pléna ONV Komárno z 26. júna 1968, alebo z 6. septembra 1968.

Quietly in the shadows of the obligatory routine political meetings, the thawing border meant a thriving black market in and around Komárno/Komárom. The years of the 1970s were the peak time of local illegal trafficking. There were at least three official Komárno/Komárom checkpoints – at the harbour, the surface road, and the railway station – where illegal exchange of Western luxury spirits and cigarettes and gadgets like wrist-watches 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 privileged enough to overcome it: a selected ‘sect’ from the local political management, customs officers, but also ordinary workers who quietly created an invisible state border. It was an open secret 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 countries.

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

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