



Dr. Bubó and his Clients.¹ Drug Use and Policy in Hungary from the 1970s through the 1990s. Translating Health in Doctor-Patient Relationships

Eszter Zsófia TÓTH

VERITAS Research Institute Budapest, Hungary
fermina36@gmail.com

Abstract. This paper is based on archive materials, newspaper articles and oral history interviews connected to drug using habits in Hungary during the socialist period. Drug use in the socialist era was treated as a police matter, and therefore they did not create establishments for prevention, cure and rehabilitation. In the socialist era the roots of the drug use phenomenon were considered to be in the 1968 movements, in the student riots and in the newly appearing hippy lifestyle. The drugs were not only absent in public and political discourse (except a few small reports which aimed to stigmatize specific groups or individuals), but also in the area of public politics—there was no public policy that would deal with this issue. The methods for drug rehabilitation were very similar to the alcoholics' rehabilitation where they tended to address the physical addiction before everything else. After the system change, the drug using habits totally changed.

Keywords: drug use habits, Hungary, socialist period, 1980s, oral history interviews with clients.

Introduction

This paper is set out to describe the translation and transfer of knowledge in medical cultures of prevention in Hungary during the 1970s and 1980s. The leader of this research project was József Rácz and the project concerned the history of drug using habits in Hungary during the socialist period. We collected archive materials, newspaper articles and we made oral history interviews with doctors and clients. The results of the research were published in 2014 (Bajzáth, Tóth and Rácz 2014).

1 During the socialist period there was a very popular Hungarian cartoon: Doctor Bubo. One episode of this film was about drug use.

On the one hand, my cultural analysis is based on my oral history interviews, which were realized with doctors and drug user patients from the 1970s and 1980s. I have made interviews with doctors about medical treatment and the methodology of therapy. I aim to show the other side: I have interviewed patients and I will analyze their opinions and discourses about therapy.

Other sources of my analysis are archive materials and newspaper reports about drug using habits at that time. In order to understand health and prevention as travelling concepts, I will emphasize doctors' and patients' concepts about drugs in the socialist period.

The first archive report about drug users was written by dr. Ödön Kisszékelyi. He was a psychiatrist and worked in a hospital for policemen. In the middle of the 1970s, he brings the attention of the party leaders to the methods with which a group of young people from Budapest, consisting of about 70 members have been treated.

In Hungary the first death connected to drug use was reported in 1969. The victim was found with a plastic bag on his head, which made what had happened completely clear. We know from the archives that between 1970 and 1975 there were 75 drug related crime cases with 22 offenders. By the second half of the 1980s many people started drinking tea made out of poppy seed plants which had been brewed by young people at home from the plants that could be bought from florists. There was also the 'Polish heroin,' the so called 'compote.' The recipe originated from Polish tourists, and it could be learnt during a summer holiday at Lake Balaton.²

The methods for drug rehabilitation were very similar to the alcoholics' rehabilitation where they tended to address the physical addiction before everything else. (Barracks in the hospital on Róbert Károly Körút in Budapest). Drug rehabilitation usually took place in mental institutions and took 6 months at the longest. By the middle of the 1980s, in the counties of Csongrád and Baranya drug centres had been created where they provided day care and longer term hospital treatments as well. In those days underage drug users were looked after by local social advisers in milder cases and by mental institutions in more serious cases. In the case of poisoning they were taken to the toxicology ward, and in the case of disturbed behaviour to the psychiatric ward.³

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2 Interview with P. K. 9. Sept. 2012.

3 Interview with G.I. 12. Jan. 2012.

era, the roots of the drug use phenomenon were considered to be in the 1968 movements, in the student riots and in the newly appearing hippy lifestyle.

The National Anti-alcoholic Commission established its team against intoxication in 1974. Partly as a consequence of the earlier mentioned report, the National Youth Commission made an order with the title 'Information and measures about glue sniffing.' In the 1978 Penal Code amendment the government used the expression "pathological drug abuse." Ödön Kisszékelyi defended his PhD dissertation in 1979 in the topic. During the last few years of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, 1.6-4% of the high school students consumed alcohol combined with medication, or sniffed glue. According to the research of Dr. Krisztina Lénárt, in 1980 13, in 1981 31, in 1982 50, in 1983 32, in 1998 54, and in 1985 46 people were convicted for drug related crimes. Krisztina Lénárt quotes the 1985 results of the Sociology Department of the University of Economics from Budapest. According to those results, out of 498 students 6% sniffed glue and 9.6% consumed alcohol combined with medication in Budapest.⁴

From the research of József Rácz and his colleagues we know that in the socialist era classic drugs like heroin, hashish, marijuana, cocaine and LSD could not get in the country, therefore, during the end 1960s, drug sniffing became widespread (Nagy and Lovass 1985). They sniffed glue with a plastic bag on their heads in order to improve their mood or alter their state of consciousness. From the beginning of the 1970s, the most popular drug was the medication called 'Parkán' among young people who were trying to get high. They drank alcohol after taking the tablets. The medication was originally designed to cure patients with Parkinson's disease. The young people who had taken 'Parkán' reported that after 2-4 tablets their walking became unstable, they had the sensation as if their feet had sunk into the ground, and were walking on a wobbly pavement. They were seeing tiny bugs around them and their surroundings seemed to have become weird. "There was the Romanian and the Hungarian Parkán, and the cooler ones used the Romanian medicine because it needed to be smuggled in the country and that immediately added to the romanticism of it. It was freaking strong otherwise and completely unpredictable," as somebody recalled his/her memories in a spontaneous e-mail. Once there were stricter rules for prescribing Parkán from the beginning of the 1980s, they started combining alcohol with codeine derivatives, and from the mid 80s drinking poppy seed tea or injecting hydrocodine intravenously became popular.

People recalled how they could get hold of prescription drugs. "I learned it from Narkó-blues how to mix Coderit and Noxyron....this was the 'cocktail.' In our circles it was four rits with one noxi. It beat by far all the fantastic synthetic drugs of today. And there were some infamous chemists where they would hand out

4 http://www.archivnet.hu/hetkoznapok/fiatalok_es_a_kabitoszer_az_1970es_evek_budapestjen.html

anything for even the most embarrassing potato print prescriptions. By the second half of the eighties you had to travel across the country to find such chemists. I still stick to my statement that the Aranybika chemist's *mixtura pectoralis* in Debrecen was like the Tokaji among wines in the sea of legal drugs in Hungary."

One of my people had an unprompted comment in which he emphasized that glue sniffing had been a common thing to do, and with the end of communism, as classic drugs appeared, it took a back seat, though sparsely it is still around. Drug sniffing and consuming alcohol with medications were supposed to be connected to the bum lifestyle and young panhandlers in the subways, according to the contemporary official discourse.

"The real lowlives sniffed glue. I lived in Kőbánya, so I knew quite a few of them, but it was a different kind of world, and I only met them at concerts and festivals. The Gypsy guys would rather drink alcohol, spirits mostly, and we 'hippies' smoked weed and used medicines. The 'we' mostly meant high school students usually with the lifestyle of the lower middle class from apartments of the suburbs or smaller towns and boarding school students. The two or three years older guys from the city who were better off than us and had become alters and art punks would rather use medicines, but they would mostly choose to shoot themselves up with hydrocodaine or morphine," as recalled by somebody in an e-mail.

Another person emphasized that he had used drugs as escapism from the lower middle class lifestyle. He first used Parkán with apple cider, and in the 1980s he switched to poppy seed tea which was offered to him first by Polish students at Lake Balaton. He summarized his views in the following way: "I was revolted by the emptiness and hypocrisy of the philistine lifestyle. The fellow rolls out of bed in the morning, works hard for eight straight hours, has a drink, eats, mates and eventually the top of the coffin closes above him, and within a week nobody remembers him, that he was messing around in this vale of tears for 70-80 years."

Some of the drug users connect their drug experiences ideologically to the hippy movement. They talked about movies which had made a huge impression on them. A few of them mentioned the Milos Forman films, 'Hair' and 'Taking off.' "The examples came from films and books. I learned to smoke weed, which was not banned at the time and there was plenty around, mostly from the Forman film 'Taking off.' I remember when I first watched 'Hair.' It was a cult film for us. Sometimes on rainy days we watched it three times by the Lake Balaton. Somebody got hold of the West German version on VHS. It sounded horrific. We took loads of them to East Germany for the fellows. It was very welcome there, but in those days anywhere we went in Eastern Europe it was popular. As we saw it, we were the Eastern European hippy movement with our standard delay. Once at the east side of the Brandenburg Gate, where 15-20 of us were sitting around, a Soviet pioneer group came by. The teacher showed them the Gate, the Wall, the Reichstag, the whatever, and eventually she energetically pointed at us and said

‘i eta hippy.’ Another time, at the flower carnival in Debrecen about a hundred of us slept at the railway station.”

Dr. Géza Szeles, the head of the Humanity Youth Protection Association, talked in a ‘Magyar Narancs’ interview in 1996 about the ways in which the habits of drug use and the drug using communities changed after the end of communism: “The drug users’ society was a familiar, closed community. It was difficult to get into it or to get in trouble. They used opium, poppy seed tea, drank alcohol with Noxiron and medications, and there was a huge wave of popularity of taking Parkán. Drug users in those days looked after each other, which is something respectable. When somebody overdosed, the other person looked after him/her and called the doctor if it was necessary. There was a really close togetherness that also involved the dealers. It is different today. Drug dealing has become an industry. The drug dealer does not care if this is your first or one hundredth time. He will not explain to you how to use it and will not pay attention to what is going to happen to you. He is interested in one thing only. If you have a hundred thousand Forints and you want Ecstasy for it, then you are going to get it.”

The big change in drug use was not at the end of communism but at the beginning of the 90s when the Albanian dealers appeared and started selling heroin and the Polish speed started coming into the country, then later first the Hungarian, then the Dutch speed. Physician Sándor Funk described the dramatic change in an interview. It was so quick that one week he was treating poppy seed tea patients, and the next week heroin users knocked on his door. The first substitution therapy attempts took place in 1989 in the Klapka street drug clinic (with Dr. István Cserne’s supervision), where they used codeine and dehydrocodeine derivatives (hydrocodeine drops, 0,02g codeinum hydrochloricum tablets). From 1992, a steadily growing number of people asked for treatment against long standing heroin addiction, which meant such a huge number of patients that it was not possible to treat them in the few existing hospitals, clinics and rehabilitation treatments anymore. At the end of the 1990s long term methadone treatment was introduced and it resulted in a growing numbers of drug clinics and church community services.

Someone’s memories from the mid 1980s (Sándor Bajzáth)

“My first encounter with drugs? In those days I used to go to Felszabadulás square, ‘Felszab,’ which is called Ferenciek square now. That’s where hippies, punks and other rebellious blokes gathered then, and I was very attracted to these people. I wanted to belong among them because I had never really found where I belonged. I was always kind of an outsider and an insider at the same time. I knew them, but not really, and I went to the parties with them, but for me it was an empty experience...”

After high school I met the girl who I really started to take drugs with. It was huge love at first sight. She was clean when we met, but she had been using drugs previously. I only found out about this later on. We had been together for weeks when she started it again. She disappeared for the whole weekend, and she did not tell me where she had gone. Next time she said that she had met her girlfriend and the girl's boyfriend. Then she told me how things really were, that she goes to Budakeszi where this girl and her boyfriend live, and they actually take drugs there. Next weekend I went with them, and that is when I first figured that some people use drugs intravenously. They shot themselves up straight in front of me, and I had to hold my girlfriend's arm while she was shooting up, and I felt like fainting. I did not try it out at the time because the fear was stronger in me. In my girlfriend, the whole madness started again. She got hold of some gear, but this time on her own. I tried it with her for the first time. My curiosity was stronger this time. Those days everybody used a medicine called 'Hydrocodaine' intravenously. In the 80s this was the most popular drug with opiate in it, and I had started on this one as well.

The first dose proved to be too big. She shot me up with as much as she used, but of course she had been using it for a while, and even though it started well, and the flash came, it was getting stronger and stronger. First it was good, but then I started to feel shitty, nearly fainted, my pulse went up, my blood pressure was in the sky, I saw yellow patches, I was scared of dying. I was throwing up all night, I had a terrible headache, my face was swollen up and I swore that I would never do it again. But next day, as I got better, my curiosity proved to be stronger, and I tried it again. This time my girlfriend shot me up with the optimal amount of Hydro (the nickname of Hydrocodaine at the time). And that DID IT!!! That intoxicatingly tingly feeling crawled up inside me as if I was being prodded with a million lustful needles, and afterwards that endless peace. As if I had been waiting for this feeling forever. The cog joined my machinery that had been going wrong. Suddenly everything made sense. Even though I wouldn't be an addict in the physical sense for quite a while, psychologically I became the addict of the FEELING from that prod. Obviously, I thought I would only use it occasionally, when I WANT TO. Still, from that time on my fate was written. I was counting the days until I would allow myself to use it again, because I still thought that I would keep things under control... And the 15-year journey started."

This person was an active drug user for 15 years. His recovery (after many hospital rehabilitations, a 7-year methadone course and many police cases) is/was based on rehabilitation and afterwards going to a 12-step self-help group on a regular basis. This 12-step group is the Narcotics Anonymous. Those who attend are anonym drug addicts who have been having meetings in Hungary from the 1990s, in Budapest and Pécs daily by now, following the philosophy of Alcoholic Anonymous. Those who accept the program of Narcotics Anonymous gather

regularly in self-help groups to give themselves a chance with regular meetings, helping each other, belonging to a group and sharing their experience to achieve long lasting (or even lifelong) recovery.

Conclusion

Drug use in the Socialist era was treated as a police matter, and therefore they did not create establishments for prevention, cure and rehabilitation. In the socialist era the roots of the drug use phenomenon were considered to be in the 1968 movements, in the student riots and in the newly appearing hippy lifestyle. The drugs were not only absent in the public and political discourse (except a few small reports which aimed to stigmatize specific groups or individuals), but also in the area of public politics—there was no public policy that would deal with this issue. The methods for drug rehabilitation were very similar to the alcoholics' rehabilitation where they tended to address the physical addiction before everything else. There was, for example, a ward in the hospital on Róbert Károly Körút for dealing with the problem. Ödön Kisszékelyi, using the Polish example, urged the use of new treatment methods, like organizing group activities for the addicts. There were 36 deaths in the first five months of 1985 in Budapest purely because of glue sniffing. The fight against drug abuse became a health policy issue with the 37th article of the 1972 Health Act. After the system change, the drug using habits totally changed.

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