

A Cold War Border Zone – Komárom / Komárno

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Abstract

The 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. As a background to this study, it has to be added that in years 2007–2009, and again in 2014–2015, two waves of research, regarding the cultural memory of the state border zone in Komárom and Komárno, were done.³⁹

Key words: project by the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute, oral history interviews in Komárno (Slovakia) / Komárom (Hungary), remembering the Cold War, deliberate suppression of memory

What is the speciality of the Komárom / Komárno Case?

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.⁴⁰ 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. (All data from 2011.)

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 losers of the World War I, Hungary lost all its territories north of the River Danube. So after 1918 (under the terms of the Versailles/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 (2011), the inhabitants of the Hungarian *Komárom* are practically entirely Hungarians; while the inhabitants of the Slovakian *Komárno* are 65% 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-

³⁹ The first research was done in cooperation with the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute, Vienna within the framework project The 'Long European Post War Period' in Communicative Memories and (Trans)National Public Spheres; the second research, smaller in scale, was done by my team at the History Department of J. Selye University. Both researches consisted of two main types of sources: (i) face-to-face oral history interviews conducted during a field research with the inhabitants of both towns; and (ii) archival materials from local, regional and state archives, regarding the border regime during the Cold War period.

⁴⁰ For details regarding the terminology of the names Komárom [a Hungarian term] and Komárno [a Slovak term] see Bottoni 2008, 27.

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 meant 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 contacts between the local people? These were the main questions our two researches were 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 that 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.⁴¹ 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’. In other words 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 a living environment where the people of both Komárom and Komárno will feel united.⁴²

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 Gorica (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 these are the cases of Salonta (Romania) 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 their ethnic composition is less compact than in *Komárom / Komárno*.⁴³

⁴¹ According to the latest research by the Ústav pamäti národa, altogether there were at least 42 people killed on the Slovak state border with Austria.

⁴² This process has already started in a form of several contemporary economic, cultural, etc. projects, from which I would like to point out to the plan of a new road-bridge above the Danube (scheduled to be ready early 2019), and the joint webpage of the two towns [<http://www.komarom.hu/index2.html>] 24 January 2016

⁴³ 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.

We can conclude that *Komárno and Komárom* are particularly interesting places if we do a research into 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 side 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 the Slovakian Komárno. So basically both towns are a unique urban environment 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 phenomenon of the 'fake' Iron Curtain. Secondly, Hungarian–Czecho/Slovak national-ethnic 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 each other. For example, our interviewees in Hungarian Komárom simply did not know that there are some 12 000 Slovaks live in Komárno; they thought that exclusively Hungarians live there. 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.

Last but not least, it seems that Komárno as the biggest *urban* place where ethnic Hungarians compactly live in Slovakia might be an interesting spot for researchers.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, in this study it is not possible to write in details about all these research directions. Therefore, in this paper, I would like to deal mostly 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

(iii) A Border Project called EastborderNetted run at the Humboldt University Berlin. (iv) The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies. Ed. by Doris Wastl-Walter, Universitu of Bern, Switzerland.

⁴⁴ I have to mention here our scientific programme with a group of distinguished Japanese and Slovak scientists, namely with Susumu Nagayo, Osamu Ieda, Tatsuya Nakazawa, Yuko Kambara, Tadaki Iio, Štefan Šutaj, Dušan Kováč, Gabriela Dudeková, László Szarka, and the series of four international workshops "Transboundary symbiosis over the Danube – EU integration between Slovakia and Hungary from a local perspective", we have conducted together in Komárno and Japan in 2012, 2014, 2015 and 2016.

would like to focus on the pre-1989 situation, especially on the 1960s and 1970s, which 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 harmonic and peaceful coexistence. It was also a time dominated by vivid economic relations and lively cross-border cooperation.

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

The Hungarian–Czecho/Slovak mutual state border relations have to be understood as part of the Cold War overall 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 the inter-communist bloc relations on the other.

As it was beautifully described by Péter Becsik and Stefano Bottoni, the state border in *Komárno/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 Komárno the water of the river was swept with huge reflectors at night. In other cases, people, or livestock, or food was driven across the 200-300 metre wide border zone over the frozen water at 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 people's 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 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 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 Danube was inevitable.

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 of 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.⁴⁵

We have some delicate sources regarding the 'Komárom harbour of a prominent operative importance' which prove that secret service agents dispatched to *Komárno/Komárom* 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 Komárom. Here she was making a 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* 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 from the Hungarian authorities. This Securitate officer works under the coverage of the Navrom agency [a Romanian ship firm]'. As the document further states: 'The Romanian officer who works in Komárno, sends operative materials to Bucharest from time to time through the Czecho/Slovak state security services, and via this way he receives orders, and commands from the Romanian authorities.' Colonel Lajos Karasz had approved the operation on February 4, 1963.⁴⁶

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/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

⁴⁵ Open Society Archives Budapest. HU-OSA-300-8-13 RFE/RL Research Institute Publication Department East Europe Box 2, 1960 Feb, pp. 22-27.

⁴⁶ Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Leváltára, Budapest. O-dosszé, 12021 – Komáromi MÁV 1963.

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 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 officers can buy a personal car and can build a house within a year, despite having an official salary of some 1600 Kčs.⁴⁷

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.

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 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 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 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 Komárno/Komárom checkpoint, and within one year this number increased to 15 993 as far as personal cars were involved. (See Bottoni 2011, 148–151)

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 Komárno County (*in Slovak*:

⁴⁷ Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, Budapest. 3.1.2, M–41473 Kékduna tmb. dossziéja.

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 fulfil 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 Komárno there was only one hotel, Hotel Europa with the 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.⁴⁸

The National Committee of the Komárno County (*abbr.* NC), the political authority of the Komárno 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 cleaning the streets continuously (for the only main road from and to the border checkpoint lead right through the town centre), for maintaining the town parks, and for creating fast food facilities, etc. The members of the plenum of NC realised by sheer horror that if not them than no one 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.⁴⁹

A simple task for a town situated on the state border with a friendly country, the task to create a decent environment for passengers travelling by, made serious complications in people's 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 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 Komárno 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 the building of a car-camping near the

⁴⁸ Štátny okresný archív, pobočka Komárno. Fond Mestský národný výbor v Komárne. Zápisnice Rady ONV Komárno. „Zpráva o rozvoji cestovného ruchu...“ 17 January 1964.

⁴⁹ 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 the establishment and development of car-camping facilities in Czecho/Slovakia was assigned to the Svázarm, 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.⁵⁰

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 cost well over 15 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 until then the staff worked under the open air, 'from now on, the passport and customs control of the automobiles will take place under a high roof'.⁵¹

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.

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 is more an allied country, interestingly enough these documents which were meant 'for all per-

⁵⁰ Štátny okresný archív, pobočka Komárno. Fond Mestský národný výbor v Komárne. Zápisnice Rady ONV Komárno z 3 June 1966.

⁵¹ Štátny okresný archív, pobočka Komárno. Fond Colnic Komárno. Sprievodná zpráva k štúdiu Colnice Komárno z 6. septembra 1966, also some papers of Krajského plánovacieho úradu vo veci Colnice Komárno.

sonnel 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 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 practical activities regarding the liquidation works in areas attacked by atomic or chemical weapons'.⁵²

To conclude: 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 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 the National Defence and the Ministry of Interior of Hungary on 14 July 1965. In this letter, the Slovak political authorities of the region thanked 'for the help of the Armed forces of the PRH for their friendly international help during the flood in 1965'.⁵³

Again in 1968, it was the political crisis in Czecho/Slovakia that hindered the 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 18 Century huge fortress stretching over on both sides of the River Dabube. 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 was accessible only for their units too.

It is interesting to notice in the sources the kind of discussions that 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

⁵² Štátny okresný archív, pobočka Komárno. Fond Colnic Komárno. „Hlavní úkoly CO v celní správě na rok 1979. Tajné“ zo dňa 8. decembra 1978.

⁵³ Štátny okresný archív, pobočka Komárno. Fond Mestský národný výbor v Komárne. Zápisnice Pléna ONV Komárno z 14. júla 1965. „Vážení súdruhovia...“

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.⁵⁴

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 '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 visited 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, had to be invited to all public events. From the mid-1970s, the Soviet anthem was also routinely played on both sides of the border. On 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 meetings, the throwing 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 – in the harbour, on the surface road, and on the railway station – where illegal exchange of western luxury spirits and cigarettes and gadgets like wristwatches 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 to overcome it. A selected 'sect' from 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.

⁵⁴ Štátny okresný archív, pobočka Komárno. Fond Mestský národný výbor v Komárne. Zápisnice Pléna ONV Komárno z 26. júna 1968, alebo z 6. septembra 1968.

Conclusions

Our research has attracted some light to the East – West division during the Cold War. As Berthold Molden stated it: “Peoples of Eastern Europe are described as victims of Communism, innocent of repressions and economic stagnation. Hence, they were seen as European brothers and sisters who had fallen under the yoke of Bolshevik dictatorship, but who were really progressive and friendly people whose suffering had to be pitied.” (Molden 2008, 38) The account being quoted below suggests a similar situation, from the viewpoint of a ‘victim’ who used to be a conscript border guard at the Hungarian – Czechoslovak river border: “From the Austrian [*shipmen*] we only got... gifts. We went on board of their ship to search... Yeah, for we had to search or to handle the passports. There was an Austrian crew of six men, so you can imagine how ‘difficult’ it was to handle six passports, one had just put a stamp into them, and then you came off the ship. It wasn’t necessary to examine the ship, but indeed we had to do it. And then they told us not to go anywhere... Where in the hell would we go on board of an Austrian ship? They gave us... some..., some minor presents..., small ones but it meant very much to us in those times. [...] You got a Fa soap in 1981. You got some friendly words in Hungarian because they spoke some Hungarian. Or... a packet of Marlboro cigarettes [...] Now looking back, I remember a ship called Melk, and it was visible on the captain that he felt... deep sorry for us. I don’t exactly know in what way he felt sorry... but he did. He shook his head that it is not true what we want from them. He didn’t even understand it.” Yet, on the other side, when in 1989 free and democratic world came back to the lives of the *Komárom / Komárno* people, and even after the border checkpoints were dismantled in 2012, people in both towns still have serious problems to establish vivid relations with ‘the other side’.

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