

The Hungarian Railways in the Humanities

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This study² discusses how the rail is perceived in the humanities as a means of travel and a tool for everyday use. How can the railroad be a research topic in the humanities? This paper will present, starting with 1945, a brief history of the Hungarian railways up to the year 2000, including socio-geographical and ethnographic information on the subject. The purpose of this paper will be to demonstrate the administrative and social-shaping power of rail areas through the study of this specific local research of Hungarian railways.

The transport difficulties caused by the Trianon³ still exist in 2020 and to this day, there are no connecting lines between county seats in Hungary. During the Second World War, much of the railway ring going through today's Hungary, Romania, and Serbia was severely fragmented; nevertheless, ever since then, track reconstruction was one of the main tasks at the railway. The history of the Hungarian railways is descriptive, less exploratory or explanatory. However, my research has shown that, in addition to being descriptive, it also points to a relationship between several research hypotheses. In order to understand and examine the spatial planning dynamics of the railway, it is essential not only to be aware of the descriptive sources, historical literature, and primary

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² Studying railways is one of the most challenging research stances. It requires spontaneity, willingness to travel, humility, thorough background knowledge and, last but not least, knowledge of technical language. As it is said in Hungary, the railway and the railway society itself is a large family, which requires a consideration of their difficult work conditions. The researcher must join this family without having a traffic service exam and without fulfilling duties (as an employee). The biggest challenge is – drawing from personal experience – building trust.

³ The Trianon is a treaty dated June 4, 1920 by which Hungary lost $\frac{3}{4}$ of its territory. These areas were attached to neighbouring countries. See more: J. Woods, *When will Hungary get back its lost territories? Trianon is 99 yrs old*. 2019. <https://dailynewshungary.com/when-will-hungary-get-back-its-lost-territories-trianon-is-99-yrs-old/> (Accessed June 04, 2019).

sources, but also to search the local culture and history. This study reflects primarily on mobility and the resulting sociological indicators, as well as on how the humanities can benefit from a more in-depth and accurate view of the organization of the railways in the twenty-first century.

I. The place and role of the railway in research

In order to be able to discuss academically the spatial organization and the society of the railway, its history in Hungary cannot be neglected. According to the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, not only did the territory of Hungary become truncated, but the counties were displaced to the periphery, thus leaving settlements and villages without a centre. Thus, Csonka-Bihar and Csonka-Szatmár counties shared the railway ring road, half of which remained in Hungary, while the other half (the Gyula-Nagyvárad-Szatmárnémeti-Beregszász-Sátoraljaújhely-Kassa railway ring road⁴) became part of three other countries (Romania, Ukraine, Slovakia). In this respect, the railway became an oxymoron. After World War II, reconstruction was the primary goal so that both passenger and freight traffic could restart as soon as possible:

In the morning after the attack, those who came to work did not recognize the train station. The rails were reaching at the sky, the pieces of torn locomotives were thrown up by the air pressure to the top of the warehouse, the shards cutting through the thick steel of the wheels. (...) At first, after the liberation, the railway passengers tried to destroy the bomb funnels again, they searched in the debris for locomotives and wagons to be repaired, they tried to put the rails together by matching short pieces of rail, so that the first consignments of food could be sent to the capital from Dombóvár, Kanizsa, and Kiskunhalas.⁵

After World War II, manual labour was still used for reconstruction, but from the 1950s onwards, mechanization appeared in both track

⁴ I. Balcsók, B. Baranyai and L. Dancs “Hajdú Bihar megye. Bihari térség [Hajdú-Bihar county. The area of Bihar],” in *Magyarország kisrégiói 8/1* [The small regions of Hungary], ed. Sándor Kasza (Budapest: CEBA Kiadó, 2002), 12.

⁵ G. Moldova, *Akit a mozdony füstje megcsapott* [Who was struck by the smoke of the locomotive] (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1978), 17.

construction and rail-laying work.⁶ In the 1970s, railway bridges and overpasses existed for the transport service, of which a significant role was given to the southern rail connecting the Danube bridge, the Keleti-Főcsatorna (Eastern main canal) bridge, the Övcsatorna canal bridge, the Mura bridge, etc.⁷ From the second half of the 1950s, service and station buildings started to be built, including the station building of the city of Debrecen (built between 1958 and 1960), which is still a remarkable building to this day. By the 1960s and 1970s, even smaller stations incorporated buildings from where traffic was controlled. Two significant buildings need to be highlighted: one is the passenger hall of the Budapest-Southern Railway Terminal (Budapest-Déli pályaudvar), whose image has hardly changed in the twenty-first century. The Budapest-Southern Railway Terminal is one of the most important railway terminals of the capital. The other significant building is that of the station in Szolnok, whose external and internal façades have not changed since construction in 1975. Szolnok is a key hub, as it connects the eastern, western, southern, and northern parts of the country. Of course, the railway has several similar railway junctions, but this one plays a cardinal role in the railway traffic of Eastern Hungary.⁸ In addition to the reconstructions, MÁV (Magyar Államvasutak, the Hungarian State Railways) also took great care of the protection of monuments, so the building of the Kálcsa station was adorned with folk art motifs.⁹ At the same time, in addition to new building constructions, traffic technology and machinery also developed, and steamers were replaced with diesel and electric machines. Furthermore, in terms of passenger comfort, the dynamics of travel also changed: namely, InterCity trains and higher-speed tracks appeared.

The railway “world” is not solely technical, but also includes a less researched group in the society: the railroad workers and their families. Prior to the year 2000, research was not significantly focused on exploring this closed micro-society, although sociology, linguistics, and ethnography all study the world of railways: jargon, uniforms, customary world, railway time, group and micro-social dynamics, as well as the

⁶ *A 125 éves MÁV* [The 125 year-old MÁV], József Csiba, Marianne Koltai, István Mezei, ed. (Budapest: MÁV Rt., 1993), fig. 431-439.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*, figs. 445, 448, 450.

⁹ *Ibidem*, fig. 457.

settlement-forming power of railway buildings and, within linguistics, the interpretation of the railway signalling system. One does not need to be a railroad worker to encounter this sign system. In order to avoid ambiguity and standardization, the railway is working with a particular signalling system which can cause a communication problem for travellers. The first step to solving the communication problems between the railway and the passengers, in terms of research, was done through three studies which will be presented in the followings.

One of the studies, *Szemed a pályán legyen! Mozdonyfüstös néprajz*¹⁰ was published in 2017. This publication was preceded by a series titled *Talpfák – Ties*¹¹ and by György Moldova's *Akát a mozdony füstje megcsapott*¹² All three discuss the railways which, although shaped by external factors (laws, social organization, economic development, innovation), are still static. Today, locomotive engineers, traffic managers (*forgalmi szolgálattevők*), ticket inspectors, yard-masters (*tolatásvezetők*), and railroad officers still exist. These fundamental railroad “pillars” have not changed and they continue to fulfil their mission: transportation.

The authors of the *Szemed a pályán legyen! Mozdonyfüstös néprajz* and *Talpfák* argue that railways have always been slow to respond to changes and increased demands. This is especially true for passenger transport, which is still provided by the Hungarian State Railways. Freight traffic in Hungary is carried out by private railway companies or their subsidiaries, so there is a sharp separation within the group of locomotive engineers. MÁV's fleet is developing slowly, and this is particularly true with regard to railway wagons. Furthermore, MÁV realized in 2014 that it was necessary to open up to the traveling public in order for them to understand the reasons for the permanent delays.¹³ Therefore, there was a change in MAV's communication strategy, both internally and externally. The title of a study published in 2017, is also highly suggestive: “Keep your eyes on the road!” (*Szemed a pályán legyen!*).¹⁴ Indeed, initiates are aware that this is a constant call to locomotive engineers, even in the

¹⁰ *Szemed a pályán legyen! Mozdonyfüstös néprajz* [Keep your eyes on the road! Locomotive smoke ethnography], ed. Géza Balázs, Gergely Molnár (Budapest: Magyar Szemiotikai Társaság, 2017).

¹¹ *Talpfák* [Ties], ed. János Bali, György Máté (Budapest: ELTE BTK Néprajzi Intézet, 2008).

¹² G. Moldova, *Akát a mozdony füstje megcsapott*.

¹³ In 2015, MÁV's website was renewed: <https://www.mavcsoport.hu/>.

¹⁴ *Szemed a pályán legyen! Mozdonyfüstös néprajz*, ed. Géza Balázs, Gergely Molnár.

driver's seat. In addition, many locomotive-built features help the commander so that he does not lose sight of his duties. The study titled "Eyes on the road!" (*Szemed a pályán legyen!*) presents railway ethnography in a more scientific way.¹⁵ Furthermore, it presents the anthropology of the railways and the extent to which the railroad is an interdisciplinary issue. The contributors to this study stress the extent to which railroads or line closures affect the lives of individual areas, while also discussing the semiotics of railroads, the linguistic specificity of railroad jargon, or railroad caricatures. The authors also present the architecture of the existing switchman houses as the remains of station buildings and of a bygone age. Their conclusion is that railway workers form a social class which is rarely researched and mentioned in literature. However, much has been written¹⁶ on railway language, vocabulary, its intimate content, and its place in the standard language of everyday life. In general, the primary factor that triggers railway language is having a railroad worker in one's family. Sooner or later, relatives will have to adjust to the railway's rhythm, including vocabulary.

György Moldova's book¹⁷ is the first sociographic study whose author holds a MÁV credential in the field. The sociographic study presents in full detail throughout six chapters the Hungarian railway world of the 1970s. The first chapter represents a cornerstone for the beginning of railroad sociology studies. Its title is "Traffic must go!" (in Hungarian, "A forgalomnak menni kell!"¹⁸) in which Moldova presents the Budapest-Ferencváros train station. Why was it important and a priority to start the presentation with Ferencváros? Firstly, the title of the chapter is a quote of a station manager who helped Moldova with his research; and secondly, Ferencváros connects the western and eastern parts of Hungary, both in freight and passenger traffic.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ See: O. Papp, *Vasutasszlang* [The slang of the railwayman], 2015. http://mnytud.arts.klte.hu/szlang/szakdolgo/papp_olivia-vasutasszlang.pdf. See also: Z. Ercsey, M. Kisteleki, T. Vincze, *Lassíjelek hatásai a vasúti közlekedés költségeire* [The impact of slow signals on rail transport costs], 2013 <http://www.sinekvilaga.hu/dr.-ercsey> (Accessed September 05, 2020).

¹⁷ G. Moldova, *Akát a mozdony füstje megcsapott*.

¹⁸ Ibidem, 7.

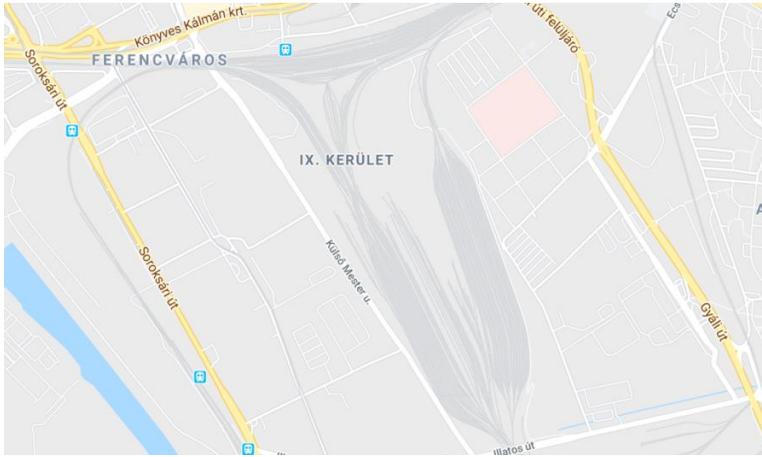


Fig. 1. Map of Ferencváros¹⁹

Even decades after Moldova's research, the critical role of Ferencváros has not changed. The centre of freight traffic remains Budapest IX. district, Ferencváros, with even the other main railway stations in the city not being as important. Moldova, through the railway workers he had interviewed, is a great example of the fact that being a railroader in Ferencváros is not only a profession, but a way of life. The concept of train-free time in Ferencváros is unknown, because if the focus is not on passenger transport, it is on freight. Furthermore, Ferencváros is more than a traditional station, more than a directing station, and more than a west-east link. Because it performs many functions, a high number of employees work in Ferencváros day and night. This led to it becoming a city within a city, encompassing a workers' hostel, a house of culture (railway houses of culture can be found in several cities, including Szolnok and Debrecen), and other civil facilities that serve railwaymen and their families.²⁰

György Moldova further discusses the topic, stressing the group of train drivers, the attributes of the micro-society, as well as issues of track

¹⁹ Map of Ferencváros. Source: <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Budapest,+IX.+ker%C3%BClet/@47.461387,19.0877187,15z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0x4741dd23b15f80d1:0x500c4290c1ed5c0!8m2!3d47.4649279!4d19.0916229> (Accessed June 05, 2020).

²⁰ T. Tokai, *Ha a 201-es váltó mesélni tudna* [If the no. 201 switch could tell its story], <http://iho.hu/hir/ha-a-201-es-valto-meselni-tudna-150405> (Accessed April 05, 2015).

maintenance and hospital care for railway workers. Moldova thus perfectly illustrates that the railway group is a society within a society.

II. The railway as primary source in local research

Railways play a decisive role in urban studies and social geography, as they allow large municipal administrative settlements to transform into cities. This is the case of Vámospércs, one of the stations of the railway line 105, located in Hajdú-Bihar County, about 20 kilometres from the city of Debrecen (Fig. 2), along the main road 48. As it is located in the peripheral territory of Hungary, the railway has saved it from depopulation, as well as from the closure of the railway lines that took place in the 2000s. Railway line 105 has been serving the city of Vámospércs for over 100 years. In addition to passenger traffic, international freight traffic also runs on the line, which is served by MÁV and other private railway companies. The line is not electrified, so only diesel machines are part of the rolling stock. Before 1920, trade and large-scale exchange of goods represented the real turnover on this line, as Nagykaroly and Érmihályfalva held trade fairs.²¹ This railway line escaped the horrors of the Second World War, after which the three settlements of Nyírac nád, Nyír ábrány, and Vámospércs started to grow steadily and eventually gained the rank of cities in the 1990s. Nyír ábrány is a border settlement with an international border crossing, along railway line 105. As Nyírac nád was the smallest of the three, until 1923, it only had a small railway which served freight traffic and later developed to serve passenger transport as well – thus the inhabitants of the settlement and the surrounding homesteads reached Debrecen via this small railway. In the 1930s, tourists also used the narrow-gauge railway of Nyírac nád. On the basis of a 1968 decision, traffic on this narrow-gauge line ceased on the 31st of August 1977. The forest of Gút, originally crossed by the rail, was declared protected:

The railway affected many homesteads and villages, as there were numerous market passengers, including people traveling going to work and school. After the railway was closed, the farmers were left without a means of transport.

²¹ I. Dankó, “Vámospércs a dualizmus korában (1849-1914)” [Vámospércs in the age of dualism (1849-1914)], in *Vámospércs története* [The history of Vámospércs], ed. István Gazdag (Vámospércs: Vámospércs Nagyközség Önkormányzata, 1995), 53-71.

The last loaded freight train arrived at the Debrecen-Fatelep station.²²

This decision somewhat predestined Nyírac nád's development path, as it was deprived of its transportation point that would have helped its economic progress and population retention. The closure of the railway line resulted in its neighbour, Vámospércs, becoming the centre in the region. One of the inhabitants of Vámospércs recalls the closure of the Gút narrow-gauge railway as follows:

It started with the construction of a road between the settlements, because there was a dirt road between Vámospércs and Nyírmártonfalva. Practically from that point onwards, Vámospércs became a centre, because you did not have to wait for the light railway, the Zsuzsi train, to take you to Debrecen, because the population of Nyírac nád, Nyírmártonfalva, and Gút commuted to Debrecen by small railway. From then on, when the asphalt road was completed, Debrecen became more accessible and these small towns were able to develop better.²³

The railway line stretched between Debrecen and Nyírbélték, but the track remained only between Debrecen and Hármashatárhegy, which is 16.6 kilometres long, as the rest was demolished.²⁴ The section of the narrow-gauge railway that has survived to this day is shown in Fig. 2 in light grey, right below the red line (making both red and light grey lines still in use today); whereas the black line (the traffic between Hárashégyalja and Nyírbélték) shows the part of the line which is not in use anymore.

²² Zsuzsi Forest Railway. *History of Zsuzsi*. <https://zsuzsivasut.hu/a-zsuzsi-vasut-tortenete/> (Accessed September 05, 2020).

²³ Interview detail, November 2017. These interviews were conducted in the framework of an ethnographic research between 2016-2019. I did the interviews myself. The topic of the interviews was urban renewal. The quote is from a 53-year-old man who lives in Vámospércs.

²⁴ Zsuzsi Forest Railway. *History of Zsuzsi*. <https://zsuzsivasut.hu/a-zsuzsi-vasut-tortenete/> (Accessed September 05, 2020).

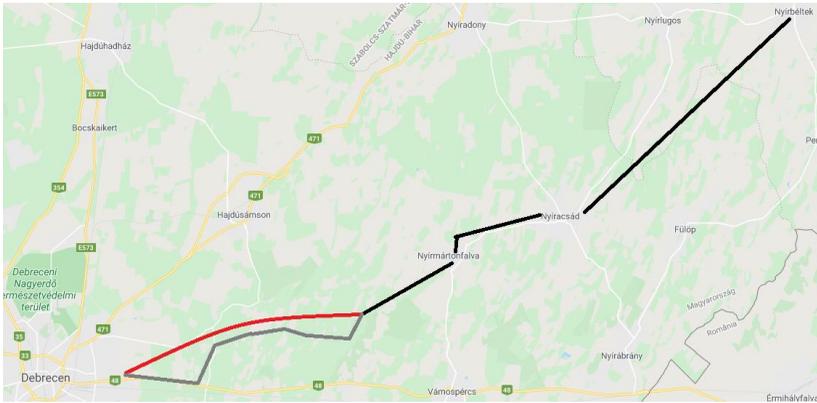


Fig. 2. Map of the small railway.²⁵ The route of the Zsuzsi forest railway between Debrecen and Hármashegyalja. The black line between Hármashegyalja and Nyírbétek shows the traffic is not operating anymore on that section.

III. Concluding remarks – railways and the humanities

The railway therefore not only belong to the fields of technical sciences and history, but can also be studied in sociology, linguistics, ethnography, and psychology. Of course, the issue of the relevance of research and usability arises. The researcher acts as a bridge between science and society, thus bringing the closed world of the railway closer to the users of the railway, that is, the passengers. The micro-world created by railways, including buildings, railway legends, railway families, as well as micro-historical events, have only recently gained research relevance. Furthermore, György Moldova points out that the impact of terminated, closed railway lines on local society is major.²⁶ Every element of the railway not only offers a research topic for the past, but also serves for present-day research.

²⁵ Self-edited map. Map source: <https://www.google.com/maps/@47.6333693,21.8518864,11.5z> (Accessed June 05, 2020).

²⁶ Internet availability of Moldova's book: http://vilir.gportal.hu/portal/vilir/upload/717530_1327607724_07294.pdf. See pages 295-327.

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