



The activity and memory of Dr. István Batka in the light of health tourism in Makó

Vivien Apjok *

* University of Szeged, Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to provide an overview of the aspect of the work of Dr. István Batka (1896-1971) from Makó, who founded the spa tourism of today with the help of medicinal water and medicinal mud. The paper is compiled based on sources, basically in the framework of interpreting Batka's memory. The aim of this short article is to place Dr. Batka's research in a local historical and recent context and to point out the manifestations of his memory that lives on to this day.

A few memoirs (Dehelán 2012, Medgyesi 2012) have already been written about the life and work of Dr. István Batka (1896-1971, a chief rheumatologist in Makó, Hungary), and his name can be found even more often in various local history and medical writings. In my short study, I attempt to summarize the manifestations of the (collective) remembrance¹ associated with him, and to review how his activities and research results influenced his time, how he founded today's spa culture in Makó, built on health tourism, and where this can be placed on the horizon of the town's tourism² aspirations.

Dr. István Batka was born in Makó, and apart from his university studies, he lived and worked in his hometown until his death (Dehelán 2012). Research on the healing effects of Maros mud can be linked to his name, as a result of which in 1961, with the permission of the Ministry of Health, the extraction of mud from the Maros River under the name "Marosi mud" began (Tóth 2008, Apjok 2018). In addition, Batka researched the healing effects of onions in Makó, the possibilities of using them for medical purposes, took part in the launch of the 'school milk program', which later swelled to a national scale, and he counts both his contemporaries and posterity as a local patriot, a model citizen, and a living yet humane and kind person of his vocation (Dehelán 2012, YouTube 2014). An important milestone in his oeuvre is the launch of a rheumatology clinic at the Makó Hospital (Medgyesi 2012, Youtube 2012b), but he also developed the concept of a spa culture and tourism based on thermal water and Maros mud, took an active part in the creation of the spa, and his dream was to open a rheumatism hospital built on natural resources of Makó (Medgyesi 2012, Youtube 2014).

"Medicinal mud is a medicinal preparation, the effect of which is confirmed by folk medicine and literature data. [...] Recognized medicinal mud is used in several Hungarian spas and spa hotels. The use of medicinal muds in treatments is equivalent to bathing in hot springs that break up naturally. Healing with sludge is ensured by the mineral content in the mud, its heat storage capacity, and its deep warming, stiffness-relieving and blood-inducing effect through slow heat transfer. Mud-cure is mainly used for chronic diseases of the joints and spine, gout and sports injuries." (termalfurdo.hu n.d) Today, seven muds have a Hungarian official permit, which can legally use the prefix "medicinal" – six of which are related to Hungarian settlements. In

addition to the “Marosi” bound to Makó, the medicinal muds are “Kolopi” (Tizzasüly), “Hajdúszoboszló” (Hajdúszoboszló), “Georgikon” and “Szent András” (Alsópáhok), as well as the “Kazár” bentonite powder (Kazár) (termalonline.hu 2020). Based on the recollections of István Batka, he made observations about the healing effects of the mud in the Maros riverbed as a child (Medgyesi 2012), from which we can conclude that it was already used for recreational and spontaneous rehabilitation purposes³ at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. In addition to István Batka, Dr. Ferenc Tóth (1928-2018), an ethnographer and local historian from Makó, also observed that bathers on the Maros coast (peasants dealing mainly with onions) smeared their joints with blue mud, waited until it was completely dry, and then washed off (Tóth 2008). Thereafter, well-being and pain relief were reported. Similarly, the healing effects of Kolop mud were discovered based on folk observation (Garamvölgyi-Dankó and Barabás 2018). It also appears in oral recollections (in the interviews I have made) and in fragmentary archival sources,⁴ that the mud-cure “pulls fatigue out of the person”, “relieves aching joint pain”. Based on the local application and observations, Batka first performed his own experiment,⁵ then the mud was tested by several institutions: the Hungarian State Institute of Geology and the National Institute of Rheumatism and Spas determined the therapeutic effect, the Hungarian State Eötvös Loránd Geophysical Institute determined the radioactivity, the Public Health and Epidemiology Station stated that the substance does not contain pathogens, and finally, with the permission of the Ministry of Health, extraction from the river was permitted from 1961 (Medgyesi 2001, Tóth 2008, Apjok 2018).

A few years earlier (in 1955), the wells of the spa, opened in 1962, were also drilled with the professional assistance of Batka.⁶ Batka saw the future of Makó in spa development and the introduction of “spa tourism” based on the healing effects of water and mud. In 1968, he published an 83-page manuscript detailing “the five-year process of classifying medicinal mud, his struggle for rheumatism hospital until 1968, in which he describes the possible benefits of becoming a spa town and explains that he does all this “for the future of Makó” (Medgyesi 2012: 6). The declaration of Makó as a spa town was an issue on the agenda of the local governance at that time, and finally the implementation was postponed due to the deficiencies of the settlement infrastructure. However, the development of the spa and the construction of health services based on thermal water and medicinal mud were already envisaged in a broader perspective, and was considered crucial not only in the rehabilitation of the locals but also in the domestication of tourism.⁷

In 1988, the thermal water of Makó was also declared medicinal under the registration number VII/511 (gyogyviz.hu n.d.), and in 1991, the spa was awarded the District-Classified Spa certification (Makói Hírek 2008). István Batka could not experience this, but his desire for health treatments in Makó based on medicinal mud and thermal water can be considered fulfilled. The Hagymatikum Spa complex,⁸ which opened in 2012 and was built according to the plans of Imre Makovecz,⁹ consciously offers health services not only locally but regionally, nationally, and even internationally (hagymatikum.hu 2020, Apjok 2020). The main profile of tourism built on Hagymatikum is health preservation and rehabilitation, which also appeared in the plans of István Batka about 50 years earlier. The Maros medicinal mud still appears regularly in the local and regional press, in the national press, and is featured prominently on the websites dealing with spas and balneology, as well as among touristic and accommodation offers. The “miracle” adjunctive appears several times in the press, that Maros medicinal mud is “worth its weight in gold”, is unique; and these articles also refer to the specificity of the recent local “extraction mode” (collection from the floodplain after flooding) (Tamás 2020, ÉR. 2017, Bertus-Barcza 2013, Szabó 2007, Szabó 2009). The healing effects and components of the Hungarian muds are listed on the various medical and balneological websites, where the Maros medicinal mud is also mentioned (axibient.hu n.d, termalonline.hu 2020, gyogyhelyek.hu 2015, termalfurdo.hu n.d). The references of the local, regional and national websites and recommenders dealing with Makó as a tourist destination (mako.hu n.d, szallas.hu n.d, hungarycard.hu 2019, szentgellertborhaz.hu n.d, datekla.eu n.d, makotel.hu n.d, termesztjaro.hu n.d, univcoupon.hu n.d, szegedtourism.hu n.d, hotelcorvus.hu n.d, programturizmus.hu 2020) also allow us to conclude that the product is organically connected to the image of the settlement as a tourist landscape (imaginary landscape).¹⁰ It can be observed that in many cases the texts are taken from the same turns, and the “desire for healing”, the uniqueness of the combination of medicinal mud and water, the possibility of its complex use appear in all of them.

Since 9 May 2014, a bronze bust of dr. István Batka in the square in front of the Hagymatikum Spa has testifies that the initiation of rheumatic treatments and the work related to the research of medicinal mud have survived in the local memory, its maintenance is emphasized by this act, which also manifests itself through

symbolic space occupation.¹¹ On the pedestal of the statue (next to his name and years of birth and death) is the inscription “the discoverer of Maros medicinal mud”, thus clearly marking the content of the memory for spa visitors or walkers in Makovecz Square. The publication of the Miklós Szirbik Association, which presents the sculptures of Makó with pictures and descriptions, points out that that Batka “did not receive official recognition in his life - but grateful posterity, however, erected a statue in his honor at the wing of the building of the medical department of the Hagymatikum Spa” (Oláh et al. 2018: 26). This designation is also a kind of symbolic indication that, although Batka’s dream of a rheumatism hospital has not come true, but in the function of the spa, the former ideas of the physician were still objectified. Batka is also referred to as the “father of Maros medicinal mud” or the “father of balneotherapy in Makó” (Medgyesi 2012), and memorial conferences were held in his honor at both the József Attila Museum and the Makó Hospital. The legacy of István Batka appears in connection with the commemorative sessions and in the statements of Dr. Sára Széll, today’s chief rheumatologist in Makó (YouTube 2012a, YouTube 2012b). Behind the rheumatology department, rehabilitation treatments, there is still Batka’s activity and memory; the staff and doctors of the hospital apparently consciously manage the funds laid by István Batka. Mention of medicinal mud (e.g. in TV interviews, articles mentioned above) is always accompanied by mention of Batka’s name, as related to the creation of the spa, and in the case of health tourism.

In the middle of the 2000s, the town administration marked tourism as a new strategy that could be a breaking point for Makó, which is no longer wanted to be hallmarked only with onions (Apjok 2020). The issues of the exciting, intertwined, competing and stacking phenomena of onions and tourism are the subject of another paper. However, I would like to draw attention to that that before the construction of the Hagymatikum Spa the local governance published an information and summary publication with the title “Let Makó be a spa town!”, which was also made available online, and in which the need for spa development and the long-term economic benefits of the project were justified by marking the historical antecedents and referring to the work of István Batka (Kovács Istvánné 2008). Although the text does not directly refer to either the 83-page plan compiled by Batka or the spa development concepts of the 1960s (certainly these resources were not in their possession), at the same time, the history of the Maros medicinal mud and medicinal water and the role of István Batka were emphasized in outlining the concept and informing the population of Makó. This also suggests that the work of István Batka was considered a decisive antecedent of the development of spa tourism in the 21st century.

The aim of my study was to outline the role of Dr. István Batka, his work and the significance of his research results in the contemporary and historical aspects of spa and health tourism in Makó; as well as highlighting his memory that exists to this day. It can be seen that István Batka’s research on medicinal mud and thermal water has not only survived in the local memory, but his person and work are a point of reference for today’s hospital rheumatology and rehabilitation professionals. This is reflected not only in the organization of the commemorative sessions, but also in the fact that the István Batka memorial room was planned in the hospital with the consent of the family (YouTube 2012b). The public sculpture erected directly in front of the spa (especially the spa doctor department) also shows the importance of maintaining the remembrance culture related to Batka, since choosing the place not only allows acquaintances and admirers to remember it, but at the same time conveys to everyone (Makó people and tourists) how the “discoverer of Maros medicinal mud” has contributed to making local natural values in the public interest. The location of the statue in front of the Hagymatikum can also be interpreted as a tribute not only to the discovery of the medicinal mud, but also to the whole spa town/tourism concept, which could not be realized in the life of István Batka. Finally, here is a quote about him that not only praises Batka’s work, but also connects the mosaics of past, present and future, health and tourism: “*It is obvious that István Batka created a lasting impression in the case of the Maros medicinal mud, and we can hope that in the future he will play a role in the treatment of patients in Makó, and even in the rise of medical tourism.*” (Medgyesi 2012: 10).

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24. 03. 2020)

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24. 07. 2020)

ABBREVIATIONS

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- MNL CSML ML CSMVCSMV – Hungarian National Archives, Archive of Csongrád-Csanád County, Account Archive of Makó, Csongrád County Water and Sewerage Company
- MNL CSML ML MVT VB - Hungarian National Archives, Archive of Csongrád-Csanád County, Account Archive of Makó, Council of Makó, Executive Committee

JEGYZETEK

¹ “Social memory [...] was conceived as a combination of certain social practices, such as commemoration and monument building, and more general cultural constructs, such as tradition, myth, and identity. They were approached from the perspectives of sociology, historical science, literary criticism, anthropology, psychology, art history, and political science, among others. [...] A contemporary interpretation of the term is usually traced back to Maurice Halbwachs, referring to his 1925 paper justifying the social determinacy of memory. [...] Halbwachs defined the concept of collective memory not only beyond philosophy, but also in opposition to psychology, although the term social memory itself corresponds to the terminology of psychology. [...] Halbwachs characterizes collective memory as the plural; shows that shared memories can be effective tools for social differentiation. [...] Assmann distinguishes between four modes of memory when attempting to embrace the problem of memory: 1. mimetic memory - the transfer of practical knowledge of the past; 2. material memory - the history contained in the objects; 3. communicative memory - remnants of the past in language and communication, including the ability to communicate in language itself; and 4. cultural memory - which is the transmission of past meanings, i.e., spoken historical references and historical consciousness.” (Olick and Robbins n.d)

² Tourism is a multisectoral system that is more or less closely related to many activities and phenomena, and thus, in addition to economics, geography as well as ethnography and cultural anthropology also examine certain aspects. From an anthropological point of view, its significance lies in the fact that “tourism is a symptomatic phenomenon that goes far beyond itself and that the study of tourist travel can be seen as a kind of entry point for understanding society as a whole.” (Régi 2017: 11). Transformation is an essential and common element of the literature approaches dealing with tourism, and in our case it may be valid that tourism is the result of social transformation and also the cause of environmental and social transformations (Régi 2017).

³ Recreation: “In leisure time, all cultural, social, playful and mobile activities performed by a person in order to relieve the fatigue and tension caused by the main daily activities, to restore and increase physical and mental performance and ability.” (Fritz n.d) Rehabilitation: “By medical rehabilitation we mean the activity that medicine provides to its disabled people with their own tools (diagnosis, therapy, prevention, care) in order to regain their independence in part or in full and become able to integrate into the family, workplace and society by developing their existing skills. Its essence is therefore the accurate assessment of existing functions and performance (condition assessment), compensatory development and training.” (Papp 2014).

⁴ We have fragmentary resources about the history of the use of medicinal mud, which we must look for primarily in human memory. Certainly, new data about unexpected places may constantly appear, so I did not even keep in mind the need for a comprehensive historical examination in this dissertation. However, I would like to draw your attention to a fragment of data that I heard at the end of August 2019, in the presentation of Gábor Ferenc Kiss at the Ópusztaszer National Heritage Park: it appears in a letter written to the family by a soldier from Elek who was stationed in Makó during World War II, to relieve his fatigue, smeared his joints with blue mud of river Maros, and experienced an improvement in his well-being. Looking at the period, this data fits into the line of knowledge about medicinal mud from the memories of the 1940s and 50s. I would like to thank Gábor Ferenc Kiss for his valuable contribution and presentation. Also see Szóts 2019.

⁵ He put coins on the X-ray film and a bag of mud on it, and the form of the money was drawn on the film developed a few days later (Tóth 2008, Apjok 2018).

⁶ MNL CSML ML CSMVCSMV protocol 58/1955.

⁷ MNL CSML ML MVT VB protocol, decree 34/1969.

⁸ The name Hagymatikum contains the word ‘hagyma’ which is the Hungarian word for onions.

⁹ Hungarian architect, born in 1935 in Budapest. He is also referred to as the “master of Hungarian organic architecture”. In Makó, buildings and squares of urban significance preserve the memory of his work. The design of the Hagymatikum Spa in Makó was one of his last works before his death in 2011 (makoveczimre.hu n.d)

¹⁰ An imaginary landscape is a social landscape concept and perception of space, “a historically embedded, social construction, an imaginary world full of action-driven images that motivate people to take certain actions, such as migrating from one place to another, visiting different tourist destinations or consuming. Some of the action control images draw from the region’s own culture, such as ethnographic and historical data [...]” See Lajos and Nemes 2020.

¹¹ “...the activity and creativity in the symbolic sphere in the region, even after a quarter of a century, produces a lively, symbolic event in terms of both content and form. Above all, symbolic events that are tied to “places” and take place in accordance with the practice of “symbolic space occupation” typical of the area. The list of events is very long: we can experience a series of regional or local symbolic celebrations, sculpture and memorial exhibitions, festive commemorations, events, shrine exhibitions, naming ceremonies, street and square renaming, memorial plaque inaugurations. At the same time, the increasing use of symbolic objects and actions in connection with priority spaces and occasions can be linked to these occasions.” (Bodó and Biró 2017: 147).