

Viktória Terendi: Changes in the lifestyle of families in Hódmezővásárhely in the 20th century,
in the light of their visual family histories
Extract of PhD thesis

The doctoral thesis explores the characteristics of lifestyle and the changes that took place in the 20th century in the case of five families in Hódmezővásárhely, through specialised sources: visual family histories (private photo collections and the related narratives).¹ The study was based on visual ethnography, but due to the complexity of the subject, it also used approaches from history, sociology and memory studies.

It's main hypothesis is that during the 20th century the lifestyle of families in Hódmezővásárhely changed due to various micro-level (internal) and macro-level (external) factors, and all these characteristics are reflected in the visual family history.

The study showed that the chosen source – through its complex mix of content – confirmed the premise and provided insights into the different characteristics of the 20th century lifestyles of the examined families, such as the family structure, social situation, housing style, space use, activity structure, relationship system and living conditions. The longitudinal study revealed the details of the processes of change, their consequences and the external and internal factors behind them.

The source material shed light on the problem under study from a micro-level perspective, however it touched the macro-level factors affecting the way of life and living conditions, such as social mobility, power interventions, wars, and economic processes. These factors appeared strongly in the narrations, but contrary the previous opinions, they were also clearly found in the visual references.

Overall, this means that, although it was not possible to explore the whole of life, or to be representative, the deep-drilling analysis of the chosen source revealed new perspectives, new details of known contexts, and thus allowed a different level of detail to be given to a problem often discussed in the history of science.

The most important results of the analysis:

Lifestyles of the examined families were primarily affected if their social status, profession, or financial situation changed as a result of internal motivation or external intervention. The analysis showed that, these changes led to transitions between lifestyle types in the first decades of the 20th century, but later associated more with social mobility and the adaptation to a new social milieu. In the second half of the century, a kind of homogenisation took place as a result of the central power's aspirations, which reduced the differences between the typical lifestyle elements of the different social strata of the studied group. The studied material shows that the change in living conditions has also been achieved in the long term through modernisation and mechanisation. The pace at which a given family followed the development of technology, infrastructure and the stock of objects depended on financial possibilities, individual attitudes and the consumption strategies.

The examined visual family histories suggested that wars (when they were not accompanied by death of a family member) and economic crises tended to have an isolated impact on the life of a micro-community. In contrast, the living conditions of the studied families were determined in the longer term by the interventions of the current regime in power. The life strategy of these families was basically characterized by adapting to the given conditions, avoiding conflicts, and striving for stability and well-being for the sake of themselves and especially of their children.

The analysis revealed that the impact and outcome of macro-historical events, although outside the scope of the micro level, depended to a large extent on the individual or family's stance on the world and their position in the given life situation. This in turn affected the way in which the family history recorded and interpreted the experience and the consequence.

¹ The analytical sample consisted of 1,190 paper photographs and a 529 pages of transcripts of interviews recording the narratives they elicited.