

Dávid Furmann: The Village and the University: the Model of Sajópálfala

Sajópálfala is situated at the heart of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County, in the Northeastern region of Hungary. The village with its 900 inhabitants can be found 12 km from Miskolc, which is the central city of the county. The region is considered to be one of the poorest areas of the country and even the European Union. This area used to be the industrial centre of Hungary during the socialist era. The change of regime paradoxically brought the opening of possibilities and the collapse of the heavy industry at the same time, triggering large-scale unemployment that still poses a huge problem in the area.

'Getting up from the floor' has been a part of the traditions of Sajópálfala for centuries. Since the Tartar invasion during the 13th century all the major disasters of Hungarian history have affected the small village. One of the most symbolic revivals in local history was the repopulation of the area by Russian settlers following the Turkish period. The uprising against the Ottoman Empire started with the refusal to pay taxes to the Turks and ended with the setting of the whole village on fire, which caused the total depopulation of the area. The new settlers - also mentioned as 'Slovakians' by some contemporary sources - were not integrated into the feudal system of the 1700s and obtained the rare privilege of having their own farms. This inspired a long-term development of the 'citoyenneté' until World War II and made Sajópálfala very different from other settlements of the neighbourhood. Afterwards, this prosperous, market-based agriculture was destroyed by the communist tyranny and the formation of the so-called 'cooperative farms'. Due to the forced industrialization of the area the everyday life of the 900 inhabitants became similar to that of the traditional mining towns of the region. The men worked in the factories and industrial sector, while the women worked in the fields doing agricultural work. Household farming was the only thing, which could survive state socialism.

In accordance with the ruling doctrines of the early 70's, Sajópálfala lost its autonomy and became a so-called 'attached settlement' with the neighbouring Arnót, which was a great setback for the public administration of the village. Since then the Greek Orthodox Church has been the only force of cohesion in the life of the community. The strong faith of the people and the cultural and social functions of religion were the basic pillars that saved Sajópálfala from total disintegration.

The primary school

In the year 1990 the village took the opportunity to restore its former autonomy. Like in several small settlements of the country, the change of regime made possible a wide range of infrastructural investments and the construction of the whole network of public services starting with the sewerage system to the cable network and so on. The effects of the collapse of heavy industry that led to unemployment lessened a little bit due to the survival of household farming, already mentioned above, especially in comparison with the great industrial centres of the county.

The first democratically elected government put major emphasis on the importance of intellectual infrastructure, in addition to the material one, in disadvantaged small settlements. So as a part of the grand school construction project of the early 90's the building of a primary school began in Sajópálfala. At that

time the number of first-form pupils was above 30, but by the time the building was completed, it decreased to five, which was not enough to begin the school year. So the inaugurated building remained empty for years.

The university

Meanwhile, in Miskolc the local scientific institution, the University of Miskolc (the former University of Heavy Industry) had to meet the changed requirements of a new era. Since the establishment of the Faculty of Law in the mid-80s, the former technological profile has changed. After the change of regime the emerging need for competitive knowledge urged the establishment of further faculties, just like the Faculty of Arts that also included the Faculty of Social Sciences. By the end of the decade, the Sociology Department has gradually changed its rather theoretical orientation to a more practical one with exact specializations such as regional development, ethnic minority studies and so on. This radical change caused an increasing need for local workshops.

By this time the management of the university had already come to know about the empty building in Sajópálfala. The interests of the university met the requirements of the local government; Rector Lajos Bessenyei and Major Tamás Kovács established the Social Research Centre of the University of Miskolc in Sajópálfala, and Mrs. Márta Pankucsi (who is also the head of the Sociology Department) became the director and manager of the Centre.

Since then a wide range of conferences and other scientific meetings have been held at the Centre. The theme of 'Digital Village' was a discussion held between highly educated experts and majors of twelve villages from the so-called strategic micro-region, which was concerned with how the small settlements could benefit the most from the possibilities of the information society and the brand-new means of informational technology.

The University and the local community

"Sociology is the self-discovery of modern society" - this sentence has gained approval several times during the first workshop of the research group that involved both professors and students. This research was aimed at mapping the local resources that focus on human factors, and regarded material and human resources equally important. Some results of the research, such as the high rate of graduated people (highly above the national average even including cities and the capital), would have surprised even the inhabitants.

The major moral and religious authority of the community is still the Greek Orthodox Church, which has also been the main instigator of the highly developed civic attitude and spiritual cohesion that is mostly apparent in the way people here take care of the sick or elderly. A good example for this attitude was when the inhabitants rented a bus to travel to Debrecen, where they offered to donate their blood for a very sick person from Sajópálfala being treated at the Hospital of Debrecen. From among all the researches being in progress one of the long-term development strategies concerns that of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County.

'Academic Lectures in Sajópálfala' is a project in which scientists from very different areas make presentations for the inhabitants of the village about their domains. One of these lectures was about Benefit

Societies (BS) in the USA, which inspired parents of handicapped children from neighbouring villages to found their own BS. Since 2002, an Information Point (IP) has also been established in the building. IPs are practically places where people living in small villages can use internet for free. The IP of Sajópálfala has made it possible, for example, for an elderly resident to keep everyday contact with her son and his family living in the US.

Internet and Titbits

The University of Miskolc in cooperation with the Technical University of Budapest has established here a Research Group for Information Society and Education. This group made one of the most interesting researches, whereby they examined the relation between the traditional human and the modern info-communicational networks in Sajópálfala and the neighbouring villages. Its major result was that the villages where traditional networks are still alive such as giving titbits or tokens to the neighbours, communicational networks of the digital era also work much better, than in those villages where the traditional networks of mutual aid have already disappeared. (Giving tokens as a present before dinner, for example, on pig-slaughter days has acquired a very symbolic meaning in Hungarian traditions, especially in the countryside.)

Conclusion

The principal conclusion of my paper is that Sajópálfala is prospering again, after a long while. Since they opened the Centre, real estate prices have been gradually rising, and the decrease of the number of inhabitants has stopped.

Sajópálfala is a good example for the fact that villages and civil attitude are not determined to be opposites of each other and there are still a lot of unexploited possibilities in the countryside. Besides, it is also a good model for the cooperation between a university and a village. Finally, this proves that prosperity is possible even in the poorest of regions with the most disadvantageous conditions.