

Eating in Budapest's Soup Kitchens. Versions and Aversions from the History of Public Catering (1860–1918)

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ABSTRACT

The growth in Budapest's population at the end of the 19th century was based on the influx of migrants from the countryside, mostly industrial workers. The examination of the social tensions generated by their arrival provides a good illustration of the changes in social policy, one element of which was the operation of soup kitchens. In the mid-19th century, the main driving force behind the founding of soup kitchens was individual religious charity, although by the end of the century, social solidarity and state involvement also contributed to the relief efforts. The present study examines the development of soup kitchens in Budapest based on the historical sources: official documents, and the contemporary press. Using the ethnographic findings of food culture research, it seeks to explain why official soup kitchens were not popular. From an ethnographic point of view, the process of lifestyle change among workers newly breaking away from peasant life and moving to Budapest and its metropolitan area has been little explored to date, and the same applies to the embourgeoisement of the peasantry. When interpreting the processes that accompany labor migration, parallels can be drawn between the eating habits of the workers' regions of origin, the value systems connected with work and food, and the common meals organized for agricultural workers when working away from home. Through a historical and ethnographic approach, the transitional, evolving features of urban foodways emerge in the context of soup kitchens in parallel with the change in lifestyle.

KEYWORDS

social policy, solidarity, soup kitchen, value systems connected with work and food, historical and ethnographic approach

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The precursors to public catering and school canteens are rooted in the everyday life of the century before World War II. In Budapest, the first large-scale soup kitchens offering hot meals to the needy were set up in 1874, alongside earlier, sporadic initiatives by associations and private individuals. The earliest traces of school canteens go back to the 1880s (SOMOGYI 1913:783), although the professionalization of mass catering dates back to World War I.

Our study examines the development of soup kitchens in Budapest from the perspective of social history and ethnography, drawing on historical sources — official documents and contemporary press materials — as well as the ethnographic findings of food culture research. The topic touches on a slice of urban history and nutrition research that has scarcely been discussed to date within the two disciplines. Our work is structured around two major concepts. In the first part, we explore the history of soup kitchens in order to find out how official soup kitchens functioned; then, using ethnographic parallels, we examine how these meals were integrated into the everyday lives, norms, and food culture of the urban working class. Certain questions remain unanswered when it comes to public catering for schoolchildren even in the 21st century — with respect to the rejection of certain foods and meals, for example — which we are attempting to resolve in the context of our ongoing interdisciplinary research. The present study contributes to the exploration and understanding of the possible motives through examples from the past.

The second half of the 19th century was a period of important development in Budapest. It was not only an era of economic upturn but also of the related population explosion, as large-scale industrialization attracted masses of migrants from the countryside to the capital in search of employment opportunities.¹ The rapid increase in the number of factory workers was unevenly spread across the country. Budapest, as the pre-eminent center, was affected — even more markedly in the decades following the peace that ended the world war.²

Due to the rate of population growth, Budapest suddenly faced an economically active mass of people — that is, people with the financial means to provide for themselves, whom the city was not equipped to supply with food within the old framework. Meeting this challenge led to the creation of a modern public food supply system (slaughterhouses, market halls, etc.) in the capital.³ A similar task was to meet the housing, healthcare, or other cultural needs (leisure, education, etc.) of the sudden influx of people into the city. The scale of the immigration was also reflected in the number of destitute people in need of relief, who — especially in the winter months of unemployment and in the absence of a traditional social care system — were more likely to require social assistance (UMBRAI 2018a:134, 2018b:305–306).

In 1875, the capital's first Poor Law had made the council responsible for the relief of those in need of public assistance. Due to the city authorities' limited economic resources, the law explicitly discriminated against those who were not residents of Budapest — that is, those who had been born outside Budapest and who were otherwise physically able to support themselves. The very limited, closed (i.e., institutional or modest, typically cash benefits) for the poor were

¹In 1851, the population of Pest-Buda was 178,062; in 1870 it was 280,349; and by 1880 it had increased to 370,767. Subsequently, the number of people living in the capital rose to 506,385 in 1890 and to 733,358 in 1900, while by 1910 it had risen to 880,000: in other words, the number of people living in the capital had increased by over half a million since 1880. (*Budapest Székesfőváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* [Statistical Yearbook of the Capital City Budapest], 1925, 33.)

²In 1929, 45% of industrial workers and 55% of factory workers worked in Budapest, including its suburbs. This figure further increased over time, and 61% of factory workers found work in the capital by 1938 (PALÁDI-KOVÁCS 2000:249).

³For more on this process, see: UMBRAI 2017:267–301, 2022:739–762.



only available to the capital's own (locally born) and *eligible* (incapacitated) poor (HORVÁTH 2010:375–383). From this point of view, the soup kitchens established with the help of the authorities, which are the subject of our study, were of particular importance, as they were accessible to anyone for a fee.⁴

GIVING FOOD TO THE HUNGRY

According to Church teaching, everyone is obliged to help the needy, each according to his or her own means, and such help is a symbol of community solidarity. In keeping with Catholic teachings on neighborly love, it has traditionally been the task of the community to fulfil the physical commandment of charity, the principle of “feeding the hungry.” In peasant society, individuals lived within the bonds of community and religion. The village outlook on life and the normative values governing behavior were based on the teachings of the Church (BÁRTH 1990:337–340), which functioned as part of community life. In times of hardship, people relied on helping one another, according to the community's internal rules. One form of communal assistance was charity, which was organized around Church conventions. Collecting food and financial donations was an integral part of folk customs, as an aspect of the greetings and dramatic games associated with certain special days. Another form of assistance was a system based on reciprocity, which drew on kinship and neighborly relations (FÉL – HOFER 1997:295–296). Rules governing hospitality and propriety differed towards those outside the community and beggars, due to the lack of this reciprocity. In a value system based on work and family, diligence and thrift formed the principal moral basis in the villages. Wealth was a moral as well as a material factor, the proof of a successful life (JÁVOR 2000:604). Beggars, and strangers who were dependent on the bread of others, represented the opposite of such values in their eyes. They were not left empty-handed, but there were reservations (FÉL – HOFER 1997:295).

This function — communal collaboration — also operated within urban society, although its practical, systematic implementation required a greater level of organization, since, due to the size and complexity of the community, the kinship- and reciprocity-based practice of the community safety net was less efficient in a city context. However, the profound and persistent poverty generated by industrialization and urbanization had been unknown in the pre-industrial era. Previously, the risk of poverty had been associated with individual lifecycles (early childhood, young married life, and old age were all vulnerable periods), or had been a threat in the wake of natural disasters and wars, but it could be overcome by family cohesion and by reliance on the community's safety net. A sense of mutual responsibility existed among all members of the community. Kinships, extended families, and neighborhoods formed moral communities, which “took account of their members and protected them in times of need, because it was believed that everyone had the right to live, at least in respectable poverty” (GYÁNI – KÖVÉR 1998:317). In industrial societies, relief was available primarily for those who were unable to work, thus

⁴Budapest City Archives (hereafter BFL) IV. 1403. A 994/1885. “A significant change in this system was introduced by Act XXXIII of 1893 on the Capital's District Magistrate's Office, which divided the administration of the poor between the council, the district magistrates, the district boards, and the district public welfare committees. (...) although to a varying extent, depending on residence, the 1905 Poor Law already included a certain degree of provision for all deserving persons living in the city who were in need through no fault of their own” (UMBRAI 2018b:307–308).



able-bodied, healthy adults had to rely exclusively on private charity. Indeed, a state of poverty came to have moral connotations, and to be associated with individual responsibility and criminality. Those outside the community, such as beggars, were thus excluded from the circle of solidarity (Fig. 1).⁵

In Pest and Buda, there is already evidence of movements initiated by churches and private individuals in the mid-19th century, when occasionally a tavern keeper or a nun would treat the poorest of the city to a bowl of soup according to the principle of Christian love (HOLLÓ 1998:85). Until the 1870s and 1880s, mercy and love for one's neighbor were also the rallying cry of the social fundraising movements that were organized to set up soup kitchens.

THE ERAS OF BUDAPEST'S SOUP KITCHENS

Based on the division of tasks between society and the authorities, the history of soup kitchens in Budapest can be divided into several phases, although the maintenance of soup kitchens was essentially considered to be the task of social associations throughout the entire period before World War II. The first phase lasted until roughly the late 1870s, when the municipal authorities played only a coordinating role in the soup kitchens established by social associations. The beginning of the second phase was marked by the establishment of soup kitchens during

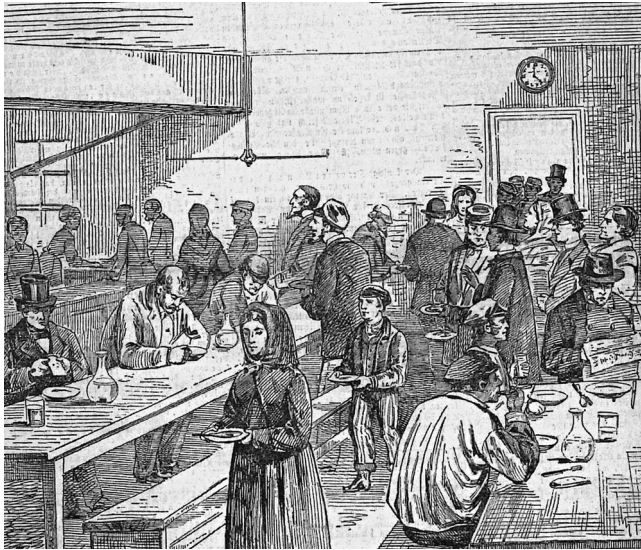


Fig. 1. Soup kitchen in Vienna in the mid-19th century (Source: PERÉNYI 2018:13)

⁵On this topic see: GYÁNI – KÖVÉR 1998:317–331; GYÁNI et al. 2004; TOMKA 2015; GYÁNI 1994; MÉSZÁROS 2011.



the cholera epidemic of 1886. From this point onwards, we can refer to *permanent soup kitchens*, the maintenance of which was taken over from the associations by the public authorities in times of hunger, shortages, or incapacity on the part of local society. The third period (which cannot be covered in the present study due to space constraints)⁶ began in principle from the end of 1917 (in practice only from 1922), when the state began to finance the operation of official soup kitchens due to the financial crisis affecting society and the capital city. In an ideal case, the kitchens were thus operated relying on joint local social efforts. Nor is this contradicted by the fact that the establishment, operation, and equipment of the soup kitchens, and even the provision of food, also justified varying degrees of involvement on the part of the (municipal or state) authorities.

THE FIRST MUNICIPAL SOUP KITCHENS IN BUDAPEST

“The first initiative to accept some form of official responsibility dates back to 1866 and was taken by the mayor of Budapest, Lipót Rottenbiller. He was the first in a long line of mayors, who, while safeguarding the integrity of the city’s coffers, encouraged citizens to help the needy. Although the movements of the 1860s were extremely small in scale, they still had the effect of keeping the issue continuously in the spotlight, so that in the event of severe cold weather or epidemics, society was ready to make organized donations” (UMBRAI 2018b:311). In January 1868, on the initiative of a few town councilors, a much larger collection was launched and regularly advertised in the press, resulting in the creation of the municipal Soup Kitchen Fund, aimed at the establishment of soup kitchens.

“*The main purpose of the soup kitchen is to provide all poor and conscientious workers with clean, wholesome, and tasty food at a moderate price, at no more than 7 krajcárs at current market prices, while having regard for their self-respect* [authors’ italics]. Besides, this will help to achieve another objective, the elimination of begging, which will certainly be pleasing to all citizens.”⁷ Although the proposed communal kitchen was not set up, about 18 months later the first⁸ soup kitchen was nevertheless opened, thanks to the efforts of the Israelite Women’s Association of Pest.⁹

The subsequent initiative by the authorities was already a genuine success. At the end of 1874, eight soup kitchens were opened in Budapest using public and municipal contributions. The clients of these kitchens, which became known as “civic soup kitchens,” were fed from the

⁶For more on this topic, see: BÁTI – UMBRAI 2020:55–96; UMBRAI 2020:115–144.

⁷Soup kitchen planned by the city of Pest (*Budapesti Közlöny*, April 4, 1868, 977). See further: UMBRAI 2018b:311–312.

⁸The kitchen began operation in November 1869 at 5 Valero Street (now Kürt Street, in district 7) providing for 30 people; it later moved to Dob Street, where it catered for an average of 300 people, and in the years of World War I it provided for 600 to 900 people (*Fővárosi Lapok*, November 20, 1895, 3004).

⁹The Valero Street soup kitchen was later followed by several similar association kitchens. We have records of an Israelite soup kitchen in Óbuda that operated in a regularly changing location in the 1870s; the sisters of St. Vincent, the so-called Grey Nuns, maintained an eating-house in Knézich Street. The Buda and Pest Charitable Women’s Association, the National Association of Hungarian Farming Women, the Maria Valeria Association, the Red Cross Association (periodically, especially during the war), and, from the turn of the 20th century onwards, the Social Missionary Sisters, the French nuns of Hermina Street, and the Salvation Army, to mention only a few from a long list, provided significant catering facilities for the poor.



Civic Soup Kitchen Fund and the social associations that maintained them, which were set up as a result of a collection that was independent from the municipal Soup Kitchen Fund. From then on, meals were regularly provided to the needy, thus supplementing the limited official relief available for the poor (UMBRAI 2018b:315). Although the vast majority of the soup kitchens in Budapest that began operation from the mid-1870s onwards operated only during the winter months, when employment opportunities were scarce, the soup kitchen run by the abovementioned Israelite Women's Association of Pest was open to the needy all year round, regardless of denomination.¹⁰ This confirms that the soup kitchens, albeit on a smaller scale, were still necessary during periods of the year when there were plentiful employment opportunities.

The public authorities were keen to be involved for a variety of reasons, which were also recognized by the population. The first such establishments, for example, were set up to address the problems caused by periodic increases in the number of beggars,¹¹ although we also know of soup kitchens set up in response to emergencies, such as cholera and floods. The soup kitchens that opened in response to the cholera epidemic of 1886 in many ways marked a milestone in the social history of Budapest. On the one hand, this was the first example of active involvement on the part of the authorities, in this case the City Council, in a social issue that had previously been considered the sole responsibility of society. On the other hand, precisely because the provision of soup kitchens was — according to both law and custom — a social task, the need to comply with it prompted urban society to “instinctively develop a traditional safety net,” or in other words to organize itself. The first charitable district associations subsequently grew out of the associations formed by enthusiastic bourgeois philanthropists, which now took on the continuous running of the soup kitchens under the catchword “help.”¹²

In the early 1900s, the need to maintain the soup kitchens was already justified by the decline in industrial productivity in the wake of the economic recession. From then on, especially in the face of the general increase in the cost of living that hit the urban population, the decline in living standards among the poorer classes, and later also among the middle classes on fixed incomes, had become increasingly marked. It was the provision of relief for them that justified the need to maintain official soup kitchens for the taxpaying public, thus the emphasis was no longer on providing for the unemployed (Fig. 2).

Due to economic and social changes, the Poor Relief Regulation of 1905 reflected a modified approach on the part of the city administration compared to the 1870s. The matter was placed on a new footing, the stated aim of the authorities being not to give alms but to help the needy, for example by providing them with work or finding them a position where they could support

¹⁰ *A jótékonyosság ünnepe* [The Feast of Charity], *Pesti Napló*, November 20, 1895, 7.

¹¹ As part of social welfare policy, poor relief was aimed at reducing begging following the 1867 Compromise (GYANI – KÖVÉR 1998:328; GYANI et al. 2004).

¹² Successive appeals for participation in collections or charity balls were published in the press under the heading “Help,” and the press regularly reported on every donation aimed at improving provision for the needy, highlighting the donor's name. Earlier, religiously motivated “Charity” was replaced by a trend for “Help,” while helping became a kind of “participation in a social event.” However, this did not necessarily bring the helper and the recipient any closer to one another. For more on this topic, see: UMBRAI 2018b.





Fig. 2. Soup kitchen run by the public charity association in the 8th district of Budapest (Source: *Vasárnapi Ujság*, February 11, 1900, 93)

themselves fully. Naturally, the provision of free or subsidized meals in soup kitchens remained a type of public assistance that was considered to be more effective than direct financial aid.¹³

We have only very sparse and contradictory data on the turnover of soup kitchens in the 19th century. We know, for example, that in the “soup kitchen season” preceding the cholera epidemic of 1892 (i.e., in January 1892), only 17 charitable and permanent soup kitchens were operating in the capital, in accordance with the needs of the population. However, in December 1892, at the height of the cholera epidemic, 23 official kitchens were serving 6,000 people, while after the epidemic receded, it was decided to operate only 12 kitchens on a long-term basis (UMBRAI 2018b:329). In subsequent years, the number of kitchens rose and fell in a similar way, in keeping with recurrent epidemics, floods, or longer winters.

We have reliable data on the turnover of soup kitchens from January 1900, when the municipal register of the poor was introduced. These data reveal that the number of people served was below 3,000, even in the busiest winter months. The municipal soup kitchens (i.e., where the city actually assumed responsibility for the provision of food due to lack of capacity on the part of local society) catered for roughly 1,000 people a day, most of whom (55–60%) paid for their meals (UMBRAI 2018a:134).

THE CLIENTS AND OPERATION OF THE SOUP KITCHENS

Regular users of the soup kitchens were rural-born day laborers who made a living from seasonal work. This is confirmed by the fact that most soup kitchens were open only during the

¹³In 1904, besides four municipal kitchens, seven were run by charitable associations; in 1906, the ratio was three municipal and nine charity kitchens. By 1908, with the improvement in economic conditions, the capital maintained just one of the 12 soup kitchens (UMBRAI 2018b:345).



winter months. In addition to immigrants, the *domestic poor*¹⁴ of Budapest could also access the soup kitchens, albeit to a lesser extent, together with the so-called *intelligent needy*,¹⁵ who were also able to benefit from the facilities. In order to cater for this latter group, who were also known as the *bashful poor*, who strove to conceal their poverty, the authorities allowed them to collect meal tickets at the municipal offices rather than waiting in line at the soup kitchens, while they were also allowed to take their food home, and later on to eat on site, although separately from the lower classes.¹⁶

Initially, the official soup kitchens were supervised by district soup kitchen committees made up of three men and 25 women. The head of the soup kitchen was usually one of the male officers appointed from among the members of the Municipal Soup Kitchen Supervisory Committee. He liaised with the central body and, as “manager” of the soup kitchen, sent quarterly reports to the City Council in addition to chairing the committee.¹⁷

The day-to-day running of the soup kitchens was undertaken by three charitable women, who took turns “on duty” from among the members of the local soup kitchen committee. It was they who supervised the meals, helped with the distribution of the food, managed the procurements, or sat at the cash desk. Each kitchen was staffed by several paid workers, including a cook and other helpers, thus the shopping and washing up was not done by the charitable ladies.

Cooking began in the early morning, to ensure that everything was ready for the opening at 11 a.m. The soup kitchen regulations also specified what the lunch should consist of. Soup and vegetable stews were the typical fare, with 120 g of meat, while baked pastry or boiled pasta were also common. On principle, the food was preferably provided for a fee rather than free of charge, although the utterly destitute could apply for free meal vouchers at the district councils. Furthermore, all the soup kitchens strove to adhere to the principle of self-financing, thus the price of the meals roughly covered the cost of the ingredients, while the cost of the free lunches was covered by the membership fees of the charitable associations that ran the soup kitchens and by subsidies from the capital city.¹⁸

According to the Soup Kitchen Regulation of 1868, people could purchase a “tin ticket” (i.e., a tin-coated iron ticket) if they ate at the soup kitchen or took their food home, a (discounted) half-ticket if the meat had already run out (i.e., for the soup and vegetable stew without a topping), although they could also purchase a supporter’s “paper” ticket, which the soup kitchen used to provide free meals for those in need, or a “foundation ticket” to donate to the Soup Kitchen Fund. In addition, weekly tickets were available, and the soup kitchens would reserve lunch for anyone who had purchased one until closing time (1 p.m.). Once the meal ticket had been purchased, the meal had to be collected and consumed immediately and the soup kitchen vacated as quickly as possible (thus the soup kitchen did not function as a shelter providing warmth).¹⁹

¹⁴The term “domestic poor” (*házi szegény*) referred to deserving persons who had become destitute through no fault of their own and who were mainly of local birth. Their care had to be provided by the capital “ex officio.”

¹⁵The intelligent poor were those who had slipped from their middle-class status.

¹⁶*Terézvárosi Segélyalap működése* [The Operation of the Terézváros Relief Fund]. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, April 29, 1915, ext. 2, 1.

¹⁷BFL IV. 1403.a 994/1885. kgy. sz.

¹⁸“A Józsefvárosi népkonyha működése” [The Operation of the Józsefváros Soup Kitchen]. *Budapesti Hírlap*, February 24, 1889, 7; *A Józsefvárosi népkonyha* [The Józsefváros Soup Kitchen]. *Fővárosi Lapok*, December 13, 1889, 2541.

¹⁹*Pesti Napló*, February 16, 1868, 2; *Pesti Napló*, February 18, 1868, 2.



It is very difficult to ascertain how popular these kitchens were. The available reports and newspaper articles suggest that when they opened amidst great publicity, crowds of needy people queued up to get in. Then, as the months passed and the employment opportunities increased, the number of clients dwindled, barely reaching a tenth of the peak season numbers. In some years, only a few soup kitchens opened due to a lack of interest, only to be closed after a few weeks.

Nevertheless, when trying to identify why people stayed away from the soup kitchens, one always comes across hints at reluctance to accept charity, or a suggestion that, for many people, even paying the price of a discounted ticket was so burdensome that this must have been the reason for them foregoing a hot meal.

The meals on offer were very different from the kind of food served at home, even though the Budapest soup kitchens boasted a rich selection. In other countries, for example, stewed vegetables with meat toppings were not served; instead, brown soup or Rumford soup²⁰ at best with a slice of bread represented social provision.²¹ Besides an aversion to accepting charity and the urban diet, the presence of the soup kitchen “staff” (i.e., the charitable ladies, who were otherwise held in high esteem) may have been a source of unease, which was only heightened by the attention of the authorities and a sense of obligation to comply with the imposed conditions. The combination of these factors may have resulted in the fact that, as economic opportunities allowed day laborers greater freedom of movement, they avoided the local charitable soup kitchens that were frequented by traditional beggars.

The opening day of the Terézváros district soup kitchen was reported as follows in the newspapers: “The board members of the Pest charitable ladies’ association were already together (...) the women were in their element, working in the kitchen, slicing bread, stacking the docket, ²² tidying up the cutlery: in short, all of them were busy doing something (...) the ladies did not greet the Lord Mayor with a speech but with a steaming cup of delicious soup, a good portion of lentils topped with meat, and a slice of bread. (...) Gradually, a few ‘famished’ folks gathered at the door but did not dare venture in on seeing so many distinguished guests. The Soroksári Street soup kitchen was busier, with Mrs. Tavaszy sitting at the counter selling docket (...) the tables were already occupied by men and women workers from the cigar factory, to whom Mrs. Jálcs tirelessly carried out food, her face flushed with zeal.”²³

“The street door leads into a spacious hall, and in the background is the kitchen with its shining tin and copper pots in which the food is being cooked. A table stands before the cooking range, and this is where the food is served up; those who have been given a docket pass through this room and enter the dining room, where long green tables are arranged in a T shape, with striped wooden chairs all round, (...) the portions are bigger than the typical helpings in a

²⁰KOVÁCS 2020; BÉLAY 1961:405.

²¹In Berlin, for example, when world war broke out, the communal kitchens offered a bowl of cocoa and a slice of bread (*Ebéd két fillérért* [Lunch for Two Fillérs]. *Az Est*, November 11, 1914, 5).

²²The docket was a tin ticket.

²³“Fővárosi Népkonyha-ügy” [The Case of the Communal Kitchen in the Capital City]. *Budapesti Közlöny*, December 2, 1874, 2220.



restaurant (...) with these Hungarian women, the cause of charity is in the best possible hands.”²⁴

SOUP KITCHENS IN THE CAPITAL CITY DURING WORLD WAR I

The outbreak of World War I, while it multiplied the number of people depending on the soup kitchens in the capital city due to the large-scale mobilization for war, did not fundamentally change the system that had been established in the previous decades.

In wartime Budapest, permanent/municipal soup kitchens continued to exist and were still maintained by the membership fees of social associations,²⁵ and increasingly by municipal subsidies. Charitable institutions,²⁶ which operated solely from donations made by their members, were also extremely active, while the particularly dynamic *private soup kitchens*, set up by wealthy individual entrepreneurs, were an innovation (Figs 3–4).²⁷ As a combined result, a varying number of people, but roughly 15,000 to 25,000, received food from soup kitchens every day during the war. In January 1918, a new institution appeared in terms of the capital's provision for poor. This was when German- and Austrian-style war kitchens, which supplied rations to be distributed from a large central kitchen, began to operate.

The menu was not entirely fixed in the early days of the war, although, due to subsequent regulations, it increasingly came to reflect the growing hardships of everyday life on the home front. With the introduction of measures to restrict consumption, the menu became increasingly poor. As was the practice in the years before the war, “poor tables” were maintained in the association soup kitchens, with separate menus and dining facilities for the “intelligent poor,” whose numbers were expanding as the standard of living among the middle class on fixed incomes fell dramatically (UMBRAI 2018a:143–144).

“[T]he citizen's attitude, and understandably so, is that if they go somewhere where they can get help for 30 *fillérs*, they won't go inside. No self-respecting citizen who wants to and can live on their own income, even if modestly, wants to receive aid worth 30 *fillérs*. Many interesting observations can be made in terms of why there is greater interest in war kitchens than in soup kitchens. In the war kitchens, lunch is provided for 60 *fillérs*, in other words at cost price; it is not given as a present, you pay for what you get (...) in soup kitchens (...) people don't go in because they don't want aid.”²⁸ “The viability of the institution should not be misunderstood. The central kitchen is not about charity; it is merely an honest ‘give and take’ business, in which clients in need receive cheap food rather than alms.”²⁹

²⁴*E hét a fővárosban a könyörület hete* [This is the Week of Compassion in the Capital City]. *Vasárnapi Ujság*, 1874. 782.

²⁵The District General Public Charity Associations, for example (UMBRAI 2018a:163).

²⁶The Uránia National Association for the Protection of Women, the Israelite Women's Association of Pest, or the Budapest Orthodox Jewish Communal Kitchen (UMBRAI 2018a:164).

²⁷The most important of these were the Manfréd Weiss, Alfréd Mautner, Hermann Groedel, and Henrik Fellner kitchens (UMBRAI 2018a:139–141, 162).

²⁸*Bíró Henrik tájékoztatója a hadikonyha akció ügyében* [Briefing by Henrik Bíró on the War Kitchen Campaign]. *Fővárosi Közlöny*, January 13, 1918, 6.

²⁹*A főváros legújabb intézménye* [The Capital's Newest Institution], *Vasárnapi Ujság*, 1918. 84.





Fig. 3. Relatives of soldiers waiting for lunch in front of the Weiss Manfréd soup kitchen, which opened on August 30, 1914, in the building of the municipal school at 89 Váci Road (today Károlyi Mihály Bilingual Secondary School of Economics), in 1914 (photo by János Müllner, source: Fortepan, donator: National Széchényi Library, <https://fortepan.hu/hu/photos/?q=n%C3%A9pkonyha>, accessed April 15, 2023)

The menus in the war kitchens did not differ greatly from those in the soup kitchens in the preceding years — Monday: barley soup with semolina dumplings; Tuesday: liver dumpling soup with potato stew; Wednesday: lung soup with potato pasta; Thursday: fake goulash soup with sauerkraut; Friday: mashed vegetable soup and cheese noodles; Saturday: caraway soup with millet pap and potatoes; Sunday: beef tripe goulash and poppy seed cake (UMBRAI 2018:158).

One might assume that the wartime soup kitchens and war kitchens were popular, but it is not quite so simple. At the beginning of the war, the experiences of the preceding decades still prevailed. With the introduction of food rationing, and as food became harder to obtain, the queues lengthened, and the shelves emptied, so the population came to value cheap meals more highly.

However, the left-wing press, which was clearly taking a political stance in its articles about the soup kitchens, painted a contrasting picture. The daily newspaper *Népszava*, for example, praised the German war kitchen system, declaring that no self-respecting working man, who shared the hardships of war just as much as the rest of society, should eat in the degrading charitable soup kitchens that continued to reflect social differences. They should no longer





Fig. 4. Food distribution in the wartime soup kitchen (Source: *Tolnai Világlapja*, September 20, 1914, 8)

accept charity but should eat together with the middle classes, as a sign of their true worth.³⁰ Indeed, as in Germany, the majority of those employed in the munitions industry in Budapest did not eat in the soup kitchens. However, this did not reflect the politically motivated determination of an awakening working class awakening but rather a reasonable adaptation to the political conditions that supported military production and influenced public provision.

THE LIFE STRATEGY OF FACTORY WORKERS

In parallel with the details of the history of the soup kitchens, it is also important to look at the lifestyle of the destitute working class, and to see how the people who were to be supported by

³⁰B-n.: *A hadikonyhák intézménye Németországban* [B-n.: *The Institution of War Kitchens in Germany*], *Népszava*, June 16, 1916, 9–10.



public catering lived, and who was able to benefit from this social support, in order to define the clientele of the soup kitchens. By examining the details of everyday life, we can interpret the functioning of the soup kitchens as a whole as well as the attitudes of acceptance or aversion on the part of consumers, as clearly reflected in the sources.

Factory workers were distinct from both self-employed artisans and the peasantry in terms of their values, life strategies, and lifestyles.³¹ The social stratum of factory workers was divided along the lines of occupational qualifications and the corresponding wage bands (PALÁDI-KOVÁCS 2000, 2002, 2007; VÁRKONYI-NICKEL 2017; PETHŐ – HORVÁTH – TÓTH 2003; VALUCH 2012, 2013, 2021; UMBRAI 2008, 2017; MRAVIK 2018; BÁTI 2018). Due to their qualifications, skilled workers enjoyed the greatest professional and material prestige, as also reflected in their way of life.³² Given their ability to maintain an independent household on their breadwinner's salary, their strategy to lead a petty bourgeois lifestyle, and their professional and social prestige, it is reasonable to assume that they did not have recourse to the soup kitchens until they became unemployed and lost the in-kind benefits and housing provided by the factory.

At the bottom of the ladder were the majority of seasonal workers, day laborers, unskilled workers, and apprentices. Many of them took industrial jobs without qualifications, escaping from peasant life and agriculture.³³ It was probably they who made up the clientele of the soup kitchens, mainly because of their unsettled and uncertain existence. While the skilled workers lived in colonies or tenements constructed by the city or the factory, and other skilled and unskilled workers commuted from their own homes in the suburbs to work, day laborers were often subtenants or night lodgers, living in temporary accommodation.³⁴ Members of the latter

³¹The conclusion to Attila Paládi-Kovács's comprehensive summary highlights the fact that ethnographic perspectives are able to capture the individual character of the working class in terms of both culture and lifestyle. "Greater importance must be attributed to the role of lifestyles, customs, and traditions if we are to understand the spirit and mindset of this class" (PALÁDI-KOVÁCS 2000:308). "In terms of wages and consumption habits, the majority of factory workers were sharply separated from other classes of society in the decades between 1860 and 1940: more sharply from the peasantry and the independent small-scale industrial stratum, and less sharply from the transitional and salaried stratum" (PALÁDI-KOVÁCS 2000:165).

³²Most of the workers newly arriving in Budapest were housed in poorer conditions than their rural counterparts in their own homes. Most of the skilled workers in Budapest, for example, lived in rented one-roomed apartments with a kitchen, apartments without a separate kitchen, or even apartments without a bathroom. In the 1930s, as many as 60% of the workers' apartments had no plumbing, 78.5% had no toilet, 50% did not even have electricity, while sometimes cooking had to be done in a shared kitchen (PALÁDI-KOVÁCS 2000:280; JAHN 1961:37). For more details on households and family types in Budapest, see: FARAGÓ 1992:199–214; UMBRAI 2008; GYÁNI et al. 2004; GYÁNI – KÖVÉR 1998:307–316; GYÁNI 1992; and on the legacy of skilled workers, see: MIALKOVSKY 1977:43–123.

³³Some day laborers did not entirely sever ties with their native settlements and relatives, returning home every week or month and relying on financial support from their families. It was primarily they who were affected by shorter or longer periods of unemployment — seasonally, for example, in the food or construction industries — as well as by periods of economic recession. Some of them undertook seasonal agricultural work as unemployed workers or during the summer holiday season.

³⁴Subtenants lived in poorer households, in one-room apartments or apartments with one room and a kitchen, typically together with the tenant. In 1870, there were subtenants living in 40% of households in the capital city, and in 1930 in one-third of households. While prior to World War I these subtenants were generally single-person households, after 1920 a family stratum also emerged (FARAGÓ 1992; GYÁNI – KÖVÉR 1998:314–315).



group settled as single people, or very rarely with their families, joining relatives or villagers already living in the city³⁵ and moving into their rented accommodation, often sharing a bed there. This attachment to their old community also permeated their other activities in the city, thus they shared the hardships of unemployment and the struggle to earn their daily bread. As a group, they certainly found it easier to accept charity meals, which were alms-like in nature and reflected urban tastes. Occasionally they shared a kitchen, which was included in the price of their accommodation, since the rents were extremely high and this was the only way they could afford even a modest living (FARAGÓ 1992; GYÁNI 1992; UMBRAI 2008, 2009; cf.: BÉKÉSY 1905).

We have only limited, sporadic data about the weekly diet of workers' families, although we are able to compare these with the meals provided in the soup kitchens, as described above. Most of the meals were cheap and high in carbohydrates, which typically featured in peasant cooking. Due to the limited range of available ingredients and the scarce market supply, there was little opportunity for variety throughout most of the year.³⁶

“On weekdays, mainly one-dish meals were cooked. In winter months there was pasta on Monday, beans on Tuesday, and potatoes or cabbage on Wednesday. Thursday was a pasta day, followed again by beans on Friday; on Saturday there was brown soup. Meat was served on Sundays only. (...) The diet of the head of a family who went out to work differed from that of his wife who stayed with the children. The family lived mainly on boiled pasta and soups, alternating with beans and potatoes. Factory workers ate a lot of soup at home. They also ate brown soup when they left at dawn” (PALÁDI-KOVÁCS 2000:293).

Many workers took cooked food with them to the workplace, which they heated in the factory, although some of them were brought fresh, warm food in food containers by their families. Some ate only bread and dripping during their shifts, while others baked potatoes and cooked bacon when factory conditions allowed. The factory workers kept their daily food in lockable iron boxes, containing their daily rations of bread, bacon, onions, brandy, salt, and tobacco (PALÁDI-KOVÁCS 2000:293).

This way of life was far from stable in the face of economic fluctuations: becoming unemployed could also result in the collapse of one's former lifestyle, and starvation. “For urban, settled workers, the horrors of starvation and of starving to death were something real and

³⁵The inhabitants of an individual settlement even worked together in a single occupation, for example road-paving work in Budapest was undertaken mainly by men from the village of Bag (PALÁDI-KOVÁCS 2000:253).

³⁶Industrial workers spent a significant proportion of their salaries, which were higher than the national average, on purchasing food; they were at the mercy of fluctuations in market supply and rising prices. The settlements, or “workers' colonies,” which were mostly set up by the enterprises themselves for their workers, with their identical houses and with residents who lived there as tenants while working at the factory, represented a transition between the villages and cities. The workers' apartments generally comprised a room and a kitchen, and, where possible, they also had a larder, a small garden, and sometime even pens for animals, so that the workers could partly provide for their own needs in terms of food (BABICS 1952:138–142). However, they too primarily relied on purchasing, although according to the regulation, they were permitted to use only the factory or colony food stores and shops, which were often far more expensive than market prices. Workers living in the workers' colonies could shop in the “magazin,” or food store, without cash, spending up to two-thirds of their monthly wage; the invoice was deducted from their earnings, or they were given food vouchers as a benefit in kind, which they could spend in the store (PALÁDI-KOVÁCS 2000:290). The weekly consumption of a four- to five-person workers' family in Óbuda in 1888 comprised the following: 12 kg bread flour, 2–3 kg pastry flour, 10–12 potatoes, 0.5–1 kg sugar, and 100–150 g coffee beans (RÉZLER 1938:136). In a four- to five-person household of a brickworks laborer in Kispeszt, 4 L of milk and 1 kg sugar were consumed per week in 1938, while meat was put on the table only once a week (JAHN 1961:36).



experienced (...)” (RÉZLER 1938:136). It was only when the catering options discussed above became unavailable or exhausted that day laborers and destitute workers temporarily resorted to the soup kitchens. In the early period, public catering offered more than these meals, mainly in terms of the available meat dishes, although economic hardship also led to a simplification of the soup kitchen menus, with less choice and variety. Compared to the eating habits of the first generation of day laborers, newly arrived in the city, members of the second and third generations were able to incorporate urban norms more easily by means of acculturation, which may have been reflected, for example, in the gradual acceptance of the soup kitchens, as described above, in the decades following World War I.

The lowest stratum of the working class was still strongly attached to the villages in terms of their values and their way of life. This can be seen not only in their housing (GYÁNI – KÖVER 1998:315; GYÁNI et al. 2004; PALÁDI-KOVÁCS 2000:258): their eating habits and norms were also rooted in it. Their life strategy, for example, reflected peasant society’s practice of severely cutting back on consumption during transitional periods of food shortages by reducing demand.

AMBIVALENT CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

It is relatively difficult to explain why people abstained from using the public soup kitchens, despite the needs recognized by the authorities, as we have few available sources that analyze the question from the perspective of the lack of clients. Newspaper articles and reports by the authorities tended to present the new facilities, to justify the need for soup kitchens to the public, or to advertise their opening. There are several aspects to explaining the reluctance to eat in public soup kitchens. The soup kitchen clientele came from the lower social strata, while the majority of those who organized the kitchens and determined the formal framework for the catering were representatives of the middle and upper classes. This in itself may have been a source of tension.

In what follows, the dietary culture of the peasantry, which has been subject to wide-ranging ethnographic research, can provide a framework for interpreting the practices of the soup kitchen clientele.

The period of soup kitchen history under review here saw the beginnings of modernization in food culture, the emergence of a food market, the levelling out of social classes, and the gradual blurring of the differences between village and town (KISBÁN 1997:422–439; BÁTI 2008). From the last third of the 19th century onwards, this was driven by the development of the manufacturing industry and the influx of industrial labor into the cities. This socioeconomic transformation was accompanied by a steady increase in the role of the food industry and food market and a gradual decline in subsistence farming. The lifestyle of several strata of the growing urban population provided the rural population with increasingly strong patterns in food culture, too (KISBÁN 1997:435–436). From the 1880s, there were innovations in terms of cooking techniques in the villages, with the rapid spread of iron stoves, accompanied by the simultaneous replacement of cookware and a variation in the range of recipes.

As they flooded into Budapest, the peasants brought with them their village values, interpreting and appropriating the urban lifestyle they encountered on the basis of their peasant mentality. Even when adapting to their new environment, they adhered to their original ideals and attitudes, as reflected in their behavior and habits.



In order to understand the clients of the soup kitchens who had lost their jobs and who were in need of charity, we should highlight certain elements of village communal values. These can contribute to our understanding of what it was that may have prevented them from accepting free meals, and how the soup kitchen differed from what they had been used to. For the first generation of workers who moved into the city from the villages, the unfamiliar public catering represented an entirely new situation, where food was given as a donation, served by others, and had to be consumed with strangers in an unusual, non-familial environment. In the case of both donors and recipients, people were reminded of almsgiving to the poorest of the poor, which may have been humiliating, especially for educated people who had seen better days and who had in earlier days personally practiced charity themselves.

The value system of the lowest stratum of society was based on work, while the organization of life was subordinated to it. The value and significance of meals and food were also considered from this perspective. It was said that *to live well* meant to eat well. In this context, there was a close connection between food consumption and work: *food had to be repaid by work*. If there was less work, for example in winter, then food was more meager, and children and the elderly received none of the energy-giving foods, bacon or meat, or only in small amounts. But eating and drinking were necessary not only to maintain one's strength; equally importantly, the consumption of food and drink is a source of pleasure and enjoyment. Accordingly, foodstuffs are also subject to a kind of ranking, with bread being the most valuable and other foods being measured against it. The most prestigious are fats, meat, and cereals, followed by milk, dairy products, and eggs. The next group comprises legumes, kasha, and cabbage, while towards the bottom of the list come fruits and summer vegetables (FÉL – HOFER 1997:191–195). Cooked dishes belonged to a different class: they were more prestigious, since they were enjoyed at home, in a family context, sitting at the table. Only relatives and good friends eat at the table, from a single dish, while no one eats with enemies or strangers. The place occupied at the table reflected a person's role in the family and the division of labor within the family. It was the farmer or the farmer's wife who dished out the food from the bowl and cut the bread.

Bread, as a staple, also appears in the description of work and family relationships. Servants *eat the bread of others; those who receive bread from the head of the family come under his authority; those who are not full members of the family are not allowed to cut a slice of bread for themselves but are given bread from his hand*. Bread is also given to those who regularly perform services for the household, such as shepherds; bread is given to beggars and wayfarers; and hospitality would be unimaginable without the offering of bread (FÉL – HOFER 1997:195).

In the closed system of peasant society, the rules and norms of community functioning provided a framework for all according to age group and gender. Thus, men's patterns of behavior focused on work and providing for the family. This was the basis of their honor, self-esteem, and prestige within the community. The counterpoint to this was a sense of shame, of failure to conform to the norms, and of being different from others, for example, if they failed to behave in keeping with their status. Although urban workers were no longer under the informal control of the community, their sense of shame could still be very pronounced if they were not sufficiently successful and were forced to rely on the soup kitchens (JÁVOR 2000:638–648).

Even if they were aware of the functioning of the above community values, members of the upper and middle classes were almost bewildered by the everyday lives of the masses living on the outskirts of Budapest, who partly had peasant roots and who, while already alienated from village



life were not yet integrated into the city; the solution continued to be the provision of charity.³⁷ Such incomprehension is reflected, for example, in the book of reports *Két esztendő* [Two Years], published in 1916 by Lydia Kovács, the first female reporter on the home front during World War I. As a middle-class observer, she described how the children of a family in Angyalföld (a part of Budapest) were sorting through the swill obtained from local restaurants: “Look, ma’am, what lovely bits of meat. A pleasure to look at, aren’t they now?” “I still don’t understand why they needed it. Do they own a dog or a cat? Are they picking it out for them? Somehow, my courage failed me, I don’t dare ask,” wrote the reporter, who was escorted by the police from the slum (which the journalists associated with crime, dirt, and depravity) (KOVÁCS 1916:30).

SUMMARY

Poverty and long-term unemployment are worldwide problems that still need to be solved to this day. The question explored in this study, the ambivalent attitude of the needy, is one that is also addressed by other researchers (GLASSER 1988:150; MARTIN et al. 2003; BERNER et al. 2008). International examples also demonstrate how community solidarity and social provision continue to generate ambivalent feelings among recipients.³⁸ On the one hand, they are in need of support due to their financial situation, while on the other, accepting food demonstrates to themselves and to those around them that they are unable to live up to society’s expectations and are incapable of caring for themselves.

Food and eating represent a significant channel for knowing and understanding *the Other* and for positioning them within a value system — that is, understanding how their nutrition differs from forms they have known previously. But it can also be a means of demarcating boundaries, defining who will not sit at table with whom or who does not share the same food. Eating habits, food consumption, and the symbolic content of food itself communicate information about lifestyle, social status, and values.³⁹ In this sense, the location in which people eat has a status value. In the examined period, eating out was a practice mainly among the middle classes in Budapest, not among the lower social strata. The process of financial decline calls for a new decision-making strategy when it comes to (invisible and visible) expenditures, yet most people continue to care about appearances, since consumption is also a means of self-expression. Negative changes in terms of meals and food are seen as a backwards step (TÖRÖCSIK 2012). At the same time, these changes also affect self-esteem and are a source of stress, and this process is typically accompanied by a move away from the previous reference group. One can assume that the clientele of the soup kitchens faced a similarly complex problem in the first phase of acculturation — integration into urban society — which was not foreseen by the support system of the time and was not therefore understood.

The examination of the functioning of the soup kitchens in the context of economic and social processes, in parallel with a survey of household catering among the peasants and working strata,

³⁷Following the interest generated by the epidemics, sociological reports, as a forerunner of sociography, presented to their readers the social issues of big cities in the form of articles and illustrations, reflecting the approach of the urban middle class (PERÉNYI 2018:12).

³⁸The issue is discussed from the standpoint of cultural adaptation by: KAPITÁNY – KAPITÁNY 2013; on the issue of eating and inferiority from a psychological point of view, see: FORGÁCS 2013.

³⁹On the influence of lifestyle and value system on alimentation and consumption habits, and the drivers of dietary trends, see: HORVÁTH et al. 2005.



reveals that the meals served in the public catering facilities did not differ significantly from those prepared in the peasant homes at the time, and that the menu was initially even more favorable in terms of meat. The sometimes positive and sometimes negative trends in consumer attitudes⁴⁰ may have had more to do with the way in which the meals were served in the soup kitchens and the conditions in which they were served. This form of catering, which went against almost every aspect of peasant practice, also represented a psychological dividing line: self-esteem and prestige were compromised by the acceptance of social provision. In the absence of sources, we can only assume that this may have been the unspoken reason behind the aversion to soup kitchens. However, the available facts illustrate that the issue is far more complicated: it cannot be understood without examining individual consumer opinions, which requires a complex approach. In the form in which they were established, the soup kitchens could not become a means of social integration, nor even a model of food culture or urban/civic dietary structure, because of the attitudes of their clients. The way in which meals are served, and the surrounding circumstances, are also of paramount importance in the perception of public catering today, and the historically rooted social barriers to acceptance must be taken into account when educating people to become conscious consumers if its operation is to be successful.

NOTE

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⁴⁰See also: [LOSONCZI 1977](#).



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