

History and memory of hospital sites. On the example of the “old” hospital in Topoľčany¹

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History and memory of hospital sites. On the example of the “old” hospital in Topoľčany

This paper deals with the site of the old hospital in Topoľčany, which is listed among Slovakia’s national cultural sites. It combines selected historical and ethnological approaches to the research of the site and its structures with the aim of capturing its historical and ethnological links and values within an urban environment. The paper is an output of a scientific project featuring the cooperation of several scientific and research institutions which are active in the technical, social, and human sciences.

Keywords: urban history, historical approaches, ethnological approaches, the “old” hospital site in Topoľčany, Slovakia, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

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Approaches to the protection of cultural and natural heritage encompass a relatively wide range of disciplines, including the technical and natural sciences as well as the social sciences and the humanities. Each discipline has its specifics, defines its own scientific questions, and looks for adequate answers. These answers or goals are then evaluated according to the fundamental concepts of the given discipline.

The methodology and sources concerning the history of Topoľčany Hospital

Historical and ethnological approaches have their own specific goals and methods, which primarily depend on the subject of analysis. This paper focuses on the original historical buildings of Topoľčany Hospital and primarily examines them through the lens of urban history and other approaches traditionally used for such topics. Because urban history is closely related to economic, social, and cultural history,² these perspectives must be taken into consideration as well.

The historical approach to sites and structures is characterised by the fact that the background knowledge necessary for research can usually be found in diverse sources. In general, historical sources can include virtually anything providing information about the past,³ and this simple definition is apt for those sources that illustrate the history of the hospital site in Topoľčany. These sources are predominantly in written form, but they also take the form of collections of old photographs, preserved artefacts, naturfacts, and mentefacts connected with the site, as well as the results of ethnological field research (interviews) focusing on respondents' testimonies. These primary sources of basic research are complemented by equally important secondary sources from the scientific and popular educational literature, which, however, is not very abundant in the case of the particular site under analysis.⁴ The limitations of research depend in particular on the availability and the state of preservation of sources and on ethnological research. The hospital site cannot be completely historically isolated, because that would mean disregarding its contextual development. The site's links to the town of Topoľčany and its historical and urbanistic development, and the link to its inhabitants, are of primary importance.

Using a heuristic approach to the history of the Topoľčany Hospital site, it is important to consider the position of the structure within the region and its past use. Fundamental starting points can be divided into three basic groups from the historical and ethnological perspective:

1. The site is located within the limits of the town of Topoľčany. It is composed of several structures which were constructed over time based on needs as well as the financial

² STORCHOVÁ, Lucie et al.: *Koncepty a dějiny: proměny pojmů v současné historické vědě*. Prague: Scriptorium, 2014, p. 338. For more details, see OKHOVAT, Hanie; NEJATI DOLAGH, Mastaneh; REZA NASROLAHI, Mohammad: The study of the principles and methods of architectural design in the protected context of Meymand Historic Village. In: *Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, vol 7, 2019, is. 1, pp. 123–142; RYŠKOVÁ, Michaela: Specifické problémy ochrany průmyslového dědictví: Otázky autenticity průmyslové architektury na dvou příkladech. In: *Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, vol 7, 2019, is. 1, pp. 167–176; JANTO, Juraj. Moderné mesto a jeho kultúrne dedičstvo – príklad Partizánskeho a Novej Dubnice. In: *Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, vol 7, 2019, is. 2, pp. 109–121; VYSKOČIL, Aleš: Kulturní dědictví a paměť industriálního centra (případ textilního Brna). In: *Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, vol 5, 2017, is. 2, pp. 83–98.

³ See Coll.: Úvod do studia dějepisu. I. díl. Brno : Masaryk University, 2014, pp. 44–45.

⁴ We need to mention the synthesis of work dealing with the history of the hospital: BRÁZDIL, Bernard et al.: *Storočnica topoľčianskej nemocnice*. Martin: Osveta, 1986. Helpful information is also provided in a BA thesis on the Stummer family (PIRY, Jozef: *Stummerovci: Augusta Haupt-Stummerová (1862–1945)*). BA thesis. Bratislava: FiF UK, 2016) as well as in the results of preservationist research (GAŽIOVÁ, Eva et al. *Zásady ochrany pamiatkovej zóny mesta Topoľčany: Stummerova ulica s areálom „starej“ nemocnice*. [online], accessed 15 October 2019, https://www.pamiatky.sk/Content/PZ_ZASADY/Topolcany_stummerova/0101-TO-STU-text.pdf).

possibilities of the hospital.

2. While a private individual and his family founded and initially donated to the hospital, it was gifted to the county of Nitra upon being built, and so it acquired a public character. The hospital's funding and operation were a matter of official supervision. It acquired the status of a county hospital, which was significant for the town of Topoľčany and the surrounding region.



Fig. 1: *A drawing of the hospital site on the Topoľčany cadastre map from 1895 (GKÚ Archive)*

3. The hospital was a place of work for people in various positions, but especially for healthcare professionals, who developed their own relationship to the hospital site and created their own story. Moreover, the hospital was genuinely a part of the everyday life of the people of Topoľčany and was not just registered by those who used its healthcare services.

The hospital site in Topoľčany

For Topoľčany, the hospital site represented a new and spacious group of buildings which gradually developed and expanded. This process is most vividly documented by a preserved set of cadastre maps, beginning with the original cadastre file from 1895, which simply lists the basic information about the site (the owner, area, and purpose).⁵ At that time, the hospital site was composed of four buildings with a courtyard and had a total area of roughly 1,460 square

⁵ The Geodesy and Cartography Archive of the Slovak Republic (hereinafter the “GKÚ Archive”), f. original cadastre file, Topoľčany, 1895.



Fig. 2: The hospital chapel and buildings in a 1913 postcard. In the foreground it is possible to see a part of the park between the street and the entrance to the site (Postcard – segment – Tribeč Museum in Topolčany).

fathoms (around 5,250 m²).⁶ All four structures were registered under number 282, and the owner was given as the county of Nitra.

The oldest cadastre map of Topolčany was based on cadastre files. It was created in 1895 (Figure 1) and forms a part of the collection of cadastre maps of the Geodesy and Cartography Archive of the Slovak Republic. It was drawn in detail to a scale of 1:2880. The hospital is registered under the name “August’s Hospital” (Ágoston közkórház), commemorating its founder August (Ágoston, also Augustín) Stummer. At that time, it was located near the town and was next to the Chotina River. The other preserved cadastre depictions are from 1905,⁷ 1913, 1954,⁸ 1960, and 1982.⁹ They all document major changes to the hospital site (Figure 2) as well as changes in its immediate vicinity, particularly the gradual increase in construction activity when the hospital became a fixed part of a built-up zone in Topolčany, specifically in the area of Stummer Street.

The hospital as a public institution

The original hospital was built in 1885.¹⁰ The idea to establish the hospital came from the Stummer family, who were local aristocrats, and more specifically from August Stummer himself, who funded the hospital’s construction. After the construction was complete, Stummer gifted the hospital to the county of Nitra in 1886. However, this otherwise altruistic decision was also motivated by personal gain. Stummer did not have a male heir, and he was trying to preserve his noble title of baron, which he had only received in 1884, for his two daughters. This effort needed to be supported by a significant deed in favour of the development of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. In 1886 the authorities agreed to the adoption of Stummer’s sons-in-law,

⁶ One square fathom is 3.5966 m².

⁷ Tribeč Museum in Topolčany, a collection of photographs.

⁸ GKÚ Archive, Topolčany Cadastre to a of 1:1000.

⁹ The Cadastre Section of the District Office in Topolčany (hereinafter “KoOÚ”), cadastre maps from 1913, 1960, and 1982; scales of 1:2880 and 1:1000. Land survey sketches from 1981 with a scale of 1:1000 have also been preserved.

¹⁰ BRÁZDIL, Bernard et al.: Storočnica topolčianskej nemocnice..., p. 28.



Fig. 3: *The hospital buildings before 1918 (Tribeč Museum in Topoľčany)*

thus confirming the noble title of baron. Stummer would later provide financial support to the hospital for the maintenance of its buildings, which were prone to damp.¹¹

Through being donated to the local authorities, the hospital gained a public character and provided healthcare for the upper part of the county of Nitra. At the time of construction, healthcare legislation in Hungary was quite well developed. In 1876, Article XIV was adopted in the Hungarian kingdom and remained in effect in Slovakia, albeit with minor amendments, until the 1950s.¹² It specified the basic structure of public healthcare and its oversight, and it defined the basic legal relationships and links to public authorities.¹³ The Hungarian government adopted another law in 1908 (Article XXXVIII: 1908); according to this regulation, each municipality with a population exceeding 5,000 (thus including Topoľčany)¹⁴ was obliged to have a doctor. Smaller municipalities were joined together into healthcare communities with doctors and midwives.¹⁵

The first organizational level of administration in public health was the *iudices nobilium* (later in the interwar period, this was the district superintendent) who managed the *processus* (later known as the district office). His direct subordinate, responsible for healthcare in the district, was the district doctor, who was also in charge of supervising the municipal and community doctors. A similar administrative position was held by the county doctor, who worked in the county office and supervised county facilities, including hospitals. After the creation of Czechoslovakia, the healthcare sector only experienced minor changes. The old Hungarian articles continued to apply to Slovakia, being transposed into the legal system of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918.¹⁶

¹¹ PÍRY, Jozef: Stummerovci..., pp. 19–20.

¹² MICHAL, Gašpar: *Zdravotníctvo v sociálnej politike štátu*. Bratislava: Osveta, 1971, p. 61. Amendments included Article V:1886, Article XXI:1898, Article XXII:1887, Article XXXVIII:1908, which, alongside certain decrees of the Ministry of the Interior, collectively amended and supplemented provisions regarding vaccination, the spread of trachoma, and changes and modifications of the healthcare service in municipalities, and which dealt with the hospital statute.

¹³ TIŠLIAR, Pavol: Náčrt populačnej politiky na Slovensku v rokoch 1918–1945. In: Tišliar, Pavol (ed.): *Populačné štúdie Slovenska I*. Krakow: Spolok Slovákov v Poľsku, 2013, p. 56.

¹⁴ In 1869 the population of Topoľčany was 3,426, by 1910 it had doubled to 6,399, and by 1940 the town was inhabited by 10,242 people. *Vlastivedný slovník obcí na Slovensku III*. Bratislava: SAV, 1978, pp. 166–168. As of 31 December 2018, the town had a population of 25,181.

¹⁵ BRÁZDIL, Bernard et al.: *Storočnica topoľčianskej nemocnice...*, pp. 22–24.

¹⁶ For more details, see TIŠLIAR, Pavol: *Okresné zriadenie na Slovensku v rokoch 1918–1945*. Krakow: Spolok Slovákov v Poľsku, 2013. Also see BOKESOVÁ-UHEROVÁ, Mária: *Dejiny zdravotníctva na Slovensku*. Bratislava: Osveta, 1989.

In Topoľčany and its surroundings, information about healthcare only started to be recorded in the eighteenth century. Healthcare for the inhabitants of the county of Nitra was the responsibility of the county doctor, a position which had been established by the authorities in 1733. A county hospital was opened in Nitra in 1834 and was also used by the inhabitants of Topoľčany before the “Stummer” hospital was built. A town infirmary for the elderly and ill was founded in Topoľčany in 1770 by Count Žigmund Forgách. Another infirmary, with fifty beds, was founded in 1872 for the municipalities of Horné Obdokovice, Oponice, and Tovarníky by Alexander Stummer,¹⁷ August’s younger brother,¹⁸ and the third biggest land owner in the Topoľčany district of the nineteenth century (after his brother August Stummer and the Thonet family, the owners of the bentwood furniture factory in Veľké Uherce).

The above information and milestones determine the direction of the core research for this paper. Information about the history of the hospital site in Topoľčany can be primarily found in the archives of the relevant supervising authorities. For the end of the nineteenth century, this includes the archival documents of the County Office in Nitra, which continued to hold territorial jurisdiction over the Topoľčany *processus* after the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic until the public administration reforms in Slovakia in 1922.¹⁹ In the county and *processus* archives, there is some (unfortunately fragmented) information about the creation or beginnings of the hospital and some highly incomplete information about its existence in the first half of the twentieth century. The same information is also provided by an inaccessible archive of the Topoľčany manor in Tovarníky.²⁰ Documents from the county of Nitra have been preserved from the interwar period as well as from the time of World War II.²¹ A larger set of documents connected with the operation of the hospital (reviews) and partially concerning changes to the site (the purchase of land) is located in the archive of the Regional National Committee in Nitra in its healthcare section.²² This file also includes authentic historical records covering the first half of the 1940s.

A somewhat larger amount of useful information is provided by preserved documents stored in the State Archive in Nitra, in its Topoľčany office. This material includes the largest group of technical documentation in different scales; technical reports (also preserved as copies) which formed the basis of the buildings’ design; and documentation on modifications, adaptations, and extensions, such as the infectious diseases facility. The technical documentation mainly comes from the period between the 1920s and 1950s and is a part of the archive of the district national committee in Topoľčany.²³ Other documents of interest include archival records from

¹⁷ BRÁZDIL, Bernard et al.: *Storočnica topoľčianskej nemocnice...*, 130 p. Chapter “Zdravotníctvo v dobe výstavby topoľčianskej nemocnice v rokoch 1885–1918”, pp. 22–27.

¹⁸ PÍRY, Jozef: *Stummerovci...*, pp. 8, 17–18. The Stummer family became wealthy thanks to the expansion of the sugar industry. In 1871 the brothers Karol, August, and Alexander Stummer were given a noble title. August Stummer became a baron in 1884.

¹⁹ MI SR – State Archive in Nitra, Ivanka pri Nitre Office (hereinafter “ŠA Nitra”), f. Nitrianska župa I., 1464–1922; f. Služnovský úrad v Topoľčanoch, 1851–1922.

²⁰ ŠA Nitra, f. Topoľčianske panstvo v Tovarníkoch, (1347) 1589–1942.

²¹ ŠA Nitra, f. Nitrianska župa II., 1923–1928; f. Nitrianska župa III., 1940–1945.

²² ŠA Nitra, f. Krajský národný výbor v Nitre, 1949–1960.

²³ MI SR – State Archive in Nitra, Topoľčany Office (hereinafter “ŠA Nitra, Topoľčany Office”), f. Okresný národný výbor v Topoľčanoch, 1945–1989 (hereinafter “f. ONV Topoľčany”).

the notary office and the municipal national committee,²⁴ including several authentic historical photographs of Topoľčany, and a landscape review dealing with the operation of Topoľčany Hospital. Another useful source is the Topoľčany Chronicle for the years 1850 to 1930, which also mentions the local hospital.²⁵

The preserved photographic material depicting the old hospital site in Topoľčany in the past has various origins. Some images are located in archives, while others are in the collections of the Tribeč Museum in Topoľčany²⁶ or in private collections. The museum collection of photographs depicts different views of the hospital site in the form of postcards with a Topoľčany theme. The photographs also capture the later extensions to the modern part of the hospital site.

The history of the “old” hospital site in Topoľčany

The oldest hospital building, which, incidentally, still stands today, was opened ceremonially on 2 January 1886.²⁷ It initially had seventy beds, and, as the largest landowner in the Topoľčany district, Baron August Stummer contributed significantly to its construction with the sum of 12,000 guildens. Stummer invested in the surroundings of the hospital as well. The hospital site included four buildings: a chapel, which offered entry into the site and flats for employees and the gatekeeper; the main building, located opposite the chapel, containing the surgical and internal medicine departments; an administrative building; and an outbuilding with spaces for stores, a laboratory, and a dissecting room.²⁸ These four buildings formed a site with an area of 1,700m². A memorial plaque was placed next to the entrance to the site. The hospital was also a place where nuns of the Order of St Vincent from Graz were active.²⁹

At that time, the hospital site was relatively distant from the centre of the town. The construction of the hospital contributed to urban development in this area, and the town houses of local notable citizens gradually multiplied along the road connecting the hospital to the town centre. Many of these houses are now listed as national cultural sites.³⁰ Originally, the hospital was a branch of the hospital in Nitra, but it became independent as early as 1887. Shortly after it opened, it became evident that there was insufficient space, hence the construction of new spaces – notably a kitchen and a woodshed – began in 1899. The water storage unit was also moved to the attic. Thanks to the redevelopment of these spaces, the number of beds increased to 98. In 1904, the construction of an infectious diseases facility began, following a proposal by Filip Bineter.³¹

²⁴ ŠA Nitra, Topoľčany Office, f. Notársky úrad v Topoľčanoch, 1873–1945 (1957) (hereinafter “f. ONÚ Topoľčany”); f. Mestský národný výbor v Topoľčanoch, 1945–1990.

²⁵ ŠA Nitra, Topoľčany Office, f. Zbierka kroník a pamätných kníh, 1952–1999.

²⁶ Tribeč Museum in Topoľčany, a collection of photographs.

²⁷ The construction of the site took place from 1884 to 1885, hence these years can be found in the literature as indicating when the hospital was opened or began operations.

²⁸ ŠA Nitra, Topoľčany Office, f. ONÚ Topoľčany. Topoľčany. Krajská nemocnice Masarykova No. 53.

²⁹ BRÁZDIL, Bernard et al.: *Storočnica topoľčianskej nemocnice...*, pp. 28–32.

³⁰ For more information, see: GAŽIOVÁ, Eva et al.: *Zásady ochrany pamiatkovej zóny mesta Topoľčany...*

³¹ BRÁZDIL, Bernard et al.: *Storočnica topoľčianskej nemocnice...*, p. 28 et seq. *Historické budovy v okrese Topoľčany. TOPOEČANY. Nemocnica*. Accessed 9 September 2019, <http://krizom-krazom.eu/regiony/historicke-budovy-v-okrese-topolcany>. According to archival documents, the facility was opened only in 1912. ŠA Nitra, Topoľčany Office, f. ONÚ Topoľčany. Topoľčany. Krajská nemocnice Masarykova No. 53.

New modifications to the hospital site took place in the interwar period. In 1922, the reception area (gatehouse) was renovated.³² In 1926, new outbuildings (a garden house and greenhouses) were built and buildings for a washhouse, an engine house, a dissecting room, and a morgue were added. As specified in the report, most of the buildings were in good condition, whereas two buildings from 1884 and one building from 1890 were neglected.³³ In 1935, the adaptation and modification of the chapel was planned. One side of an underpass provided entry into the historical chapel itself, and the space on the other side was modified into two housing units with common social areas.³⁴ In the late 1930s, the construction of a second infectious diseases facility was planned; the work itself began in 1939 and was completed in 1943.³⁵ In 1936, the administrative building was extended by another floor, and a side extension was also added. Ten rooms for patients with kitchens and social rooms were built in the spirit of the hygienic standards of the time. The documentation on the renovations from that time emphasizes that “It is strongly recommended that a well, a cesspit, toilets, and a dung pit be constructed in line with the type plans issued by the state healthcare institute in Prague.”³⁶

During the first sixty years of the hospital’s existence, the whole site underwent several gradual changes connected to the significant development of the hospital, its modernization, and an increase in the quality of the services provided to patients. The original site was composed of three zones: an entry park between the gatehouse and the chapel, with the latter forming the boundary of hospital site itself; the building housing the internal medicine facility opposite this; and side buildings for administration purposes which also included a kitchen and an accommodation facility for the nuns. In the interwar period, and from the beginning of the 1940s, new buildings were constructed on the site and were connected to the original ones. The hospital site was expanded, with a new area extending towards the Chotina River that was originally intended to be bounded by a new surgical facility; however, this facility was designed but never built. The second infectious diseases facility dating from the 1940s was situated in an eccentric manner from the hospital buildings. The original core of the hospital thus gradually became surrounded by a complex of medical facilities which continued the original urbanist design of the earlier buildings.

The development of the hospital site was also affected by the preparation of the town’s masterplan. The first principles were adopted by the town authorities as early as 1927, but the process really started to get underway in the 1930s.³⁷ However, the timeframe for its creation was repeatedly extended. A draft plan for Topoľčany was finally drawn up by the architect Artúr Szalatnai-Slatinský in 1940.³⁸ During construction and the development of the town in a south and south-easterly direction, which was also the position of the hospital site, it

³² ŠA Nitra, Topoľčany Office, f. ONÚ Topoľčany. Kolaudačný plánok strážneho domku žup. nemoc. vo Vel. Topoľčanoch. Nitra, 3 December 1922.

³³ ŠA Nitra, Topoľčany Office, f. ONÚ Topoľčany. Krajinská nemocnica v Topoľčanoch, 31 October 1928. Súpis budov a ich technický stav; Topoľčany. Krajinská nemocnice Masarykova No. 53.

³⁴ Adaptácia a prístavba kápličky kraj. ver. nemocnice v Topoľčanoch. 24 December 1935.

³⁵ BRÁZDIL, Bernard et al.: Storočnica topoľčianskej nemocnice..., p. 37; ŠA Nitra, Topoľčany Office, f. ONV Topoľčany. Výst. št. nemocnice, kart. 1136.

³⁶ ŠA Nitra, Topoľčany Office, f. ONÚ Topoľčany. Okresný úrad v Topoľčanoch. Výmer (22 October 1936). The renovation was carried out by the Rahas company based in Malacky and Eugen Škopec, a builder from Topoľčany.

³⁷ ŠA Nitra, Topoľčany Office, f. ONÚ Topoľčany. Regulácia Topoľčian 1933. The document includes the principles for the preparation of the town master plan.

³⁸ ŠA Nitra, Topoľčany Office, f. ONÚ Topoľčany. SZALATNAI, Artur: Regulačný plán obce Topoľčany, 1940, ostatný materiál, 1936–1941.

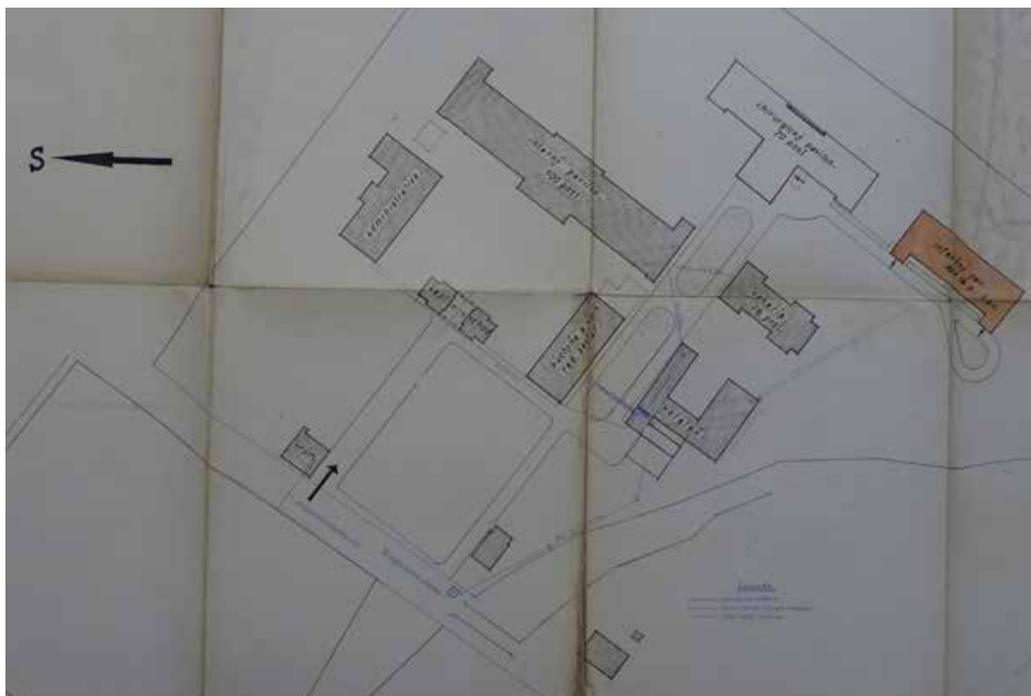


Fig. 4: The extension to the hospital site with the addition of the infectious diseases facility, 1941. Based on these plans, the hospital complex was supposed to include a surgical facility that was intended to close off that part of the site that had been constructed in the interwar period (State Archive in Nitra – Topoľčany Office).

was necessary, among other things, to deal with the regulation of the Nitra River and the Chotina River and avoid building anything in their flood plains. Ground water and the flooding of the Chotina River posed a threat to the hospital buildings from the very beginning, and the hospital's administration continually had to deal with problems of damp basements and ground-floor spaces.

After World War II, the hospital was put under state control. At the beginning of 1947, the representatives of the Healthcare Commission, Technical Commission, Topoľčany Local National Committee, and the State Hospital in Topoľčany adopted a decision on the construction of eight new buildings: a gatehouse and waiting room for visitors, flats for nurses and nuns, flats for employees of the hospital, an outbuilding with a kitchen, a boiler house, a surgical facility, a gynaecology and obstetrics facility, and an internal medicine facility. The old gatehouse was supposed to be demolished because it did not meet regulations. Moreover, the hospital site was supposed to be fenced off from the side of the street and the Chotina River by the end of 1948. For this reason, it was proposed that a new gatehouse with a waiting room and a new entrance gate be built by that time. The management of the hospital understood the complexity of the construction in terms of time and cost, so it proposed the individual facilities be built in an order which they would specify.³⁹ The prioritisation of constructing a waiting room was also based on a critical article in the daily newspaper *Pravda*⁴⁰ pointing out that citizens from more distant places would come to the hospital to visit their family and

³⁹ ŠA Nitra, Topoľčany Office, f. ONV Topoľčany. Štátna nemocnica v Topoľčanoch Povereníctvu zdravotníctva, 26 April 1948. Výst. št. nemocnice, kartón 1136.

⁴⁰ CA, Topoľčany: Čakáreň pod mostom. In: *Pravda*, vol. 5, 1948, issue 96.



Fig. 5: Laying the foundation stone of the new facility of the hospital in 1969 (Tribeč Museum in Topolčany)

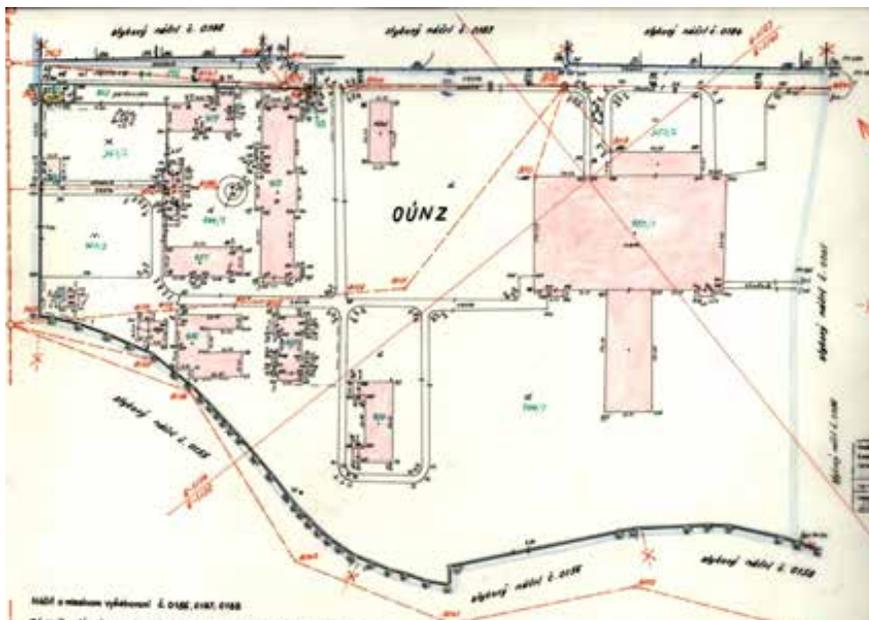


Fig. 6: A land survey sketch of the OÚNZ (District Institute of National Health) Topolčany from 1981 to a scale of 1:1000 after the construction of the new hospital complex (Cadastral Section of the Topolčany District Office) (KoOÚ Topolčany, Land surveyor sketch of the OÚNZ Topolčany to a scale of 1:1000, 1981.)

friends using public transport but would have no place to shelter from inclement weather before hospital opening hours; many of them would end up waiting under the wooden bridge spanning the Chotina River.

Extending the hospital site was successful only in a later period. In 1954, the administrative part of the hospital was modified, and its capacity was increased to 170 beds. In 1964, a design for the construction of a new hospital building was prepared, and construction took place from 1969 to 1977. After opening the first stage of the new hospital, the spaces of the old hospital were made available to the gynaecology and obstetrics department. In 1970, new lodgings for 36 employees became available. In the second half of the 1980s, there were efforts to build the second stage of the hospital site.⁴¹

The recollections of workers about the Topoľčany Hospital site

The starting points, goals, and methods of ethnological research

Historical documents are fundamental to the professional description, recording, and interpretation of cultural heritage. However, recollections can uncover other tangible and intangible aspects of these places, like their use, cultural significance, and the changes they have undergone.⁴² Oral history is often wrongfully omitted when documenting historical buildings. However, it is key to understanding intangible phenomena and uncovering the “significance of a place”. It records physical, social, and ritual aspects—the things that cannot be found (or are only very rarely found) in archival and other historical documents.

Collective memory encompasses notions (representations) of the past in a given (e.g., ethnic, local, professional, and recreational) community or group.⁴³ Oral history covers the recollections of people who personally experienced certain historical events; it is a narrative interpretation of these processes and a narrower category which focuses on representations of the past and the memories of direct participants. Oral history is also a specific methodological approach to ethnological interviews which focuses on researching such memories.

Oral history can help in the reconstruction and examination of past events. However, it must be understood that the testimonies of contemporary witnesses offer a highly subjective interpretation of the past from the perspectives of the present, so they cannot be considered equivalent to historical facts.⁴⁴ However, if they are sufficiently verified, critically assessed, and compared to other sources, they can be used for objective historical research. Where other sources are missing, they can even serve as the only available source.

However, examining recollections can also have another goal. It is not primarily about an “objective” search for “what really happened and what it was like in reality”, but rather about examining representations of the past, opinions, approaches, and their significance. These are things that form a part of the interpretation of history. The goal is to examine distinctive experiences of the past and the relationship of specific people and groups to them. Although this approach is often used in ethnology and other social sciences, historians also use it to make historical facts more colourful and personal by using the testimonies of specific witnesses. Moreover, the personal stories and recollections of people – especially if they are connected

⁴¹ BRÁZDIL, Bernard et al.: *Storočnica topoľčianskej nemocnice...*, p. 53 et seq.

⁴² MARCUS, Benjamin: *Oral History and the Documentation of Historic Sites: Recording Sense of Place*. In: *16th ICOMOS General Assembly and International Symposium: Finding the Spirit of Place – Between the Tangible and the Intangible*, 29 September to 4 October 2008, Quebec, Canada..., 2008, p. 1.

⁴³ HALBWACHS, Maurice: *Kolektívni pamät'*. Prague: SLON 2009. ISBN 978-80-7419-016-2.

⁴⁴ The narrative interpretation of the past is characterized by its presentism (narrated from the present perspective), self-importance (focusing on the narrator and the story of their group), and selectiveness (only some events are chosen). HLŔŠKOVÁ, Anna: *Kategória minulosti v rozprávačskej stratégii*. In: *Slovenský národopis*, 44, 1996, pp. 319–333.

to places and buildings – are a part of the values of these sites; they are their “living history”.

It is precisely the latter two approaches that were used to perform the ethnological research into the buildings and the site of the old hospital in Topoľčany. Instead of searching for and reconstructing historical facts, the main goal is to record memories as a distinctive interpretation of lived history and parts of the value (*genius loci*) of a specific place and its structures.⁴⁵ Opinions about the present state and future use of the buildings were also examined.

The main empirical method was the ethnographic (semi-structured) interview. Attention centred on those employees of the hospital who had worked there for many years. Those interviewed included doctors, nurses, and laboratory workers who had worked in the hospital for a long time (indeed, some of them still work there) and experienced its original buildings.⁴⁶ The questions that were asked dealt with their memories of working in the old hospital⁴⁷ with an emphasis on the context of the buildings, the site, the present state of the spaces and structures, and their further use.

*Research results*⁴⁸

When those interviewed recalled the old hospital, their narrations focused mostly on topics relating to the character and style of their work, their careers, gaining work skills, and the differences when compared to the present time. Another relevant and significant topic was the interpersonal relationships with colleagues and patients. The testimonies mostly included positive assessments.⁴⁹ The buildings and the site only served as a context, and memories about them were acquired only through and in connection with the key topics which were naturally dominant in the presented life stories. Most of the time, the interviewees remembered the structures and the site of the old hospital in the context of the working life of doctors and nurses, and their descriptions were usually connected to the performed activities.⁵⁰

For questions about the working environment, statements can be categorized into those that mentioned positive aspects and those with a more negative focus. Sometimes the same interviewee would mention both positive and negative aspects. Doctors and nurses also compared the old hospital with the conditions provided by the new buildings. Negative aspects

⁴⁵ Of course, this does not mean that these recollections cannot include historically objective and true facts.

⁴⁶ The interviews were organized based on acquired contacts, availability, and the interviewees' willingness and state of health. They mainly took place in July and August 2018 in Topoľčany or its close vicinity. The research included a total of fourteen interviewees.

⁴⁷ The work of nuns at Topoľčany Hospital was also dealt with by E. Hulová in her MA thesis, where she recorded their testimonies. HULOVÁ, Eva. Vplyv kresťanských reholí na ošetrovateľstvo v topoľčianskom regióne. MA thesis. Department of Nursing Care, FSVaZ UKF: Nitra 2010.

⁴⁸ For an illustration of findings, specific testimonies of interviewees were chosen and are given in the relevant footnotes in italics. Although no particularly sensitive information appeared in the interviews, the statements were recorded anonymously in line with ethical standards. Because of the low number and the narrow and specific group of interviewees, there is no personal description given.

⁴⁹ *We came into the team, where the relationships were usually very positive. The older workers who had been there longer were interested in helping us learn. We had fun and a good time there.... We were a very good team, and there were no arguments. We had fun all the time.*

⁵⁰ *It was one large building with gynaecology and obstetrics in one half and surgery in the other half. And we had one large room with thirty-five beds. Back then, many babies were born, so we had a lot of work.*

focused on the damp walls and the problems of mould, as well as the limited space.⁵¹ The positive aspects usually dwelt on the peaceful surroundings, the well-tended park, the trees, and the greenery.⁵²

As far as the opinions of doctors and nurses about the present state of the site and the buildings are concerned, the dominant feeling was one of sadness over the fact that the old hospital was falling into disrepair and becoming more and more dilapidated.⁵³ When asked about the possible future use of the buildings of the old hospital, interviewees responded with two types of proposal. The first type spoke of the need for long-term care homes, day-care centres, and retirement homes.⁵⁴ The second group of answers had a more sceptical approach to the state of the buildings and merely proposed their use for cultural purposes.⁵⁵

Summary and interpretation

The results and interpretation of the presented ethnographic research show the following:

- Notions (representations) of the buildings and the site of the old hospital are significantly connected to the memories of the doctors and nurses about their working experiences; their memories reflect and exist through these structures.
- The memories informants shared about working at the hospital emphasize the good team dynamics and positive interpersonal relationships, with helpful and obliging colleagues and superiors.
- The old hospital site was mainly assessed positively, emphasizing the quality of the greenery and the trees and the calm and peaceful environment it provided for both patients and staff.
- In terms of memories about the buildings themselves, there were opinions about the inadequate state of the buildings, which were not always fully fit for purpose: specifically the dampness, mould, and confined spaces. Positive assessments were connected to the accessibility and “family” atmosphere of the spaces and the aesthetics of the buildings.
- Opinions about the present state of the site included sadness and disappointment over the dilapidation of the spaces and buildings which have fallen into disrepair.
- Opinions about the future use of the old hospital included two proposals: (a) a long-term care facility, a day-care centre, and a retirement home; and (b) repurposing it for cultural, artistic, and commemorative use in the form of a museum, gallery, or lecture hall.

⁵¹ *Look, there were large spaces and thick walls, so it was very confined... It was old. It was quite damp; the drainage, sewerage, and various other things were damaged, so we often had problems that we had to deal with. Things always had to be sorted out. It was an old building, and the insulation wasn't any good. You could see it in the fact that the walls often needed to be painted because of mould and falling and crumbling plaster. That was one thing. And another thing – the rooms were adjusted to the period when they were built, meaning that there were six to eight patients per room, maybe four in some of them, but there were bigger ones as well. And you can imagine, with eight groaning people in the room, it wasn't very comfortable.*

⁵² *But the location is beautiful. There is a park, and it used to be well-tended... There are beautiful trees, I always admired them... It was relaxing for me. There was a back door, and when I needed to clear my head, I went to the park to breathe some fresh air.*

⁵³ *The whole hospital site gives a very good mental impression. The bad impression concerns the state of the buildings – they are in disrepair, with holes, and in ruins.... It's heart-breaking to see that something so beautiful that had been created in Topolčany and that had served so many generations of patients was allowed to go so far as to become a ruin. I don't go there anymore, because I want to keep that memory of when it was cultivated, tended, and not destroyed.*

⁵⁴ *If there was a sanatorium or an institution for seniors, something like that... Various day-care centres, because we have more and more people who need to be cared for, and there are problems with that. Look, it's simple: the population is growing older, so, for instance, hospices, homes for the elderly... I think it could be for long-term care. They could use it for hospices and social services homes.*

⁵⁵ *Turn it into a museum, or maybe what was done in Továrničky Park.... It would have to be renovated, those historical parts. Use them as a museum or something similar.... Museum spaces, the history of the Stummer family.*

Relationships towards specific physical spaces and buildings are a non-material part of their value; they are also a condition for ongoing interest in them, their protection, and their future existence. A significant part of this relationship is created through representations of the past in the memories and stories of people. The recollections of staff who had worked at the hospital for many years—doctors, nurses, and laboratory technicians—were examined in the presented ethnological research into the values associated with the old hospital site. This was done to try to enrich existing perspectives on the significance and importance of this unique complex.

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