

THE VERNACULAR BUILDINGS OF HUNGARY AND THE PROBLEMS RAISED BY THEIR MAINTENANCE

It is a rewarding task to speak of the results achieved in the preservation of our vernacular buildings, the legal and material provision for which has increased to an extent which could not have been anticipated earlier. My report concerns the practical experience acquired in the course of work on a given settlement.

This settlement is Szigliget, a small village hidden away in the north-western corner of Lake Balaton. It has over thirty listed vernacular buildings, and its historic centre, which contains about a hundred houses, is shortly to be declared a protected area.

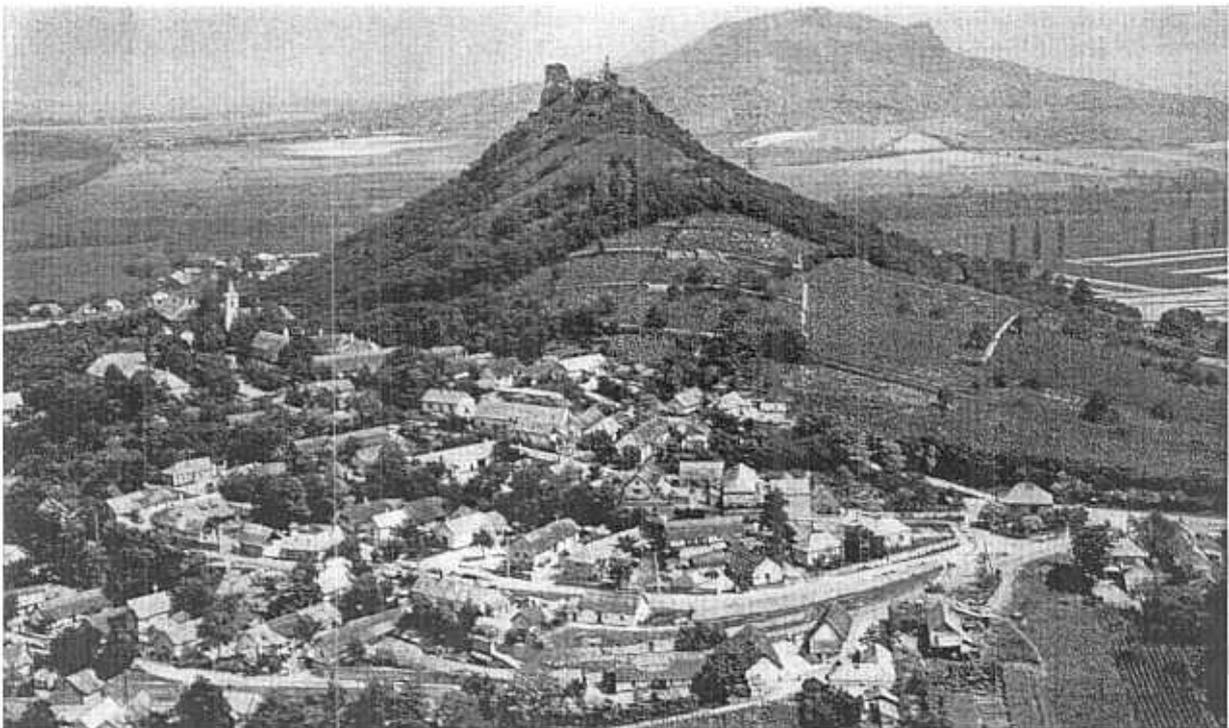
The "fishermen's village" of Szigliget has been mentioned in records for nearly 900 years. All that now survives of the original settlement is the church erected by the local masons; the later one grew up in the 14th and 15th centuries on the south-west-

ern slopes at the foot of a 13th-century fortification.

The centre of this settlement may be located on the old road leading to the castle, which still survives even today: here stood the parish church, the foundations of whose walls have come to light behind the sanctuary of the present church, and here, later on, were built the earliest village school and the mansion of the local landlord. The village was depopulated several times over, but in the second half of the 18th century it was undergoing peaceful development.

The population at that time was mainly composed of free peasants, the rest being propertyless farm-labourers or serfs belonging to the landlord. The 82 houses (with 415 occupants) recorded by the end of the 18th century almost exactly cover the area

1. Szigliget. Aerial photography.



of Szigliget now recommended for protection. The village remained a typical rural settlement up to the middle of the last century.

Subsequently the shortage of fallow land which could be brought under cultivation led to a readjustment in employment structures and ways of living; the process began slowly but has accelerated in our day. By 1970 only 30% of all those employed were working in agriculture, and at the same time the farm-labourers' way of life had itself radically changed. There have been irreversible changes in social structure and similar changes in the architectural aspect of our villages.

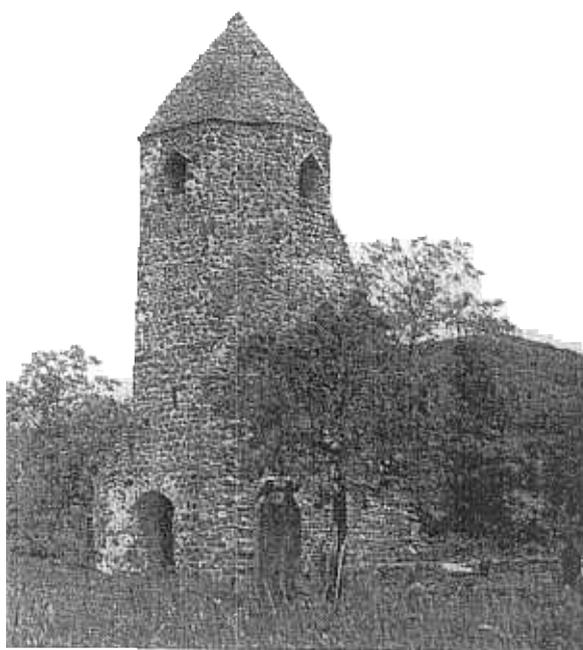
But why should we be having to tackle human and social problems in the Hungarian village of our day? The answer is that a large number of houses listed as "monuments" are in private hands (800 out of a total of 1200), and that the owners of these, instinctively or consciously, reject tradition and wish to live in accordance with new ideas.

Private ownership of vernacular listed buildings is the source of a specific contradiction which it is hard to overcome: it signifies that the maintenance of buildings recognized to be a part of the common national heritage is left, under the regulations in force, to the care of individuals. It further means that we are trying to force the architectural framework of the last stage of feudalism on to people living under socialism.

I do not wish this brief summary of the problems to be taken as a questioning of our basic aims; but I am convinced that we shall be able to safeguard the material and spiritual heritage entrusted to our keeping only in so far as we are able to face the future without illusions.

To return to our example, which is Szigliget: here we find that nature and geography have put a considerable brake on a transformation process so dynamic elsewhere. Topographical conditions forced the population to abandon traditional living structures and to build their new and depressingly standardized houses in a new district possessing scarcely any visual connection with the old one.

In the preservation of monuments all the elements involved — house, site, street, settlement, cultivated land and natural scenery — form a coherent whole all parts of which must be reckoned with. At Szigliget the protection of the natural environment is shortly to be provided for, since the grounds of the old castle, which contain botanical rarities, as well as the woods covering the fortified heights, have been declared a protected area. The survival of the medieval road network and the layout of the settlement can be ensured, thanks to

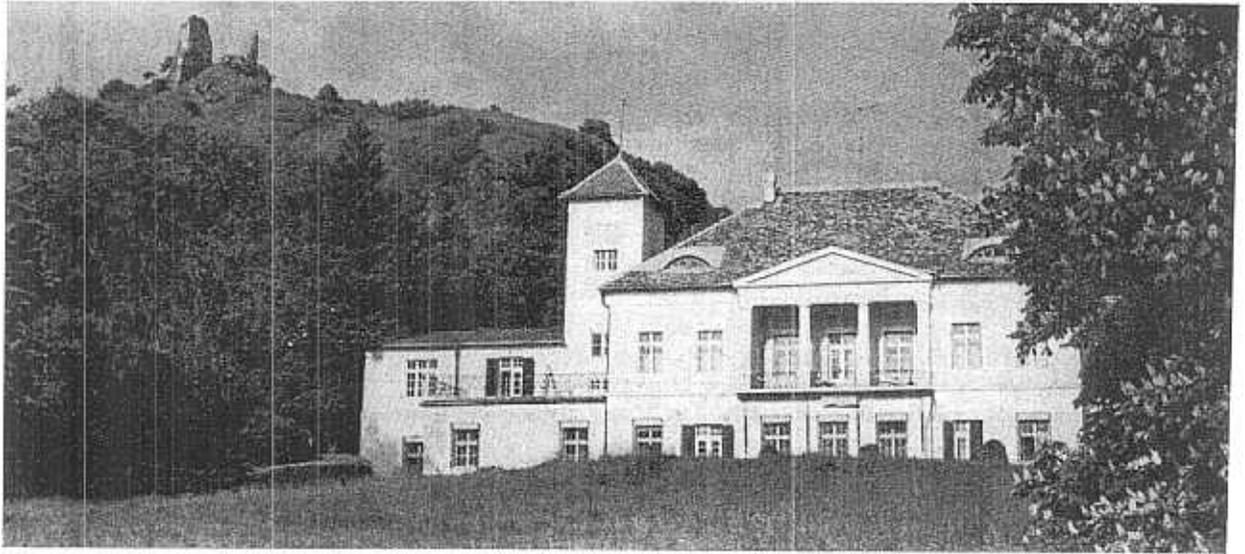


2. Szigliget. The church of the village. 12th century

the existence of a cadastral map of the last century which entirely covers the area concerned.

As regards the residential houses, provision for their survival will be facilitated by knowledge of their functional and structural peculiarities. The arrangement of these buildings, which rise one above the other on a steep hillside, was determined by the desire to orient the living-room facing on to the courtyard in a given direction: it invariably faces south or south-east.

The centre of the single-fronted house was the ancient "smoke kitchen" with its bread-oven and open fireplace also serving for heating purposes. Originally it was windowless and the smoke escaped through gaps in the ceiling and through a double door. Because of this the other rooms in the building were invariably entered from the outside, through doors located below the overhang or balcony. The kitchen did not become smokeless until the 20th century, when an open chimney with hood or a closed chimney unit was built above the oven. Dwelling-houses were composed of three rooms (front rooms, kitchen and back room) all on one floor, and this was the general rule all over the country. However, it is clear to anyone familiar with the structural methods adopted in Hungarian vernacu-



3. Szigliget. Castle

lar architecture that the technological skill of the master-craftsmen of the age was sufficient to enable them, had they wished, to build houses with several storeys.

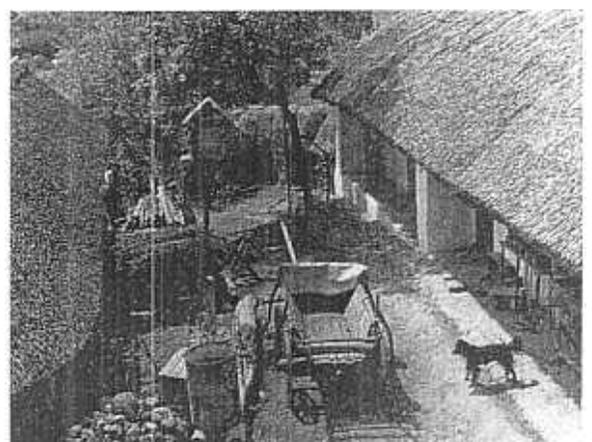
The architecture produced by the craftsmanship of the time in combination with the barely processed local building materials had a unity of its own; it featured undressed stone, hewn timber beams, split laths and a mortar composed of hand-worked straw, reed and mud for infill, exterior renderings and floor finishes.

It will be clear even from so sketchy a description that modernization of such houses involves serious difficulties. Even for the constantly diminishing sector of the population willing to occupy these technically and culturally obsolete buildings, maintenance and repair will obviously be an impossible task in the absence of a State subsidy. Regular annual grants are made to all owners who commit themselves to ensuring the upkeep of a listed building and carrying out minor repairs; the size of the grant will depend on the merits and size of the

4. Szigliget. Dwelling-house from the beginning of this century.



5. Szigliget. Typical courtyard.



house. Such grants have been accepted by all the owners concerned at Szigliget, and the resultant technical improvements in the buildings are perfectly apparent. In the country as a whole, however, only about 50% of the owners of such houses have responded favourably to the initiative.

The actual technical difficulty of maintenance is enough to discourage the owners from accepting a subsidy. There is not enough straw and reed, nor enough craftsmen possessing the necessary skills. And sometimes the buildings are in such a deplorable condition that their rehabilitation calls for considerable financial resources.

In cases where this is justified for reasons of public interest, larger subsidies covering more extensive rehabilitation work are provided; such operations mainly affect whole clusters of vernacular buildings as at Szigliget, where assistance has so far been provided for the rehabilitation of a little under ten such buildings.

The limitations of this financial aid scheme of ours are obvious. Where, as at Szigliget, listed vernacular buildings cannot retain their original functions, their survival can be ensured only for a short period. The question is: what will be the fate of these houses if their survival is challenged by the irreversible process of social change? For Szigliget the answer lies in the proximity of Lake Balaton and the transformation of what was once a village of poor peasants into a holiday resort, and 20% of

the buildings have already been turned into summer bungalows.

Financial assistance to new owners will go some way towards reconciling the two contradictory aspects, namely, use as holiday accommodation and preservation as listed buildings, even if the latter involves no more than retention of the original mass and proportions. It is only when a building is used for communal purposes and rehabilitated as a "monument" that there can be authentic preservation of detailed forms, the full beauty of the traditional materials, and all the various features of a peasant farmhouse.

The remarks I have made so far, as a specialist having to face such problems day by day, have been of a pessimistic nature. But I am happy to be able to conclude on a more optimistic note on one of the most important questions — that of the use of monuments for communal purposes.

The Council of Ministers has studied the problem of saving vernacular architecture and has decided that, over and above appreciation of our work on the ethical level, there can be comprehensive provisions for its economic basis. The central subsidy for the exportation and rehabilitation of privately-owned vernacular buildings as a prelude to their communal use in an up-to-date village community is making it possible to save over 200 buildings under a ten-year programme.

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RESUME

Les observations et les conclusions de ce rapport sont fondées sur l'expérience acquise lors des travaux du village de Szigliget (qui comporte un „secteur sauvegardé“ avec trente monuments classés et une zone protégée comptant une centaine de maisons).

Les villages protégés de Hongrie comptent 800 maisons en propriété privée sur un total de 1200 maisons. L'obligation pour les propriétaires d'entretenir des monuments présentant un intérêt public, et la présence de vestiges d'un mode de vie féodal dans un cadre de vie socialiste, entraînent certaines contradictions. Le plan cadastral du XIX^{ème} siècle permet de connaître et de sauvegarder le parcellaire et le tracé médiéval des rues de Szigliget. Les maisons sont disposées en amphithéâtre et selon une orientation unifiée. Le plan type des maisons se compose de trois pièces: une chambre en façade, une chambre et la cuisine ou-

vrant sur cour. La cuisine dispose d'un four et d'un foyer, mais ce n'est qu'au XX^{ème} siècle que furent installés des conduits de fumée et des cheminées.

L'entretien de ces maisons a été rendu difficile par défaut des matériaux de construction traditionnels — moellons de pierre, planches de bois, paille, terre glaise, etc. . . et faute d'une main d'oeuvre spécialisée. L'Etat verse tous les ans une aide — dont le montant est fixé en fonction de l'état actuel et de l'importance du bâtiment — aux propriétaires qui s'engagent à entretenir leur maison. Cette aide a été acceptée par tous les habitants de Szigliget, mais par 50% seulement des propriétaires dans le reste du pays.

1. Szigliget. Vue aérienne.

2. Idem. La première église du village, 12e s.

3. Idem. Château.

4. Idem. Maison locative du début du siècle.

5. Idem. Jardin typique.