

# **THE ARCHITECTURAL WORKS OF SEASONAL AND URBAN BATHING CULTURE IN THE DUALIST PERIOD. THE BATH OF BORSEC AND THE FORMER STEAM BATH IN TÂRGU MUREŞ**

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**Domain: History**

**Doctoral school: History, Civilization, Culture.**

**Keywords:** communal ownership of Borsec, Ditrău and Lăzarea, Upper-Borsec, Dualist period, bath architecture, monument conservation, medicinal spring, bathing culture, bath house, balneology, water- and balneotherapy, holiday home architecture, Swiss style, town development, urban development plan, Lajos Fejér, Béla Málnai, Sándor Radó, Lajos Pákei, tourism, history of tourism, architectural inventorisation, bathing culture in the 19th century, ephemeral architecture, historicism, communal ownership, public bathing, Târgu Mureş.

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## **Summary**

Public bathing culture has probably never had so much popularity as in the second half of the 19th century. At the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, bathing was widely spread among social groups, and it became a common activity for all classes. In these conditions one can understand that vacation and bathing were practically considered to be the same, and as Károly Bolemann put it in 1897, at the beginning of summer the question for some was not really where to spend the summer, but which bath to choose. Some kind of entertainment, whose therapeutic effect was a matter of research of the contemporary medicine, was also part of bourgeois bathing culture. Treatment rooms built as separate building types at bathing areas give a great example of the significance of entertainment, social interactions in bathing culture. Despite their names, these buildings did not serve for medical treatment, but ensured the appropriate place for entertainment and community life. For this reason, they included a ballroom, a piano chamber, a lounge room, a library, a room for playing cards, billiards, smoking etc. However, entertainment was not only the particularity of bathing areas. The bourgeois lifestyle that constantly fought boredom found ways to spend a nice time or socially interact even within the closed structures of the city. Just think about the bygone, outdated entertainments such as firing ranges, tennis, horse races, music pavilions, or the essential fun programs such as tableau, raffles, improvised plays. Thus, entertainment and celebration were essential elements of bourgeois society, which had a particular manifestation in bathing culture.

Specific literature often calls bourgeois bathing lifestyle a bath world, including its particular culture, as well. Indeed, bathing in the 19th century created for itself a separate world, which was ruled by laws different from those of everyday life. There the leading part was given to healing, resting, entertainment, social introduction, fun time. Work, problems, negative emotions – according to the advice of contemporaneous bath presentations – had to be left at home. However, bathing life had one deficiency: its seasonal nature, for it lasted only two and a half months. After the season, the public said farewell to the beloved bathing area, and local papers could not miss publishing this painful event.

Unable to abandon the mesmerizing world of bathing, the bourgeois public tried to reproduce the experience in their own local environment. As a pretext to the approach of hygiene and health, which had growing popularity, they established public baths in cities, as well, then later also in localities that started to be urbanized. Mainly steam baths and hot tubs were preferred in Hungary. Based on a survey carried out in 1910, there were 153 of such baths in the whole country. According to research information, the two scenes of the bourgeois bathing culture completed each other. Urban baths were often called winter baths, because they were used mainly in cold times. In summer these were closed, and their staff usually went to a renowned rural bath area.

Thus, it can be seen that in the second half of the 19th century, there was a demand for bathing in the whole year. In my thesis, I aimed to analyse the architectural and cultural historic particularities of the urban and seasonal bathing considering this demand. All these were presented through Transylvanian examples. The examination of the topic of urban bathing was based on the case of the steam bath and tubs built in 1898 in Târgu Mureş, whereas seasonal bathing was analysed through the case of the Bath of Borsec, which is the most completely preserved out of the Szekler mineral water baths. Regarding the latter, I tried to explore the architectural heritage of the Dualist period, which meant mainly the revealing and listing of the (architectural) heritage.

In my thesis, besides the thorough historic exploration of the topics, I try to find the answer to the following questions:

- How did the appearance of Borsec change in the second half of the 19th century?
- What laws and regulations contributed to the modernizations of the bath?
- How did the “Swiss style” become the specific architectural trend in the vacation lifestyle?
- How was the “Swiss style” applied to the villa architecture of Borsec?
- What were the specifics of the urban bathing culture?
- What were the demands that shaped the urban bath architecture?

- What were the specific architectural solutions of the steam baths and tubs popular in Hungary?

In my doctoral thesis entitled *The architectural works of seasonal and urban bathing culture in the Dualist period. The Bath of Borsec and the former steam bath in Târgu Mureș* I examine in detail the specific characteristics of the bathing culture that thrived in the second half of the 19th century, and its specific architectural patterns. In a significant part of the thesis, I present the bathing area of Borsec situated at heights and its bourgeois villa architecture of seasonal nature, then I devote a whole chapter to the urban bathing customs.

The part that presents the Bath of Borsec starts with establishing the time and space limits of the topic: it presents the architecture of the bath situated in Harghita county in the Dualist period, which period is the heyday of the Transylvanian bathing culture. The *Research history summary* provides a great list of literature in this topic. From the subchapter that reports on archive sources, collections, and heritage, we can learn that Borsec is quite lucky considering the quantity and quality of archive sources: although, there are only a few actual blueprints left, the frequent correspondence of the Bath Directorate describes a remarkably rich and diversified image of the contemporaneous conditions.

In the chapter following the *Introduction*, I discuss the architectural heritage of Borsec in the Dualist period, and for this the entire history of the settlement is essential. I present the history dividing into nine ages, which give us nine subchapters. The first subchapter presents the bath up until 1804, until the first period of season tickets, and it offers a general introduction to the development of the Transylvanian balneology. Between 1804 and 1832, the communes with communal ownership let the place to Antal Zimmethausen, who is considered to be the founder of the bath by the local historical literature. The second chapter aims to give a realistic image of the legendary figure of the entrepreneur from Vienna, and to present his work objectively. However, Zimmethausen was not the only achiever of the successes of this early period: The Szekler Border Guard Regiment had been stationed there since the 18th century; thus the first constructions are related to them. The third subchapter ends with the wound up of the Border Guard Regiment in 1851, after the independence war. Deliberate development of the prestigious bourgeois bath started in the second half of the 19th century: when the administration of the bath started to be institutionalized, the Bath Directorate, having members with communal ownership, and its management board, the Business Management, were established. The bath was further operated by lessees, whose primary interest was the profitable mineral water trade, and the bath was handled as a tolerated stepchild. Within such conditions, it was hard to ensure the development of the bath, therefore, the communal administration took

it into its own hands between 1874 and 1903. The fourth and fifth subchapters offer details regarding these two exciting and diverse periods, including the golden age of the bath. Starting from 1903, due to indebtedness of the communal administration, the developing bath was managed again by a lessee, this time for long term. Mór Fekete and further on the Borsec Bath Company JSC founded by him favoured the mineral water trade, as well, and they neglected the development of the bath, despite their contractual obligations. This period full of hope and failure is the topic of the sixth subchapter. Ending with the communist takeover, the following subchapter presents the period, which is characterized by the most administrative reorganization: there is no other settlement in Romania, which belonged to three different counties in the space of twenty years. Obviously, the political instability existing due to the two World Wars had a great influence. Together with the takeover by the Romanian Communist Party, the establishing of a new totalitarian government based on Soviet model had begun. As a first step, villas were nationalised, then, in the spirit of the Social tourism, the development of the bath begun. The eighth subchapter describes broadly this period until the regime change in 1989. The last chapter of the *Historical summary* reflects on the situation of the Bath of Borsec in the recent past and in the present, starting from the drastic decrease of the tourist numbers, through the close down of medical treatments in 2002, up to the actual delivery of the Hope ski slope and the planned delivery of a modern wellness centre.

The third chapter turns back to the unfortunate and scandalous beginning of the 20th century, in which the lessee of the bath was Mór Fekete. After long debates, he agreed to fulfil his contractual obligations, and in order to improve the bath, Lajos Fejér, architect from Budapest, was asked to design a complex that included a hotel and a treatment room. The construction of the complex started in 1912, but due to many irregularities, it was never entirely completed, and was entirely demolished at the end of the 1930s. Beyond the historical presentation, the chapter describes in details and evaluates the buildings that survived, which were practically completed, but, with the exception of the treatment room, they were never used, but could have given significant prestige to the bathing area.

The chapter entitled *Architectural assessment* puts the general architectural pursuits of Borsec in the Dualist period into context: in the first three subchapters it presents the tasks of the Beauty Commission which was formed from the members of the Bath Directorate; it includes the master development plans – out of which only the one planned for ten years by Gábor Margitay came into force –, and the laws and regulations regarding bath architecture, enacted during the years. The fourth subchapter presents the specific style of the bathing area situated at heights, the “Swiss style”: its emergence, spread and influence generally on bathing

areas situated at heights, then, in the following subchapter, specifically in the case of holiday home and villa architecture. The last two short subchapters describe the conservation issue of the villas and thus of the typical historical appearance of the locality, and the possibilities of saving all these.

The fifth chapter is basically a detailed description of the Swiss styled buildings in Borsec, which also contains the data sheets of prestigious buildings situated in the bathing area at the turn of the century. The stories of buildings, descriptions, dates and contemporaneous pictures – in the case of still existing buildings –, as well as the list containing recent photos describe 18 villas, 5 bath houses, and 6 well houses in details. These data sheets can be extremely important documents in case of conservation, preservation and restoration of buildings, this is proved by the fact that people competent for renovation have already asked for these documents in the case of Vaitsuk Villa, Csiky Villa, and Mélik Hotel.

The last chapter abandons the topic of the countryside situated at heights and presents an urban public bath, namely the steam bath and tubs of Târgu Mureş. The first subchapter describes the urban bathing culture and its main characteristics – including medical, social and hygiene aspects –, and gives a detailed presentation of its cultural and architectural preview. The following four subchapters contain the actual story and the description of the bath of Târgu Mureş, establishing the identity of the architect, as well as the architectural assessment of the building. They also reveal that the approach of bathing which changed with the communist takeover made the building opened in 1898 unnecessary, which proved to have a short lifetime: it could not resist half a century, for in 1944 it was exploded by the retreating German soldiers, along with the bridge situated nearby.