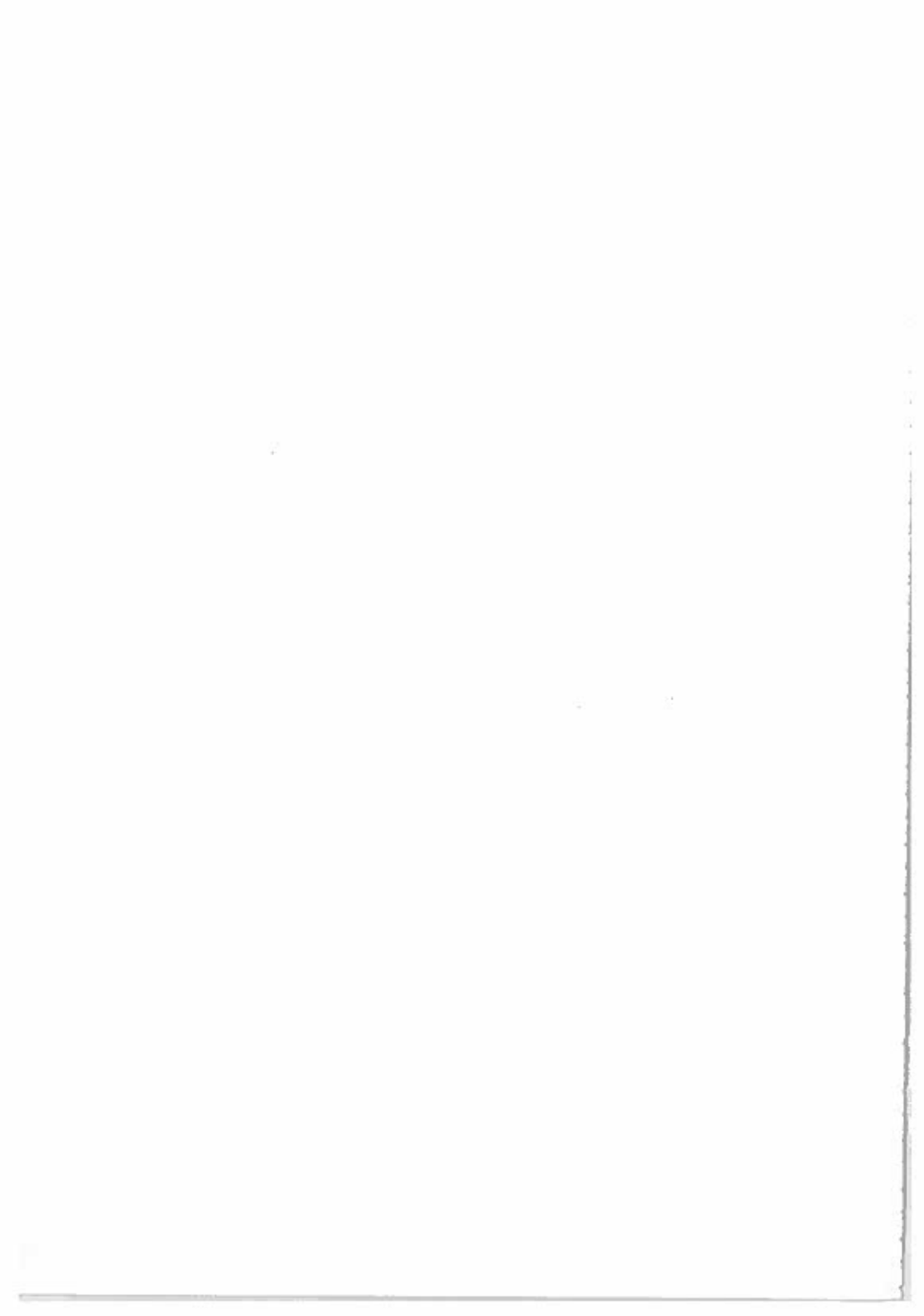


## Part II



## Chapter 6:

### Tázlár: a Frontier Community on the Great Plain (1978-9)

#### 1. Hungary's internal frontier

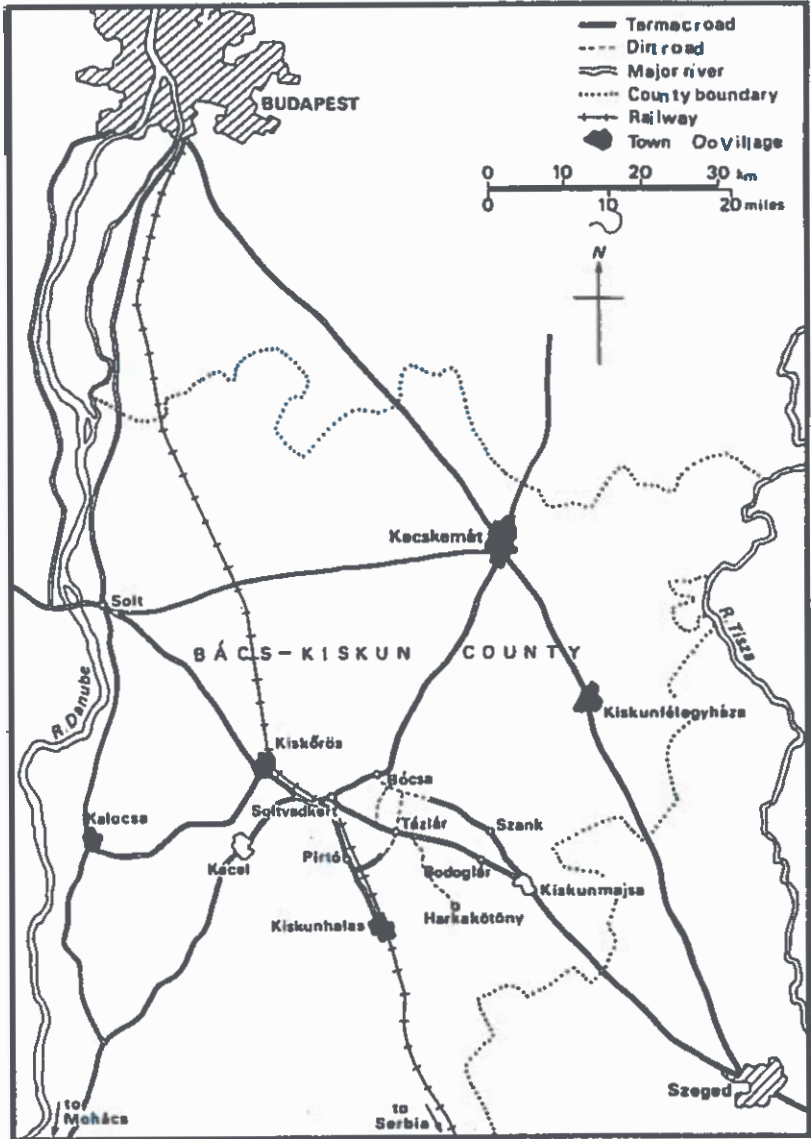
The concept of the frontier has long been controversial in historical analysis. The great American historian and foremost exponent of 'frontier theory' Frederick Jackson Turner provoked many debates with his 1921 book *The Frontier in American History*. Some of these seem a little old-fashioned today, but the influence and the fertility of the basic idea can still be seen today in various fields of study. Some of the most interesting economic history research being carried out in Hungary today is concerned with the development of the Hungarian economy in the modern period as a peripheral or 'marginal' concomitant of the expanding system of western capitalism – a conception at first sight far-removed from that of Frederick Jackson Turner, but which may have important common roots. This article will consider a thesis according to which a frontier concept can be applied to the Great Hungarian Plain in the period which followed the expulsion of Ottoman forces, i.e. from the beginning of the eighteenth century. The thesis was restated over several decades in numerous papers and articles by the Dutch social scientist, the late Professor A.N.J. den Hollander.<sup>1</sup> Here it will be illustrated and appraised with material from a single community on the plain, where I carried out ethnographical fieldwork during 1976-1977.

First, let me give the reader a summary outline of the views of Professor den Hollander. His central contention is that a European frontier area was formed in Hungary in the wake of the 150 years of Ottoman occupation of the Great Plain region. The Turks were forced to retreat during the later seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century, and the vacuum which emerged in this region was filled not only by the Hungarians who returned from the western side of the Danube but by a multiplicity of ethnic groups from a wide area of Central Europe. Ethnic diversity amongst pioneer settlers suggests one immediate point of comparison with the American frontier. Moreover the conditions which prevailed on the plain during the Ottoman occupation contained the ingredients of a 'frontier atmosphere'. In many areas the Turks destroyed the village settlement network which had developed in the Middle Ages, and the fraction of the population which remained in the region was induced to move into larger settlements isolated from each other, the so-called

## 114 The Skeleton at the Feast

'agrarian towns', which remained a feature of the Great Plain's settlement pattern for centuries to come. On the vast spaces or *puszta* between these towns, outlaw traditions flourished similar to those which later became predominant in the folk history of the American Wild West. The settlement pattern was in both instances considerably influenced by military factors and was closely allied to an economy based on extensive cattle-breeding. Cattle were driven from the Great Plain to markets as far afield as Vienna, and den Hollander finds numerous details of comparison between herding techniques, the associated importance of horse-breeding in both cultures, and the quality of the horses and cattle (greatly inferior to the folk-culture evaluation). He is careful to point out certain differences, particularly the fact that the Hungarian frontier was gradually re-subjected to the centralist power of the Hapsburg Empire, intent upon re-conquering the region with its own feudal mode of production. Nevertheless, den Hollander concludes, to understand the history of the Great Plain in the period which followed the Turkish evacuation and to explain distinctive features of its settlement pattern which have lasted until the present day, it is useful to see this plain as a European frontier zone, and to seek comparisons with the American frontier.

It is no easy task to write a detailed local history of the community of Tázlár. The archival material is relatively poor and widely scattered, like the Tázlár dwellings. The community is situated midway between the Rivers Danube and Tisza on the western zone of the Great Plain, in a region of predominantly poor quality sandy soils which during the last century has become one of the major wine-producing regions of Hungary. The name Tázlár is of Cuman origin, the Cumans being a Kipchak Turkic people who arrived in several waves in the Carpathian basin after the arrival of the Hungarians. They were settled by medieval Hungarian monarchs in the area between the two major rivers. The earliest reference which I could trace to a settlement named after the family or clan name 'Taz' dates from the year 1429. It shows the community nominally linked to County Fejér, whose modern boundaries do not extend east of the Danube. There is some archaeological evidence to suggest a settlement on the same site at the time of the arrival of Árpád and the first Hungarians. It seems likely that there was some form of nuclear settlement, and possibly a church or shrine, near to the centre of the modern community in the years preceding the Turkish occupation. Following the invasion, however, and the dramatic defeat of the Christian army at Mohács in 1526, there was no permanent settlement in Tázlár for some three centuries. During this period, lasting approximately until the first half of the nineteenth century, and even later



Map 1. Tázlár: Contemporary Regional Communications

## 116 The Skeleton at the Feast

during the first phases of resettlement, we can amass considerable detail to illustrate the den Hollander thesis.

The grazing pastures of Tázlár were not abandoned and forgotten following the flight of the village population. On the contrary, the Turkish military authorities sought to raise revenue from renting out the land to the remaining Hungarians, now for the most part gathered together in the agrarian towns. The distance between the town and the summer pasture was often very considerable. For example, quite close to Tázlár is the community of Bugac, which today is the centre of the Kiskunság National Park. Bugac still retains some of the atmosphere of the old cattle-breeding economy: its pastures were formerly rented by the town of Kecskemét, and after resettlement the community was still administered from this town, some 50 kilometres distant. According to one source, Tázlár *puszta* was leased in the mid-seventeenth century by the citizens of Szeged, some 70 kilometres away to the south-east. We should not, therefore, be surprised that the name of the community (and even of specific sites within it, such as Church Hill) should have survived throughout the long period of Turkish rule. Herdsmen probably established temporary summer residences during most of the occupation, continuing the semi-nomadic traditions of early Hungarian settlers and later Cuman immigrants in this region. Only towards the end of the occupation, with Turkish forces under military pressure, did the situation become unstable and dangerous. Documents in the municipal archives of Kiskunhalas, the nearest of the agrarian towns to Tázlár and one of the original Cuman settlements, record the fate of a citizen who, in 1689, strayed with his animals beyond the town boundaries into Tázlár: 'cruel death at the hands of the Tatar'.

No Hungarian noble could claim Tázlár *puszta* following the Turkish withdrawal, but neither was any Cuman or pseudo-Cuman claim upheld. Instead, together with numerous other properties in the immediate region and in many other areas, Tázlár was allocated to a family of the upper gentry, the Wattay family, in return for services rendered to the Monarchy during the closing years of the military campaigns. It is something of a puzzle why Tázlár, with its history of Cuman settlement, should have been arbitrarily allotted in this way. It might more logically have been included in the reformed bloc of Cuman territory, the Kiskunság, which in the middle of the eighteenth century, after prolonged negotiations, succeeded in purchasing a large measure of autonomy from the Hapsburg State. Kiskunhalas and other neighbouring communities to the east of Tázlár returned to the 'Cumans', though the actual recipients had only the most tenuous claim to represent the original settlers and consisted for the most part of Hungarian immigrants from Transdanubia.

Tázlár, however, was left as a peninsular of the feudal monarchy jutting into the Kiskunság. The boundary can be clearly seen on the first detailed map of the community, the Habsburg military survey of 1783.

In practice this border entailed no sharp social or economic differentiation: the feudalism which prevailed on the Tázlár side was of a weak, diluted character. The Wattay family had its seat at Pomaz, north of Buda. Many documents concerning the administration of its various domains have survived and can now be consulted in the National Archives. The records bring out the practical limits upon the power of the nominal lord in the conditions which prevailed in the frontier period. Today the town of Kiskőrös is the dynamic centre of the administrative district into which Tázlár falls, but in the early eighteenth century it, too, was *puszta*. In 1718 the Wattay family organized the first settlement of a colony of Slovaks, and when Kiskőrös became the centre of the family's property in the region, its inhabitants rented the pastures of Tázlár, some 20 kilometres away. They were not subjected to some of the important restrictions typically associated with feudal economy, and in comparison with Transdanubian villagers in the same period, their dues and obligations to the Wattay family were slight. The family accrued some additional revenue through its control of the alcohol products sold at the Tázlár tavern, but sales dropped considerably during the winter months. This is consistent with the hypothesis that Tázlár *puszta* had no permanent residents during the eighteenth century. During all this period lawlessness and violence posed recurrent problems for the authorities. For example, Kiskőrös documents (now in the County Archives, Kecskemét) record the treatment administered by the town barber to a man brutally attacked and robbed of his horse on the Tázlár *puszta* in 1805. Tázlár maintained its reputation as a favourite hideout for outlaws until well into the second half of the nineteenth century; local tradition has it that the most famous of all Hungarian outlaws, Sándor Rózsa, sought refuge here after his escape from gaol in Szeged.

Far-reaching changes took place in the course of the nineteenth century, changes which require a revaluation of the concept of the frontier in the Hungarian context. First, the unified property of the Wattay family began to fragment as a consequence of a decline in its economic fortunes, a decline which was typical of that experienced by large sections of the Hungarian gentry during the nineteenth century. Following the first sales of sections of the *puszta*, we find evidence of manor-construction and permanent residence. The first of the pioneers who came to resettle Tázlár arrived not from the more remote Hungarian agrarian towns, but from the newer, mainly Slovak town of Kiskőrös, and from the neighbouring village of Vadkert, colonized by its lord

## 118 The Skeleton at the Feast

with Swabian Germans in the early eighteenth century. The census figures recorded annually by the Catholic diocese of Kalocsa show that during the first three quarters of the nineteenth century population growth in Tázlár was slow, but also highly erratic and subject to sharp declines, no doubt associated with disease, climatic variation etc. More permanent change began almost exactly a century ago in the 1870s, when successive waves of settlers arrived from the more heavily populated regions of the Great Plain, speedily transformed the mode of farming and began the construction of the modern community. At this time the administrative entity known as Tázlár comprised an expanse of more than 100 square miles of *puszta*. It included several other former possessions of the Wattay family which later gave rise to separate communities and either developed nuclear centres of their own or retained the pattern of scattered settlement.

The modern community in Tázlár did not take shape overnight, and the imposition of social control in frontier conditions proved a difficult task for the great institutions of feudal society, church and state alike. This is amply confirmed by the records of the local council, as well as the ecclesiastical archives in Kalocsa. The secular authorities struggled to enforce the property code, to ensure basic medical services, and to maintain law and order. The established churches had to compete with numerous rival sects for the allegiance of the pioneers. Even after the construction of buildings for worship, they had difficulties in attracting congregations because communications remained very poor. The church shouldered the main responsibility for public education during this period, but it encountered problems in extracting fees and in maintaining full attendance. No genuine community developed in Tázlár during the first generation of mass resettlement: behind the minimal presence of a few central, national institutions, the anarchic individualism of the frontier persisted. This is reflected in the character of the settlement pattern. The population increased very rapidly (from 876 in the year 1900 to 2,268 in 1910, at the height of the process of 'parcellization' of the more fertile areas of the *puszta*). Yet there was no substantial growth of a nuclear centre. The Catholic church and the state administration had their headquarters in separate clusters three kilometres apart. The immigrant families built a farm (*tanya*) wherever they succeeded in acquiring plots of land, from whatever materials were at hand. Some are said to have spent years in temporary accommodation in cave-like huts dug down into the soil, while the whole family worked on the construction of the permanent dwelling. The settlement pattern which resulted, and which remained dominant until the socialist period, was an extreme type in which, in contrast to other parts of the Great Plain, the *tanya* was not merely



a temporary abode designed to facilitate specific tasks on the land (such as the herdsman's summer shelter), but the permanent residence and full-time work place of an entire family.

The sharp rise in the population coincided with the transformation of the economy and the social structure of Tázlár. Some owners of large farms, generally absentee proprietors, persisted for some time with the old cattle-rearing, based on extensive-grazing methods. Others led the way with crop innovations, but many of the later arrivals could afford only very small plots ('dwarf farms') and were compelled to practice a more intensive agriculture. Many families found that the quality of their soil was barely adequate to produce cereals sufficient for subsistence requirements, while the marketing of all agricultural products was greatly handicapped by the poor communications of the region. The coming of the railroad to Soltvadkert (the new name of the neighbouring, primarily German-speaking village) in the 1880s was a great boon for some. Those who planted relatively large areas with vines were able to derive a handsome living from fruit and wine production, which they were able to market through the merchants, mainly Jewish, of Soltvadkert and Kiskunhalas. However, before a pioneer immigrant was able to produce his own wine considerable capital investment in equipment were required. The story of the development of the community in the pre-socialist period is the story of ever-widening differentials within the peasant population, both with respect to the means of production and in a broader social sense. In the early decades of mass resettlement, i.e. the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the observable differentiation can still be reconciled with the mobility and the open opportunities of the frontier. Some settlers arrived with little or no capital, purchased dwarf farms with the aid of bank mortgages, and went on to become, if not exactly millionaires, then at least the respected owners of large farms built up on the basis of their own dedicated family labour.

By the inter-war period, when the community population rose to over 3,000 and land became an increasingly scarce commodity, *tanya*-dwellers had fewer opportunities for social mobility. Even in the 1930s absolute landlessness was a relatively rare condition, and the number of absentee owners of large estates was insignificant in comparison with most other Hungarian communities. Yet a closer inspection of the 1935 census data on land ownership suggests that, by the outbreak of the Second World War, the peasantry in Tázlár had become clearly stratified on the basis of the ownership of land. Interviews conducted in the community in the 1970s confirm that this hierarchy left little scope for upwards mobility. The Catholic Priest's diaries for the 1930s recount the

## 120 The Skeleton at the Feast

grinding poverty in which a large section of the population was condemned to live, particularly during the years of world economic recession. In the heyday of the frontier larger families had been deliberately planned in order to supply labour for the never-ending work to be done on the land. In the Depression years it was the large family which suffered most acutely. Although the government of the day pursued numerous policies aimed at relieving this distress, average family size began to contract sharply: the number of children planned has remained low here and throughout Hungary in the post-war period. By the end of 1930s we can say that the economic mode of the frontier had been almost completely transformed from extensive cattle-rearing to a more intensive agriculture and viticulture, and that land itself had become a highly fragmented and scarce commodity. There was not much development of a nuclear village centre, nor of a common identity or community spirit among the scattered *tanya* population. But there was a clearly hierarchical social structure, corresponding to that which prevailed throughout rural Hungary in the Horthy period. In this sense at least, the frontier had been closed. The community of Tázlár had been incorporated into the national society and its class structure henceforth would conform to the general class structure of the nation.

Tázlár provides a good illustration of numerous points of den Hollander's thesis. As we have seen, this settlement for several centuries lacked any semblance of a nuclear centre, and both its economy and its folk culture have been permanently influenced by frontier conditions. Mass resettlement did not lead to the emergence of a conventional village community. On the contrary, this took place within the framework of the *tanya* movement, and on their new, isolated farms the pioneers preserved specific aspects of the frontier, particularly its social and cultural backwardness. This backwardness and isolation persisted in spite of the transition to a more intensive agriculture and despite the increasingly rigid stratification of rural society. Ultimately, the *tanya* movement may be studied as a product of the peculiar character of capitalist penetration from the west into Hungary, of its failure to stimulate sufficient indigenous industrial development and its failure to challenge the stifling conservatism of the traditional structure of Hungarian society. This provides the key to explaining why the fate of the Central European frontier was so different from that of the American, where an important element in Turner's argument was the contribution of the frontier to the formation of a democratic political culture. The farmers who emigrated to Tázlár in the later nineteenth century as a result of acute overpopulation in other regions of the plain were seeking the opportunities of the frontier, but these had disappeared completely by the end

of the inter-war period. The class structure which prevailed in the national society had finally extended its hegemony here as well. Mass migrations of the population did not establish a dynamic, creative frontier in Central Europe, such as prevailed in North America, but led directly to the elimination of such objective elements of the frontier as were present in pockets such as Tázlár, encompassing them within a very conservative national society. The real frontier was found not by those who emigrated to Tázlár, but only by those who managed to leave Central Europe in this period for the New World.

## 2. The frontier community since 1945

By the outbreak of the Second World War the divisions of peasant society in Tázlár reflected the class structure of the nation, and the economic and political problems of the nation had direct repercussions upon the local community. In spite of this incorporation into the national society, the notion of a community remained elusive because of the persistence of what was by now commonly described in the sociographic literature as the '*tanya* problem'. In the analysis of Tázlár since 1945 I shall concentrate upon the two inter-related themes of community and incorporation. Considerable progress has been made in the development of a planned nuclear centre in the lower of the two hamlets (Lower Tázlár), in increasing cohesion and raising the material and cultural standards of all citizens. At the same time *tanya* residence has remained attractive to many, and this is in part because Tázlár has once again diverged from the main stream of national development. Currently, in the late 1970s the forces of incorporation are once again in command and Tázlár is being required to conform more closely to the national model of collectivized agriculture. But for a substantial period following mass collectivization this area was one of the scenes for a novel Hungarian experiment with gradualist, transitional institutions in agriculture, in which pride of place was retained by traditional individual smallholders.

The post-war period opened with the Land Reform of 1945. This had only a small impact upon Tázlár because of the relative absence of large estates by this time. Nevertheless it gave many individuals the opportunity to build a new *tanya* and commence independent farming operations for the first time, thus further strengthening *tanya*-based smallholding. The population of Tázlár reached a peak of 3,408 persons in 1949. Of these 2,650 were to be found outside the two hamlet centres. In the same year, the Tanya Council was formulating plans for the resolution of the '*tanya* problem' at the national level. These included the proclamation of numerous new communities in areas of

## 122 The Skeleton at the Feast

scattered settlement, and the affiliation of other *tanya* zones to nearby towns. A ban was imposed on further *tanya* construction. These new policies gave rise to no radical changes in Tázlár in the 1950s. All individual farmers suffered and output declined sharply as a result of the policies of the years of the 'personality cult'. There was also a great contraction in the landholdings of a large section of the peasantry, although apparently excessive holdings could in many cases be justified by the poor ecology of the region. Many farmers sought work in industry, while others applied for membership of the new cooperative groups which functioned in Tázlár from 1949 onwards. The latter, however, though benefiting from land transfers away from the richer sections of the independent peasantry, were never properly in a position to lay the foundations of an efficient large-scale agriculture. Their membership consisted primarily of those who had been unable to make a success of independent farming after 1945, those lacking in essential know-how. These collectives obtained very little aid from the state at this time. The cooperative movement was thus highly unstable in its early years, and several groups dissolved in 1956. They were inevitably viewed with suspicion by the majority of farmers who were fearful of having their own lands appropriated. However in the closing years of the 1950s, following the government's abolition of compulsory deliveries and the general raising of agricultural prices, smallholders in Tázlár and throughout the nation once again became relatively prosperous. The great majority of the land surface was still owned by private farmers. The curious fact about Tázlár is that even after experiencing mass collectivization (almost all farmers signed to join one of the three new cooperative groups formed in the closing weeks of 1961), the smallholders retained their dominance, in contrast to the new pattern of farming in the nation as a whole.

The institution which gave rise to this anomaly is known as the 'specialist cooperative' (*szakszövetkezet*). It differs from the familiar *kolkhoz* type of 'production cooperative' in a number of ways, and in some respects bears a closer resemblance to the 'agricultural circle' of non-collectivized communities in Poland. The individual, on joining, takes all his land with him into the cooperative, with the exception of a nominal household plot and special cultures such as wines, but retains the use-rights over all his plots until such time as the group is ready to transfer them to some form of collective exploitation. The member is not obliged to work in the 'collective sector' (*közös*), but may continue with his family to devote himself to his own (*magán*) fields. For certain purposes, such as social security entitlements, this independent activity may, like work on the household plot in the context of the production cooperative, be counted as work in the collective sector. The farmer is expected

to dispose of a large proportion of his output through the collective, but since the latter, as the agent of the state, has of late been able to offer favourable prices, this is no hardship for the member and merely simplifies his marketing. He also has the right to participate in the organization of the cooperative, which is a democratic, self-governing body controlled ultimately by the general assembly of the entire membership. Finally, he has the opportunity to purchase many services from the group, including supplies of fertilizers and feeds and the mechanical execution of a wide range of tasks (sowing, harvesting etc.) on his individual plots.

The establishment of specialist cooperatives in communities such as Tázlár had several justifications. In the first place, scattered settlement posed a formidable obstacle to field consolidation. Second, the economic importance of smallholders' fragmented fruit and viticulture in areas such as the Danube Tisza interfluvium weighed heavily against premature collectivization. However it was always stressed that the specialist cooperative was a lower form of collective and explicitly transitional, and that its collective sector would gradually be strengthened. Each year a specified proportion of plots was to be absorbed by the collective sector until such time as the specialist cooperative reached the ideal of the usual production cooperative.

In retrospect it is easy to understand the reasons for the failure to implement this process in Tázlár. From one point of view it is a tribute to the realization of cooperative democracy that the elected leadership of local farmers made no attempt to strengthen the collective sector through the appropriation of the lands of their fellow-members. The collective land area did expand gradually, but this was due to the voluntary ceding of plots by emigrants, or by farmers who found that, with the help of the group in supplying goods and machinery services, they no longer needed more than a few hectares of land. Many members prospered in the new situation, particularly in the years after 1968 when the farmers of specialist cooperatives, most of whom were still working full-time on their own farms, were optimally placed to exploit the opportunities created by government policies designed to stimulate small-plot farming nationally. In the meantime the collective sector continued its piecemeal assimilation of the inferior lands the independent farmers did not need, and suffered from under-investment and general neglect. Tázlár soon came to typify an extreme case of the 'rich peasant and poor cooperative' dichotomy (see Lázár 1976). Whereas the 'poverty' of many cooperatives stemmed solely from the lack of central funds and disguised a quite satisfactory return on capital, the specialist cooperatives of Tázlár suffered from both the absence of

## 124 The Skeleton at the Feast

outside financing and from local mismanagement. It was difficult to find employees of the right calibre to work in the collective sector, and the leaders themselves were often most concerned with their own personal farms. Several large-scale fruit and vine investments failed completely in the 1960s through lack of professional advice. The collective sector confined its own production to field crops, and its other activities to supporting the profitable animal and wine production of its members.

The conditions of the specialist cooperative contributed towards the resolving of *tanya* social problems, and yet simultaneously made a final solution more difficult to achieve in the short term. On the positive side, it was thanks to the large sums now obtainable in independent farming that many *tanya* families were able to afford the construction of new houses in the village. More than 100 families have made this move over the last fifteen years, building entirely new streets and transforming the character of Lower Tázlár. A hamlet centred around the tavern and a few shops has given way to a modern community of almost 1,000 persons with numerous central institutions and services. Noteworthy in this process of modernization was the role of the state and of the local council in the accomplishment of extensive building programmes (schools, surgery, culture-house, pavements, post-office, shops etc.) and major ventures such as the piped water network. The private housebuilding boom as yet shows no sign of abating, and the community council has ambitious plans for the future, including park landscaping and the further development of cultural facilities. The solutions to the social problems of *tanya* settlement are being achieved not, as was once envisaged, through administrative measures and decrees, but pragmatically in the course of the general rise in living standards under the influence of wise community planning. In contrast to the ineffectiveness of the collective sector in agriculture, the local authorities have here exercised a decisive controlling hand. The conscious policy to promote the central functions of the lower centre has inevitably been accompanied by discrimination against Tázlár's upper hamlet, and this has caused some resentment among its inhabitants.

In recent years, beginning in 1975 with the arrival of a team of young, qualified professionals to head the management of the specialist cooperative, modernization of the agricultural structure of the community has also proceeded apace, though less smoothly than the growth of the village centre. In one sense, the underlying trend ever since 1945 has been towards the greater integration of smallholders and the undermining of their independence. In place of semi-autonomous production utilizing relatively large areas, they have been induced to substitute cooperation with the collective sector and more intensive methods.

Moreover, in Tázlár as everywhere in Hungary, many families now have one or more of their members in regular employment off the farm, either in one of the local cooperatives or socialist farms, or as a commuter to more distant urban factories. The success of recent government policies in stimulating output through price incentives is further indication of the integration of small-farming: the farmers of the specialist cooperative are not an isolated reservation of 'private interests', but a group susceptible and responsive to general agricultural policies. They have a special place within the total small-farm sector (which includes the household plots and the auxiliary plots of industrial workers etc.), but all small farming takes place in an integrated framework that is radically different from the old agrarian structure (see Romány 1977).

The fact remains, nonetheless, that at the time of mass collectivization it was not expected that the distinctive institutions of the specialist cooperative would continue to guarantee small producers, many of whom would remain full-time farmers, the use of landholdings considerably in excess of the norm for the household plots of the production cooperatives, as well as the freedom to work individually, free of obligations towards the collective sector. Since 1975 the specialist cooperative leadership in Tázlár, frequently in conflict with the wishes of its members and in closer association with higher state administrative organs, has been attempting to bring about greater conformity to the national pattern. Promising new investments have been undertaken in the collective sector. Some *tanyas* have been acquired by compulsory purchase orders and demolished to make way for large-scale vineyards. The leadership has also bravely tackled the land question and pushed through collectivization schemes designed to enable the most rational expansion of the collective acreage.

Attachments to traditional family plots accounted for the dismay with which much of the community has received these policies. However there can be no doubt that the losses in small-farm production consequent upon collectivization today are infinitely less serious than they would have been twenty years ago. Most farmers no longer need large resources in land and are able to attain the output levels they desire by virtue of their membership of the specialist cooperative. At the time of mass collectivization it was objectively beyond the capacity of the collective sector to assure the conditions for the technical integration of small-farms. At that time the appropriation of land would have had a direct effect upon the productive potential of the farm. In the decades which have elapsed since mass collectivization the existence of the specialist cooperatives was one of a number of factors which facilitated the long-term strengthening of the collective sector, without entailing shortfalls in production. In the present situation, an integrated agriculture continues to rely

## 126 The Skeleton at the Feast

upon the interdependence of large-scale and small-plot farming, but the prospects now seem brighter for the further consolidation of the former. The nationwide strength of the socialist sector means that it can now afford to pay the price necessary to eliminate the exceptional status of the specialist cooperative members within the small-farming sector. The specialist cooperatives would then approximate to the conditions of the typical production cooperative.

Reaction to these policies in Tázlár is not uniform, because the cooperative membership is highly differentiated. Some are more or less integrated already. Others aspire only to the traditional levels of farm output, believe that the present size of their landholdings is essential to their enterprise, and justify continued *tanya* residence by the need to be as close as possible to these plots. A few individuals have attempted to resist the appropriation of their *tanyas* for cooperative farm consolidation, but their complaints have gone unheeded.

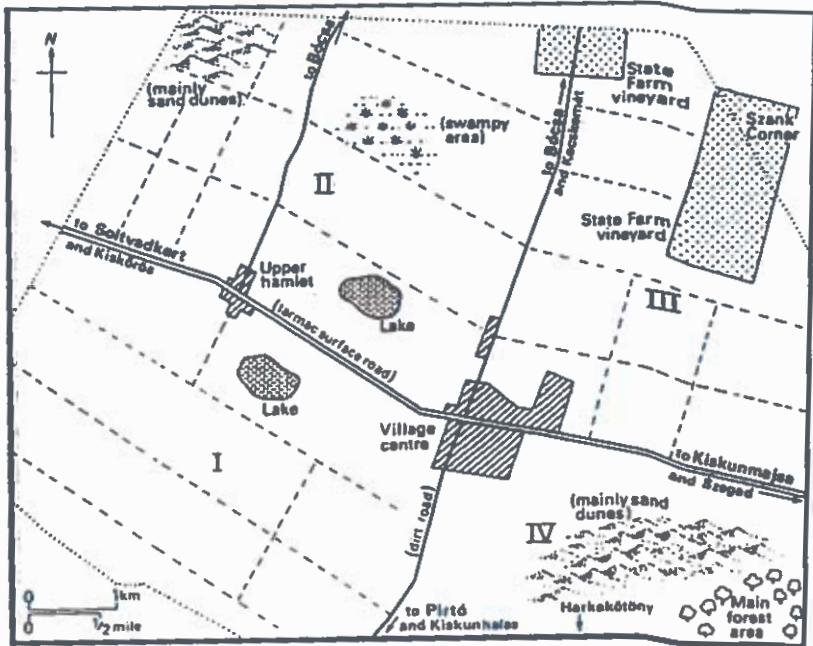
In short, the experiment with specialist cooperatives may be hailed as a success in terms of easing the national economic transition to a socialist agriculture, but we may nevertheless wish to consider the full social influence of the cooperative upon the community before offering a final assessment. A common fallacy which underlies many western analyses of rural societies following collectivization is the assumption that similar institutions and central planning lead necessarily to a dull uniformity of social structure throughout the nation. The truth is the Hungary's agrarian society remains in constant flux and presents many surprises. However, while heterogeneity may in itself be highly desirable, we would not expect to discover under socialism any of the social distinctions reminiscent of capitalist rural society. With these points in mind, let us pay a short visit to the specialist cooperative community of Tázlár and meet a few of the citizens still making use of *tanyas* in summer 1978.

### 3. A *tanya* zone in 1978

We set out on the road from Soltvadkert, Tázlár's nearest neighbour at ten kilometres, and always a much more prosperous community, in which the specialist cooperatives were able to develop strong collective sectors at an early stage. After proceeding five kilometres in a south-easterly direction we reach a large wooden cross by the side of the road, which marks the boundary with Tázlár. There is no conspicuous change in the distribution of the *tanyas* and their access tracks, nor in the mixed landscape of large fields, small vineyards and seemingly infertile rough grazing land. Two kilometres past this



cross the road bends slightly to pass through the upper hamlet. Another subtle bend, and after a further three kilometres one is in the main village. Tázlár extends for a further perfectly flat five kilometres beyond this centre, before merging imperceptibly into the less developed *tanya* world of Bodoglár, in the direction of Szeged. We shall not travel so far but restrict our focus to one square mile, north of the main road and adjacent to the Soltvadkert boundary. The land here is of relatively good quality and of average *tanya* density. It was settled in the main by farmers from Soltvadkert, who bought parcels of around twenty *hold* (11.5 hectares) at the turn of the century; but the larger properties of one or two rich peasant farmers (*paraszt nagygazda*) were also preserved intact until the 1940s. Some inhabitants have retained close ties with the older centre of Soltvadkert than with either of the Tázlár hamlets. The principal access tracks fall perpendicularly to the main road. After about a mile these tracks peter out in a zone of sand dunes where *tanya* penetration ceases. Electricity has been available along these access tracks for several years, but supplies are not yet extended to every *tanya* household.



Map 2. Tázlár: 1978 Topography

## 128 The Skeleton at the Feast

From the road, one receives an impression here of generally large fields, implying collective cultivation. A policy of active appropriations has been re-adopted in the last few years, after a lull of some two decades since the very large private farms were broken up. The ageing population has raised no effective protest. The specialist cooperative owns the buildings of the largest of the former private farms, but in spite of predictions that large-scale agriculture would utilize such buildings in the new pattern of farming as storehouses, the cooperative has found no use for them and they have fallen into decay. When another large tanya came onto the market a few years ago it was bought by a neighbouring smallholder, but later it was remembered that, in now possessing two dwellings, he was in violation of the law. The property then reverted to the cooperative, and it now serves as low-rent accommodation for an employee of the collective sector, a tractor driver who is unlikely to stay for very long or to bother very much about maintaining the dwelling. Other *tanyas* have been abandoned as places of residence, yet their owners have retained proprietorship and return to cultivate the gardens or associated vineyards in summer months. One individual used to return regularly from his new home beyond the Tisza. Imre Bugyi is one of a number who commute from Soltvadkert at peak periods, and hence use the *tanya* in the manner characteristic of the Great Plain in the past, as an aid to farming in the summer season rather than as a permanent residence. Imre is a former chairman of the specialist cooperative in Tázlár. Although sidelined in controversial circumstances by the new young leadership in 1975, he remains more popular than they in the eyes of many farmers, and retains the respect and affection of his neighbours here.

Nearby, another prosperous farmer who now has his permanent residence in Soltvadkert broke the law by constructing an imposing new *tanya* with modern cellars and garage next to his exemplary orchards. This extravagance cost Sándor Balogh a substantial fine (for building without permission), but he is rumoured to be well-satisfied with the result. In other cases, however, the decision to leave a *tanya* marks a scaling down of agricultural activity on the part of the farmer. The vines degenerate extremely quickly, and the buildings are frequently destroyed by their owners, care being taken to salvage valuable materials, such as roofing tiles. The cooperative has no interest in acquiring more old *tanyas* except where they fall in areas scheduled for large-scale redevelopment. Those who still intend to leave have a good chance of finding a buyer for their property only when it has electricity and is situated near the main road.

László Vajda works in the technical centre of the cooperative in the village. He is only thirty, but has managed to build a house in the centre which his wife and children are already occupying. The stables at the *tanya* and the importance of the income he derives from milk have induced László to stay on for a few more months, after which the buildings will probably be abandoned. Similarly, Judit Kovács, a *tanya* widow of fifty-seven who lives with her younger son and is still active on the land, has with the aid of the contributions of another son, a wage-worker in Soltvadkert, laid the foundations of a large new house in the upper hamlet, to which she will move permanently in the near future, at which point their farming activity will probably cease altogether.

Among those most likely to live out their lives on the *tanyas* of their forebears, we may note first of all a number of descendants of the former prosperous middle-peasantry who have successfully adapted to new conditions. They belong to a group which contains most of the major individual producers in Tázlár: it is above all the value of their production which has been retained for society and for the good of the nation's balance of trade by the institution of the specialist cooperative. For example there is János Bak, who lived through many difficult years with the stigma of being labelled a *kulák*, and who even today is far from reconciled with the land politics and the general performance of the cooperative. Yet from his four hectares of land and three quarters of a hectare of vines, János sells to the state through the cooperative produce worth over 60,000 forints annually. He also makes some use of the cooperative for machine services. At the same time, his wife and sole companion on the *tanya* is regularly selling large quantities of fresh garden produce on the open market in Soltvadkert. János is sixty-five years old now, and illness makes work in the vineyards very difficult for him. He resolves this difficulty as his parents might have done in the past, and as his rich neighbours do today, by seeking to hire labour on a daily basis. That, perhaps, is his main substantive complaint today: not the institution of the specialist cooperative, which allows him so much latitude and independence, but the general economic climate which is both driving up the price of hired labour and squeezing its supply.

This square mile contains other producers who have flourished in recent conditions. Pál Kunos (born 1926) is a specialist wine producer, one of the largest in the community. He is not a very popular man, and has the greatest difficulty in recruiting day-labourers; nor is he well liked by the local tax inspectors, who suspect him of entering false declarations of his grape harvest

## 130 The Skeleton at the Feast

in order to increase his profits through private selling. Despite his high income, the living conditions on his *tanya* have not greatly changed in recent decades. In contrast, not far away is the expensively modernized *tanya* of István Papp. István now farms only a small area of poor quality land on the edge of the sand dune zone, but his years of experience enable him to produce remarkable results from such meagre resources. He can sometimes be encountered cutting the hay on the verges of *tanya* access tracks: it may not belong to him, but as he points out it would be a shame to let valuable grass go to waste. In addition to apricots and melons, plus some milk and pork, he too produces wine: but, he jokingly adds, only through the illegal distilling and retailing of spirit (*pálinka*) does the present conjuncture offer the individual farmer a respectable living, and enable him to pay all his taxes. István is now fifty-seven, and he too feels that the individual farmer has been unfairly squeezed in recent years; but his own industry and resourcefulness have not been found wanting, and it is the whole society which is benefiting from these qualities. When you thank him for his time and get up to move on, he presses you to accept his visiting card: in simple, elegant letters it says *István Papp, Private Farmer*.

A number of individuals of a younger generation are full-time small cultivators on a more modest scale. Levente Simai did not inherit a large land area or good quality vineyards. Although he is twenty years younger and, until his eldest child recently started work on a state farm, had two children to support at home, he produces less than half the value of János Bak's farm output. From savings in recent years Levente has purchased expensive vine spraying equipment. With this he can now earn substantial sums through spraying in the vineyards of his older neighbours, in addition to saving effort in his own. Nearby the Tóth household is another in which neither adult has any off-farm activity, but which in comparison with the older producers we have already met is not making the most of the opportunities afforded by the specialist cooperative. Gábor purchases fewer services from the cooperative than the larger producers, and at peak periods his wife helps out on the adjacent farm of István Papp.

Other households in this cluster are not engaged so heavily with farming their own plots and procure their livelihood primarily by other means. There is much variety here. Péter Hont commutes to work on the railways in Budapest, and during his absences his wife is left alone with their numerous young children on the small *tanya* which they purchased cheaply a few years ago. In summer they are usually joined by members of her family from another

community, attracted by the relatively high wages available in agricultural labouring. Sometimes the whole family contracts with one of the farmers we have met, and the children too have to be taken along. This family, and another very similar in character, does a little gardening for subsistence requirements but produces virtually no agricultural commodities for sale through the cooperative. Heavy drinking is a problem shared by most of the adults, women as well as men. The teacher in the upper hamlet has often expressed worries about the welfare of the children in such conditions.

Ferenc Korik was born in 1914 and is now a pensioner of the state farm which owns large vineyards on the borders of Tázlár. The eldest of his six children are already full-time workers for the state farm but, after spending most of his working life in the socialist sector, Ferenc now prefers to work on his own plots adjacent to the *tanya*, both to satisfy family consumption needs and to market through the cooperative. The time this family now has free to work for others is therefore more restricted than it was in the past.

This does not exhaust the social types we can identify within this one small corner of Tázlár. Other families manage to combine various types of wage-labour with significant small-farm commodity production. These are the 'worker-peasants', a large group throughout the Hungarian countryside. The average age of the *tanya* dwellers is high. Some of the pensioner households are able to live comfortably off the results of their own past labour or with the aid of their children resident in the village or in remote towns, but others are unable to afford the installation of electricity and struggle to maintain themselves on the small allowance they receive from the cooperative. Until recently this allowance was worth much less than the pension of a production cooperative member, and the problems of old persons are intensified by difficult communications, which impede them from maintaining regular contacts with relatives elsewhere. Let us close with the case of Tamás Orbán, born in 1908, who lives on a *tanya* that is some distance inside the sand dune zone. He bought this *tanya* and a few hectares of sand cheaply soon after the war, but a few years later became severely disabled and unable to walk without crutches. In place of manual work, he underwent a course and became the treasurer of one of Tázlár's first cooperative groups in the early 1950s. When that group was merged with another, and when the genuinely collective groups of the 1950s gave way to the loose, mass-member specialist cooperatives of the 60s and 70s, Tamás fell back upon his small pension, plus his wife's labour in gardening and in tending a few vines. He joined the Communist Party when it was suggested to him that

## 132 The Skeleton at the Feast

he should, as a cooperative official in 1951. He has remained a member out of conviction. Sometimes a car is sent from the village centre to bring him to party meetings, but more often than not he has to hobble on crutches to the main road a mile away and wait for the bus. His pension is supplemented from the earnings of his youngest son, who spends the summer season labouring for the rich farmers of Soltvadkert. This son has reached the age at which most of his contemporaries have married and begun their investment in modern housing in one of the nuclear centres, but it seems that he spends a high proportion of his earnings on alcohol. Tamás Orbán speaks without bitterness of the specialist cooperative, which has brought back good fortune to many of those who possessed it in the past, but remains far short of fulfilling the cooperative ideals which inspired him and the other pioneers of socialist agriculture in Tázlár thirty years ago.

What lessons can be drawn from this short visit to a few of the inhabitants of one corner of Tázlár's still sprawling *tanya* world? First and foremost there is the implication that the positive economic results of the experiment with specialist cooperatives should be balanced against some negative socio-cultural manifestations. Tázlár has always been rather atypical. Only in communities with this type of cooperative is there such extensive hiring of labour in Hungary today. Only in such communities did government policies designed to increase small-farm output run the risk of intensifying remnants or the traditional stratification pattern. As we saw in the first part of this article, that pattern was very late in taking shape in Tázlár. Now it seemed to be persisting all the more stubbornly, as if the village wanted again to isolate itself from the general trend of national development. It was only with considerable difficulties, during which the self-managing character of the cooperative was seriously weakened, that towards the end of the 1970s the community began to move in the direction of a properly integrated agriculture based upon a strong collective sector. It remains uncertain whether the delay in reaching this equilibrium will have lasting effects upon the social structure of the community. In visiting one cluster of *tanyas* we should not forget that, although representatives of all of these household types and interest groups may also be found in the main village, here the polarities are altogether less sharp. In contrast to the *tanya* world, in the new streets one is more likely to be struck by the general similarities of house sizes and designs, similarities which extend to the interiors. The very existence and vitality of this new community must be

attributed in part to the credit of the specialist cooperative. It would be foolish to claim that the proclamation of a production cooperative and thoroughgoing collectivization in 1961 would have led to any better results. On the contrary, emigration would have been steeper, the collective sector would have faced many difficult years, and the losses in small-farm production would have been enormous. In recent years, the authorities have been able to exert ever greater influence over events in the community, and have set about ending the anomalies of the specialist cooperative, while maintaining the will to produce of the majority of medium smallholders through sensible pricing policies. Poverty traps have persisted, have a serious effect upon the education of a section of the population, and in the absence of more decisive welfare measures, will produce a new generation of underprivileged citizens on the *tanyas*. That is why the present policies of the authorities are surely the right ones, even though they are unpopular with many, particularly the elder *tanya* residents. But the long-term success of the gradualist strategy pursued by the authorities over two decades is best indicated by the behaviour of the majority of young persons. For them, the obtaining of skilled qualifications is what matters today. Among the children of the well-to-do smallholders there is little willingness to remain either as full-time farmers or as *tanya* residents: hence there are grounds for hoping that the disparities characteristic of this world in the late 1970s will sooner or later be eliminated. If and when this happens, Tázlár will be not merely incorporated into the national society, but genuinely integrated on the basis of a much more egalitarian social structure than anything it has known in the past.

### Note

- <sup>1</sup> See den Hollander 1947, 1960-61, 1975. The last of these publications takes up the relevance of Turner's work. Den Hollander had studied in North America before turning his attention in the 1930s to the problems of scattered settlement on the Great Plain. For more detail on Tázlár and further references, see Hann 1980a.



Plate 4 and 5. The extremes of the social hierarchy in Tázlár