

Kovács, Vera (2019)

Utak az erdőben [Routes in the Forest]

Noran Libro: Budapest, 2019, ISBN 978-963-517-046-3, pp.304

The stepwise criminalisation of homelessness has been ongoing in Hungary since 2011, and the explicit criminalisation of people experiencing street homelessness was included in the Fundamental Law of Hungary as of 2013. From autumn 2018, based on the Law on Misdemeanours, people experiencing homelessness have been targeted by several restrictive measures, including obligatory referral of people experiencing street homelessness into shelters by the police, and penalising and suing people experiencing homelessness who could not be put into emergency shelters or other facilities for people experiencing homelessness¹. At the same time, (partly illegal) demolition of informal housing and a closer watch of squats by local municipalities and the police was ongoing, which hit dozens of households hard, who, for example, hid in public parks or private lands in abandoned former industrial areas in the capital city. These are painful outcomes of periods of scapegoating and ever fostered exclusionary discourse of people experiencing homelessness for years (Misetics, 2014), with an ongoing polarisation of welfare arrangements at the expense of serving the poorest (Scharle and Szikra, 2015).

It was these experiences, based on a series of 22 life-stories, that Vera Kovács, the head of the NGO 'From Streets to Home' published the volume 'Routes in the Forest'. By that time, the NGO already had some experience with housing people who were formerly experiencing homelessness in small scale projects in refurbished municipal social flats, and has maintained contact with various other families and individuals who were moving through temporary shelters and emergency shelters, or were moving back and forth to shacks in one of the 'forests' of Budapest for several years.

The life stories told in the volume are narratives of the homeless and formerly homeless families about their life paths and ins and outs into welfare services, jobs, schools, partnerships, employment, and housing. There are a few aspects that are common to all: they all experienced street based homelessness repeatedly and for many years, and they all learned the deficiencies of welfare services and social

¹ <https://utcajogasz.hu/en/resources/information-materials/the-criminalisation-of-homelessness-in-hungary/>

housing measures within Budapest. Most of them come from the poorest pockets of poverty in Hungary, segregated neighbourhoods in small villages, growing up in multiple exclusion, and a few of them fell into homelessness after long years of stability and promising work careers.

In the introductory chapter, Zoltán Lakner, a social policy analyst, invites the reader to watch for the narrative of traumas and blurred time horizons in life stories, the lack of public and private safety nets, the fragile health conditions of the interviewees, and how decent, affordable and safe housing is shifting step-by-step further away from the possibilities interviewees could think of. This guidance is useful to follow the sometimes chaotic and unstructured dialogues, as these are included in the volume as they were recorded by volunteers and social workers. Many times the data collectors' questions are left out, thus, the reader is effectively shifted into co-constructing the recorded dialogue. In these cases, the responses prompt questions from the reader on the go, and the personal life paths unfold step-by-step, while some aspects and periods remain shaded. In other interviews, the self-narration of the interviewees is more coherent, and rich in details, which develops the impression that those stories have been told many times, and interviewees had the chance to be confirmed and being listened to by social workers along their pathway.

In the majority of cases we are invited to 'sit together' and 'talk' to people in newly refurbished social housing. Other conversations were recorded in one of the largest temporary shelters or in one of the forests in shacks where Vera Kovács and her NGO have worked to move as many couples and individuals to safe housing as possible. Most stories are about couples in their forties or older, while the paths of individuals talk about struggles with abuse, loss of autonomy, and painful fights for independence. Women fleeing violence are recurring in all life paths, and they appear either as the interviewees' or their mothers' affliction.

The last chapter by Vera Kovács explains the title of the volume: the Forest is the common point/space in the life paths of the interviewees in that they have all lived in one of the parks/forests for period of time, in some cases for upwards of 20 years. 'Routes' stands for depicting being lost in the insecure and looking for the paths to move on, which sometimes resulted in further destitution. The intergenerational nature of housing insecurity and homelessness is also striking. Most interviewees have families, children, and grandchildren, but they are not able or reluctant to keep contact. For some, siblings and children seem to be there as last resort, but only for issues beyond solving housing. As the stories unfold, it becomes clear that all have already exploited larger social and family networks' resources for a long time, and new friendships and acquaintances can provide sympathy and endurance, but cannot handle shocks and solve difficulties effectively.

Kovács states that she wanted to present the dramatic interplay of deterministic life situations, personal tragedies, and false decisions, framed by systemic failures through these 22 life stories. In the ever worsening public discourse about homelessness, she wanted to show the human behind the stories, and foremost, she wanted to pay tribute to clients she has been visiting in the forest by presenting the value of their individual stories in a book which is only about them. This goal is nicely fulfilled: the reader is invited to discover real lives of real people, and the reader may wish to come back to them later to learn whether their dreams to settle could finally come true.

› References

Misetics, B. (2014) Criminalisation of Homelessness in Hungary, in S. Jones (Ed.) *Mean Streets. A Report on the Criminalisation of Homelessness in Europe*, pp.101-112. (Brussels: FEANTSA).

Scharle, Á. and Szikra, D (2015) Recent Changes Moving Hungary Away from the European Social Model, in D. Vaughan-Whitehead (Ed.) *The European Social Model in Crisis: Is Europe Losing Its Soul?*, pp.289-338. (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar).

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