

The Good Old Times? Sensory History of Master Paul Square in Levoča, 1948–1989

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This article explores the sensory history of Master Paul Square in Levoča between 1948 and 1989, examining how visual and auditory elements shaped everyday life under socialism. It reveals how the square's historical architecture anchored locally shared practices and meanings, constraining attempts at socialist transformation. While the regime sought to mould sensory experience through propaganda and modernization, the persistence of the town's visual and auditory environment sustained continuity with the past. The study shows that Levoča's inhabitants remembered socialism less for its ideology than for its lingering sense of community and shared sensory experience.

Keywords: sensory history; socialism; Levoča; urban space; collective memory.

Introduction

Sensory history has emerged as a vital lens for understanding the past, growing out of the “sensory turn” of the 1980s, which highlighted the social and cultural dimensions of perception. Senses are neither universal nor neutral; they are shaped by social context and can foster shared experiences and a sense of community. Historically-minded anthropologists adapted these insights to historical inquiry, giving rise to sensory history. In essence, it emphasizes how sensory perception structured people's experiences in the past and explores how and why these perceptions differed across time. As leading sensory historian Mark Smith notes, it is not a new branch of history in the traditional sense, but a “habit of thinking about the past” that seeks traces of sensory evidence embedded in sources, offering fresh perspectives on historical experience.¹ In Slovak historical studies, sensory history is essentially an unknown term so one of the goals of this study will be introducing this approach to Slovak academic readership.

Recent scholarship has shown that sensory history offers a powerful framework for revisiting everyday life under communism. Studies such as Gediminas Lankauskas's *Sensing Memories of Socialism* highlight how the senses mediate collective memory, revealing the ways in which sight and taste intertwine past socialist and present capitalist experiences.² Similarly, the chapter “Rainbows and Communism” in *Amnesiopolis*, a collective volume on the construction of Marzahn, East Germany's largest prefabricated housing project, explores how new urban environments in East Germany reshaped residents' sensory and emotional worlds,

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1 SMITH, *Sensing the Past*, 4.

2 LANKAUSKAS, *Souvenirs Sensoriels*, 45–69.

exposing ruptures between material surroundings and personal memory.³ Finally, Maria Pirogovskaya's "Odour of Chlorine in Soviet Urban Reality" illustrates how even unpleasant smells – once associated with cleanliness and collectivity – encoded shared social realities and blurred boundaries between public and private spheres.⁴ Together, these works reveal how attention to the sensory opens new perspectives on socialist and post-socialist experience, memory and materiality.

This study draws on archival sources collected in 2019, alongside oral history interviews conducted in the same year. The archival research for this study focused primarily on materials produced by the municipal and district authorities of Levoča between 1945 and 1989, with particular attention to sources documenting the regulation, transformation and everyday functioning of the historic town centre. These included administrative files of the Municipal National Committee (MNV), such as building permits, reconstruction and maintenance records, plans for public lighting and transport, and records concerning street renaming, commercial activity and tourism, as well as minutes of local commissions (e.g. planning, public order, trade, social affairs) and transcripts of public meetings. These sources make it possible to trace the official intentions, priorities and constraints shaping the physical and functional development of Master Paul Square, including infrastructure, housing, commerce and heritage protection.

Period newspapers and local chronicles were consulted to contextualize these materials and to reconstruct the public language through which urban change, celebrations and everyday life were represented. Rather than treating archival documents as transparent accounts of lived experience, the analysis reads them as normative and administrative perspectives that articulate how space was planned, regulated and ideologically framed. When juxtaposed with oral testimonies, these sources allow for a comparison between official representations of urban space and the ways it was sensorially experienced, remembered and negotiated in everyday life.

In the present study, oral history functions as an alternative, vernacular archive of lived experience, grounded in the embodied perspectives of those through whom sensory interactions with urban space took place. Their testimonies therefore do not merely supplement written sources, but provide access to how the town square was sensed, inhabited and experienced. This raises questions about the reliability of remembered perception; however, within a sensory-historical framework, forgetting, distortion and selectivity are analytically productive. As oral historians have long argued, memory does not function as a transparent record of the past, but as a process through which individuals actively interpret earlier experience from the standpoint of the present.⁵

Accordingly, this study adopts a post-positivist oral-history approach that treats memory not simply as a source of factual information, but as an object of historical analysis in its own right. Following Alessandro Portelli, oral testimony is understood as distinctive precisely because of its subjectivity, narrative form and retrospective reinterpretation; discrepancies, silences and idealizations are therefore analysed as meaningful rather than dismissed as methodological flaws.⁶ The subjectivity of

3 RUBIN, *Amnesiopolis*, 77–104.

4 PIROGOVSKAYA, *Odour of Chlorine*, 171–182.

5 FRISCH, *Oral History*, 40–44; THOMSON, *Anzac Memories*, 343–346.

6 PORTELLI, *What Makes Oral History*, 48–50.

interviews – often presented as the central critique of oral history – thus becomes an advantage: through the social construction of sensory perception, individual accounts illuminate broader social patterns of meaning and experience.

The interviews are analysed as situated and relational narratives, shaped both by the interaction between interviewer and interviewee and by the dynamic relationship between individual and collective memory.⁷ The study draws on a small number of locally embedded narrators to explore shared modes of remembering and interpreting urban space over time. This approach is particularly suited to sensory history, as oral testimony provides access to embodied, affective and atmospheric dimensions of past experience that are rarely documented in written sources, including sound, movement and bodily co-presence. In line with this scholarship, the interviews are read as retrospective accounts of how urban space was sensed and inhabited, not as direct reconstructions of past perception.

The study draws on six in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in December 2019 with long-term inhabitants of Levoča, all of whom spent the socialist period (1948–1989) living and working in the town. The interviewees were born between 1932 and 1955 and represent a range of social positions and everyday engagements with the town square, including a municipal employee active in heritage and tourism, an archivist and regional historian, a firefighter, a schoolteacher and two manual and service workers. While the sample is not intended to be statistically representative, it was selected purposefully to capture diverse yet locally grounded perspectives of everyday life in the historic centre. All respondents shared sustained, routine exposure to Master Paul Square through work, leisure or civic activities, making them well positioned to reflect on its sensory environment.

For sensory historians, the value lies in sensory memory as a powerful mnemonic device capable of evoking a plenitude of recollections. Yet this experience is always retrospective, “involving not only a recall of the past, but a sense of the past in the present”.⁸ The population of former Eastern Bloc members is especially susceptible to this phenomenon: German *Ostalgie* is by no means unique, and in countries such as Slovakia, stark contrasts often appear between historical records and personal memory, frequently fuelled by nostalgia.⁹ The utility of respondents in advanced age has been questioned on the grounds of decreased sensory sensitivity and recognition. However, this should not deter the historian. As Portelli notes, the value of oral sources lies in the transformations “wrought by memory”, revealing “the narrators’ effort to make sense of the past”, in our case, quite literally.¹⁰

Borrowing ideas from Setha Low, we will also look at how the historical formation of urban space (“social production”) and social processes within it (“social construction”) are connected through the concept of “embodiment” – understood as the sensory and bodily engagement through which human subjects experience, negotiate and transform space into place – that is, from a material setting into a meaningful, lived environment. Setha Low’s distinction between the social production and social construction of space builds explicitly on Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space. In this co-production model, social production refers to the material and historical formation

7 SMITH, *Remembering in Groups*, 193–197.

8 HAMILTON, *The Proust Effect*, 222.

9 KAZDA – POTOČÁR, *Životné prostredie*, 250–262.

10 PORTELLI, *What Makes Oral History*, 54.

of space through political, economic, ideological and technological forces, while social construction denotes the phenomenological and symbolic processes through which "space" is interpreted, used and transformed into "place" through everyday practices, memory and social interaction. Embodiment links these dimensions by emphasizing that space is experienced sensorially and corporeally, allowing material settings to acquire meaning as lived places.¹¹

To further emphasize the role of the senses, we will also utilize the idea of "sensory citizenship", which highlights how citizenship and belonging are constituted through embodied, everyday sensory experiences that mediate between individuals, social norms and state power. In this sense, state ideologies can embed feelings for the state "under the people's skin" through sensory manipulation, making them seemingly exist independently of state ideologies.¹² This process is not a straightforward one, however, and might lead to a disjunction between state ideology and the everyday experience of the people. In other words, any attempts are always effective only "in the sense of affecting", but not necessarily successful in achieving their goals.¹³ The point is that the human, as a corporeal sensing being, is at the very centre of our attention, making the senses a relevant tool for the study of social and cultural history as well. This is because the senses are socially constructed¹⁴ and mediate both individuals' relationships to particular spaces¹⁵ and their connections to others.¹⁶

The Arena: Master Paul Square

Levoča's square is a highly valuable historical site and is currently a UNESCO heritage site.¹⁷ Whether named after Andrej Hlinka,¹⁸ Milan Rastislav Štefánik,¹⁹ Stalin²⁰ or, as currently, Master Paul of Levoča, it has never lost its central position in the Levoča's society. The square has always been there to host, witness and participate in the various societal processes which is why investigating Levoča's society necessarily leads us to the town's heart. As a social and cultural hub of the town, it also served as an arena for the quotidian experience of ordinary Levočans, allowing us to investigate the society entire by focusing on the town's centre.

The social production of Master Paul square is characterized by a number of valuable buildings dating back to the Middle Ages. Two dominant landmarks, the historical

11 LOW, *Towards an Anthropological Theory*, 21–30.

12 DUREAU – PARK – TRNKA, *Introduction*, 6.

13 Ibidem, 7.

14 DEGEN, *The Everyday City*, 94.

15 TUAN, *Space and Place*, 6–11.

16 AGAPITO – MENDES – VALLE, *Exploring the Conceptualization*, 64.

17 "Levoča, Spišský Hrad and the Associated Cultural Monuments", UNESCO, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/620> [accessed 8 October 2025].

18 Rozšírenie elektrickej siete na Hlinkovom námestí a pitevne na rím-kat cintoríne (1945), inv. no. 190 – box 79, Mestský Národný Výbor v Levoči: Administratívne spisy 1945 1–2999, Spišský archív v Levoči (Expanding electrification of Hlinka square).

19 Levoča: Plán mestského rozhlasu (undated), Mestský rozhlas – kúpa, montáž 1946–1953, inv. no. 630 – box 179, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (The PAS system layout).

20 Zbúranie domov na Stalinovom námestí čd. 38, 39 a 40, 18339/1948 (13 September 1948), Zbúranie domov na Námestí Majstra Pavla 38, 39, 40 (Stalinovo námestie), inv. no. 193, box 86, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Demolition of houses in the square).

town hall and St James Basilica, occupy the very centre. On the western side, they are flanked by a protestant church and on the eastern by what is currently used as a town hall, formerly a school and central trade office, surrounded by a park. They are all enclosed by sixty burgher houses of various proportions, from relatively small to truly monumental ones. The setting is completed by smaller structures, namely the Cage of Shame, the Charity Fountain and the Red Army Memorial. Together, they create a characteristic townscape – one of the town's most important identifiers.²¹

Levoča is what Ashworth and Tunbridge call a “gem city” – a place where a phase of rapid development has been followed by a long period of stagnation and decline, fossilizing a cityscape which later becomes treasured and preserved.²² Such places are highly valued because they are the result of a “historical accident” since their creation depends upon “rare, even bizarre, set of circumstances”.²³ Such a description seems to be an accurate account of Levoča's history. Originating in the thirteenth century, Levoča quickly became one of the most important places for commerce in the Kingdom of Hungary due to its favourable geographical location.²⁴ After being granted several key privileges, Levoča's township became an appealing option for merchants, attracting some of the wealthiest persons from the kingdom and abroad.²⁵ It was directly through the square that the medieval trade route ran, turning the place into the commercial, social and cultural hub of the town.²⁶

However, after experiencing its heyday in the sixteenth century, fires, plagues, uprisings in Hungary and a decrease in mining activity set Levoča on a course of gradual decline.²⁷ By the twentieth, it stood as a quintessential example of a small Slovak provincial town, serving as the administrative and service centre for its predominantly agricultural surroundings. Being denied the chance of a new phase of growth, however, allowed for its medieval look to be preserved. The first half of the twentieth century therefore saw not only the gradual removal of all remaining important offices from the town but also an increase of interest in the maintenance and preservation of its heritage.²⁸

When the communists assumed power in February 1948, Levoča's urban landscape in many ways presented the antithesis of the new state ideology, producing a unique juxtaposition. The socialist realist architecture adopted from the Soviet model in the 1950s²⁹ sought to oppose capitalist urbanism by turning the city into a space of collective ownership.³⁰ In Slovakia, the clearest manifestation of this ideal was Nová Dubnica – a town planned and built entirely from scratch. Its monolithic apartment blocks, designed for workers and intended to erase social distinctions, enclosed

21 JANOVSĀ, *Námestie Majstra Pavla v Levoči*, 50.

22 ASHWORTH – TUNBRIDGE, *The Tourist-Historic City*, 156–158.

23 *Ibidem*, 156.

24 LACKO, *Majster Pavol a Levoča*, 9.

25 SUCHÝ, *Dejiny Levoče 1*, 65–84.

26 JACKOVÁ, *Pamiatková rezervácia Levoča*, 34.

27 *Ibidem*, 35.

28 *Ibidem*, 142–188.

29 ZARECOR, *Czechoslovakia's Model Housing*, 80.

30 CVACHO, *Jiří Kroha*, 12.

a central square dominated by a monumental town council building.³¹ Levoča, by contrast, presented the opposite image: its main square was lined with grand former private mansions that underscored sharp class divisions within the historic core. These buildings exemplified what *Architektura ČSR*, the leading architectural journal of the period, condemned as the capitalist exploitation of the built environment.³² The same journal also criticized the dominance of churches on Levoča's square, where communist symbols were conspicuously absent.³³ Towns like Levoča therefore posed a challenge to the regime's project of creating a "socialist space" – an urban environment meant to embody and reinforce ideological values through its organization, aesthetics and everyday use.³⁴

It therefore comes as no surprise that the preservation of historical sites could become a rather peculiar issue after 1948 and many sites in Slovakia suffered as a result. In general, monuments, be it individual buildings and houses, architectural ensembles or commemorative statues and memorials, were seen as evidence of societal progress demonstrating the cultural, educational and moral level of the people from history.³⁵ At the same time, they also served practical purposes as an important political tool: the basic prerequisite for the permanent preservation of monuments was their ideological-political and cultural-educational use in the construction of a socialist society.³⁶ This was, at least, the official stance. Laws put in place were often not enforced and largely ignored, both by owners of monuments and Monuments Boards' offices, and funding from the government was insufficient.³⁷

Neglect, however, did not constitute an attempt to create socialist space – such efforts took far more radical forms, primarily through destruction and reconstruction. Budapest, for instance, experienced both: old monuments were demolished and new monumental sculptures erected as part of a campaign to "suppress or eliminate signs of Hungary's bourgeois past".³⁸ The regime thus clearly recognized the power of the built environment to convey ideological messages. At the same time, authorities were aware of the depth of people's attachment to historical places, as shown by the residents of Sevastopol, who strongly resisted the transformation of their historic centre according to socialist ideals during postwar reconstruction.³⁹ Defined as a radical break with the past, socialism therefore faced particular challenges in sites of high historical and symbolic value. Towns like Levoča were far from blank slates in 1948; the material traces of their past were integral to everyday life, providing "the possibility for people to attach a range of meanings and memories that did not fit neatly with the official account".⁴⁰

31 Ibidem, 16–17.

32 *Architektura ČSR* 7:1–10 (1948), Klub Architektů, The Moravian Library in Brno, 312–313.

33 Ibidem, 113.

34 CROWLEY – REID, *Socialist Spaces*, 4.

35 KUTLÍK, *Socialistická zákonnost*, 8.

36 Ibidem, 50.

37 Ibidem, 163–164.

38 FOWKES, *The Role of Monumental Sculpture*, 65.

39 QUALLS, *Accommodation and Agitation*, 24.

40 CROWLEY – REID, *Socialist Spaces*, 8–9.

In the twentieth century, Levoča came to be defined almost entirely by its cultural and historical significance, and this legacy deeply shaped the lives of its inhabitants. Interviewees repeatedly emphasized that the town's past was not experienced as distant or abstract, but as something constantly present in everyday life. As Ivan Chalupický put it, Levoča was a place where history was "everywhere around us", forming an inseparable backdrop to daily routines.⁴¹ Regardless of age, background or education, people shared a common experience: the town square was an integral part of everyday movement through the town. Whether on their way to school or work, shopping, or simply taking a walk, interviewees recalled visiting the square "day in, day out", often even several times a day.⁴² This habitual proximity fostered a sense of familiarity and intimacy with the historic environment, as the steady visual and sensory encounter with historic buildings made the past feel immediate and lived rather than merely remembered. In this way, the material presence of history functioned as a medium of connection, shaping what it meant to be a Levočan through continuous embodied experience.

For many inhabitants, the square's centrality was lived through repetitive bodily movement rather than formal gathering. Interviewees recalled walking "up and down" the square daily, often without a specific purpose, in a practice commonly referred to as *korzo*.⁴³ This activity followed informal but widely shared spatial rules: people moved along established routes, encountered acquaintances they "hadn't seen all week long" and temporarily claimed the square as a space of mutual visibility and social recognition.⁴⁴ Such familiarity was reinforced by proximity, several interviewees emphasizing that the square lay only a few dozen metres from their homes, making it a habitual extension of everyday routes rather than a destination reserved for special occasions.⁴⁵ The sensory quality of this experience was closely tied to perceptions of order and care, with interviewees recalling clean benches, well-maintained greenery and an environment that allowed one to sit, walk and linger without discomfort or disturbance.⁴⁶ In this sense, the square functioned as an arena not simply because people gathered there, but because everyday social life was choreographed through shared rhythms of movement, visibility and embodied co-presence.

Our bodily presence, after all, transforms spaces into places, as the senses familiarize us with our surroundings and endow them with meaning.⁴⁷ Many residents expressed pride in living amid such historical richness and gratitude that Levoča's monuments had endured the upheavals of the twentieth century. Archival records reflect similar sentiments, noting civic complaints about neglected façades or inappropriate ornamentation.⁴⁸ The preservation of the square's medieval appearance thus emerged not only as a professional concern but as a shared commitment of the local community.

41 Interview with Ivan Chalupický.

42 Interview with Ernest Rusnák.

43 Interview with Marta and Ján.

44 Interview with Mária and Anton.

45 Interview with Ernest Rusnák.

46 Interview with Marta and Ján.

47 TUAN, *Space and Place*, 6–11.

48 Zápisnica z verejnej schôdze občanov z dňa 15.3.1978 (15 March 1978), Zápisnice z verejných schôdzí občanov 1974–1982, inv. no. 708 – box 194, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Public meeting of citizens – minutes).

Transformation of the “bourgeois” space into a socialist one through destruction and construction was therefore not an option. Judging from the prominent position of the town’s history in people’s identity, it would have been a counterintuitive and counterproductive decision to make. Moreover, any possibilities of change were obliterated very early in the socialist period when, in June 1950, Levoča was proclaimed a national heritage site.⁴⁹ Even though this act ended any potential plans of socialist-space transformation in the future, it could not prevent construction and destruction already undertaken between 1945 and 1950.

In the immediate postwar years, several new constructions had altered Levoča’s historic fabric. In August 1945, a Red Army monument in the form of an obelisk was unveiled – one of many such memorials erected across the Eastern Bloc.⁵⁰ Though not built by the army itself, it clearly asserted the endurance of Soviet influence and introduced a new ideological layer into the town’s visual landscape. A more subtle but equally revealing example concerned the addition of a newsstand to the square. Even such minor interventions can profoundly affect the embodied experience of space, as Setha Low demonstrated in her study of San José’s Parque Central, where residents resisted the replacement of their old kiosk because the new one conflicted with local cultural values.⁵¹ In Levoča, a similar dispute arose in 1948, when the Communist Party’s newspaper agency sought to install a newsstand in the square – the town’s busiest location.⁵² Municipal authorities rejected the proposal, deeming the structure “too modern-looking” and incompatible with the square’s historical appearance.⁵³ After months of negotiations, it was finally placed at the periphery, in front of house number 21, rather than at the square’s centre.⁵⁴ Even this modest episode illustrates how deeply the town’s historical character constrained socialist interventions, forcing ideological symbols to yield to the authority of heritage.

This, however, was still a relatively subtle disruption of the square’s urban environment compared to the destruction that followed. In September 1948, three so-called Berger Houses in the southwest corner of the square were demolished for health and safety reasons.⁵⁵ They had not been damaged during the war, suggesting that their condition had been deteriorating for some time.⁵⁶ Given the generally poor economic situation of postwar Czechoslovakia, the decision to demolish rather than restore them was likely pragmatic. It was also still administratively possible, as Levoča had not yet been granted heritage protection. Importantly, this intervention did not

49 KUTLÍK, *Socialistická zákonnost*, 104.

50 CHALUPECKÝ, *Dejiny Levoče 2*, 415.

51 LOW, *Spatializing Culture*, 466.

52 Žiadosť o umiestnenie novinového stánku na námestí (June 1948), Umiestnenie novinového stánku na námestí, inv. no. 194, box 87, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Request to place a newsstand in the square).

53 Námietky proti uzneseniu rady MSK v Levoči vo veci novinárskeho stánku Journal na námestí (October 1948), Umiestnenie novinového stánku na námestí, inv. no. 194, box 87, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Objections against the resolution regarding the Journal newsstand).

54 Súhlas s premiestnením (November 1948), Umiestnenie novinového stánku na námestí, inv. no. 194, box 87, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Acceptance of relocation).

55 Zbúranie domov na Stalínovom námestí (Demolition of houses in the square).

56 Zápisnica o škodách zapríčinených vojnovými udalosťami na verejných budovách (1945), inv. no. 190, box 79, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Buildings damaged during the war).

pass without resistance. One interviewee recalled that the demolition provoked “quite a strong public outcry”, the buildings were perceived as part of the square’s historical fabric. Although the demolition proceeded quickly, discussions about the site’s future resulted in what was remembered as a compromise: instead of remaining empty, the cleared area was transformed into a small park, an attempt to mitigate the loss and preserve the spatial continuity of the square.⁵⁷

From 1950 onward, after Levoča’s designation as a national heritage site, activities within the square were formally limited to preservation, reconstruction and maintenance. In practice, however, heritage protection suffered from chronic underfunding,⁵⁸ as state resources were preferentially directed toward monuments commemorating events celebrated by the regime, such as the Slovak National Uprising.⁵⁹ This imbalance was repeatedly noted by interviewees, who recalled that while the square was officially protected, many buildings were “shabby” or visibly deteriorating.⁶⁰ As one respondent put it, repairs tended to occur only “when things had reached their worst”, while routine maintenance was largely confined to façades.⁶¹ Another interviewee summarized this approach bluntly, noting that houses were “patched up on the outside”.⁶² Although this strategy prevented the complete loss of several structures, its overall laxity left the square widely perceived as neglected, with few comprehensive restorations completed before 1989.

The decayed appearance of the square during socialism thus symbolized the town’s stagnation. More importantly, it acted as a counterforce to the creation of a socialist society in Levoča. The town’s historic core embodied everything ideologically unacceptable to socialist urbanism: it was capitalist, bourgeois and exploitative. Yet it was also culturally and historically invaluable – and, crucially, a cornerstone of local identity. Radical transformation into a socialist space was impossible not only because of the post-1950 legal restrictions, but also because of the deep emotional and sensory bond between the inhabitants and their environment. Neglect did not sever this connection; rather, the deteriorating buildings became anti-monuments to progress, silent witnesses to continuity with the past.

In Levoča, buildings were simply spared, allowing the symbols of bourgeois prosperity to endure. The result was paradoxical: the revolutionary government preserved the very urban fabric it ideologically rejected. The square thus remained an active participant in the town’s life, its embodied space resisting socialist redefinition. Its visual landscape – dominated by traces of the “bourgeois” past – anchored Levoča’s residents in a shared sensory citizenship that reinforced continuity rather than rupture.

Ultimately, the cases discussed here – construction, addition and demolition alike – reveal a population highly sensitive to changes in the visual character of their historical core. This collective attachment to place, mediated through sight, formed a significant

57 Interview with Ivan Chalupický.

58 Zápisnica rezervačnej komisie (3 February 1960), Rezervačná komisia 1957–1960, inv. no. 113 – box 51, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Reserves Committee – minutes).

59 KUTLÍK, *Socialistická zákonnosť*, 42.

60 Interview with Mária and Anton.

61 Interview with Ivan Chalupický.

62 Interview with Marta and Ján.

obstacle to the creation of socialist space. The processes examined in this chapter all unfolded within a historical enclosure that constantly reminded its inhabitants of their connection to the prosperous medieval past. The square's architecture thus stood as both a material and sensory link to history: its bourgeois nature contradicted socialist ideals, yet its preservation became indispensable. As the visual and social centre of Levoča, the square allowed the town's past to permeate everyday life, embedding itself – through the eye – into the very identity of its people.

Modernity Creeping In

Despite the fact that the square became, to a large extent, anchored to a specific point on the timeline, it did not become immune to the passage of time. Starting with the Renaissance, continuing through the Enlightenment, and then Industrialization, the world, life and society transformed rapidly, affecting the ways in which we perceive the world. It is therefore unsurprising that one of the most prevailing topics in sensory history is the impact of urban and industrial developments, as well as new technologies, on sensory perception. This approach was pioneered by Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong in their concept of the "great divide", which frames human history through shifts in communication. With the invention of the printing press, sight as the medium for reading gained primacy as the sense for acquiring knowledge.⁶³ Further enhanced during the Enlightenment, sight became the carrier of civilization, employed through instruments such as maps and microscopes as the "sense par excellence" for science;⁶⁴ the proliferation of visual imagery in the twentieth century further consolidated its dominance over the sensorium.⁶⁵

Non-visual senses – primarily smell, touch and taste – were relegated to an almost animalistic status. Smell, in particular, acquired multiple negative connotations, largely due to rising hygiene standards, and became associated with the irrational and the emotive.⁶⁶ As our environment became cleaner, noses became more sensitive, and many traditional smellscape⁶⁷ were gradually reduced or regulated; spaces, both private and public, were "deodorized". Dung, garbage or sweat transformed from necessary realities to undesirable malodours in what has been termed the "olfactory revolution".⁶⁸ Hearing occupied an intermediary position: along with sight, it experienced an extension of possibilities through radio, television and cinema.⁶⁹ Yet it was also the sense most affected by modernity, forced to lose sensitivity in the face of technological noise. Cars, aeroplanes and factory machinery, as Alex Rhys-Taylor notes, produced a relentless "unwanted noise of the modern city", drowning out the subtler, older sounds of the streets.⁷⁰

63 SMITH, *Sensing the Past*, 8.

64 CLASSEN – HOWES – SYNNOTT, *Aroma*, 84.

65 HOWES, *Introduction: "Make It New!"*, 12.

66 CLASSEN – HOWES – SYNNOTT, *Aroma*, 4.

67 Sensescape refers to the culturally patterned configuration of the senses through which environments and social relations are experienced, encompassing interrelated sensory modalities such as soundscapes, smellscape, tastescapes, and tactile or bodily modes of perception. See HOWES, *Empire of the Senses*, 143.

68 CORBIN, *The Foul and the Fragrant*, 61; CLASSEN – HOWES – SYNNOTT, *Aroma*, 81.

69 HERTEL, *The Senses in Literature*, 174.

70 RHYSTAYLOR, *Urban Sensations*, 67.

In short, the modern era changed the ways in which we sense the world. This sensory modernity is largely linked to processes and inventions that transformed global experience, affecting places regardless of culture or politics. This is a crucial point in the study of sensory developments in Levoča: these changes were not intrinsic to the socialist regime but coincided with communist rule in Czechoslovakia, particularly in Slovakia, where modernity lagged nearly a century behind Western Europe.⁷¹ When the Czechoslovak communists assumed full control in February 1948, Slovakia remained a heavily under-industrialized region with a predominantly rural character, functioning largely as Czechoslovakia's agricultural hinterland.⁷²

Industrialization thus became the regime's top priority and the principal means of transforming Slovak society from rural to urban.⁷³ Attracting masses into towns and cities was seen as crucial for this transformation. The early 1950s marked the beginning of these efforts to produce "new socialist people" through rapid industrialization.⁷⁴ Yet the process was far from evenly distributed: while industrial centres expanded and modernized quickly, other regions – those not selected for investment – declined.⁷⁵ The construction of new housing lagged behind demand, and automobilization was even slower.⁷⁶ In 1953, when television broadcasting began, only a few hundred sets existed across all of Czechoslovakia, and few households even owned a radio.⁷⁷ Modernity in Slovakia thus arrived at a slower pace and on a smaller scale, truly taking hold only in the latter half of the twentieth century.

From the regime's perspective, this temporal gap was largely irrelevant, as virtually all phenomena were interpreted through the ideological lens. Modernization was understood as a straightforward path to progress – the most influential overarching theme of socialist utopian thought.⁷⁸ In regions where modernization was slow, such as Slovakia, it could also be framed as preparing the ground for the emergence of the "new socialist person".⁷⁹ Large-scale ideological concepts were translated into concrete policies, permeating all facets of everyday life: waste collection,⁸⁰ health practices,⁸¹ environmental management⁸² and even car ownership⁸³ could be framed

71 ČAJKA – KALICKÝ, *Socio-ekonomické pozadie*, 9–10.

72 GAJDOŠ, *Sociálno-priestorová situácia*, 113–114.

73 *Ibidem*, 116.

74 KOVÁČ, *Dejiny Slovenska*, 277.

75 MATLOVIČ, *Tranzitívna podoba mesta*, 139–140.

76 ZARECOR, *Czechoslovakia's Model Housing*, 67; SCHUSTER, *Povojnový vývoj*, 121–122.

77 KRAVČÁK, *60 rokov televízie*, 190; LEHOCZKÁ, *85 rokov rozhlasovej komunikácie*, 116.

78 PODOBA, 'Svetlé zajtrajšky', 50.

79 *Ibidem*.

80 Zdravotnícka komisia pri MsNV 19.5.1965 (19 May 1965), Zázpisnice zdravotnej komisie 1957–1966, inv. no. 114 – box 52, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Health Committee report).

81 Untitled speech (29 October 1965), Zázpisnice zdravotnej komisie 1957–1966, inv. no. 114 – box 52, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Speech about the importance of hygiene).

82 Referát k verejnej schôdzi občanov konanej na MsNV v Levoča dňa 28.3.1974 (28 March 1974), Zázpisnice z verejných schôdzí občanov 1974, inv. no. 708 – box 194, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Public meeting of citizens – report).

83 Vyhláška 5331/1950 (1950), Bezpečnostná komisia 1950, inv. no. 100 – box 50, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Security Committee regulation).

as contributions to the building of a socialist society. Any progress, regardless of its origin, was acceptable to the regime as long as it complied with the official narrative – which, in practice, it always did.

As we already know, from the early modern period onward, Levoča's role changed from a centre of regional power to that of a smaller provincial town with enduring symbolic and historical significance. Its geographical position – once a source of power – became a limitation in the modern era: encircled by mountains and lacking major water sources, Levoča was poorly suited for agricultural or industrial expansion. Although a few new factories were built, such as *Strojsmalt*, they employed only small numbers of workers from the town and nearby villages.⁸⁴ Consequently, Levoča began to reposition itself as a "tourist-historic" town, capitalizing on its well-preserved urban core as an economic resource.⁸⁵ When "modern" developments did occur, they were mostly confined to the outskirts, in new industrial zones or residential districts dominated by tower blocks. According to René Matlovič's classification, Levoča belongs among Slovakia's stagnating towns – the settlements least affected by socialist urbanization and retaining their historical centres largely intact.⁸⁶

Modernity, however, reshaped the square in more gradual and uneven ways. These processes should be understood as gradual reconfigurations of the square's social, sensory and symbolic functions over time, rather than as moments of rupture or disappearance. As industrialization, motorized transport and new patterns of everyday mobility took hold, the square's role as the primary site of routine social interaction slowly changed. Activities once embedded in daily errands and informal encounters increasingly gave way to new forms of use: the space became partially occupied by cars, reorganized around circulation rather than gathering, and intermittently reactivated through socialist mass events that produced a different kind of crowd and collective presence. Rather than disappearing altogether, social life on the square was transformed – shifted from habitual, face-to-face interaction to episodic, organized and often ideologically framed forms of co-presence. In retrospect, many Levočans interpret this transformation as a loss of intimacy and solidarity, encapsulating their experience in the recurrent refrain that "life was nicer back then".⁸⁷ This nostalgia does not simply signal decline, but reflects how changing spatial practices altered the felt texture of community and belonging.

One of the most significant agents of change was the automobile, whose arrival brought noise, pollution and an unprecedented degree of individual mobility. Over the course of the twentieth century, cars came to dominate public space, transforming streets and squares once devoted to commerce, recreation and sociability into thoroughfares and parking zones.⁸⁸ Ever since, both physical and social public life have been subordinated to the relentless movement of vehicles. As Brian Ladd argues, the car was one of the key agents of urban transformation, rapidly increasing social distance through the privatization of public space – and the case of Levoča shows that not even a "medieval" environment was immune to this process.⁸⁹ Although the number

84 CHALUPECKÝ, *Dejiny Levoče 2*, 85.

85 ASHWORTH – TUNBRIDGE, *The Tourist-Historic City*, 3.

86 MATLOVIČ, *Tranzitívna podoba mesta*, 140.

87 Interview with Marta and Ján.

88 LADD, *Cities on Wheels*, 265.

89 *Ibidem*, 270.

of vehicles grew slowly, they still managed to restrict space for promenading and to enclose visitors within their cars, isolating them from one another.

Levoča's preservation status and limited economic importance prevented any drastic infrastructural interventions of the kind seen elsewhere – unlike in Bratislava, for example, where construction of the Slovak National Uprising Bridge required the demolishing of an entire historic district.⁹⁰ No such sweeping project was either feasible or necessary in Levoča; here, the automobile takeover occurred in subtler ways. The gradual subordination of the square began as early as 1938, when parking spaces, roads and pavements were first formally demarcated, though these changes took time to become significant.⁹¹ In 1950, only about thirty private cars were owned in the entire Levoča district, along with a handful of trucks and ambulances,⁹² and a regular bus service had only recently begun.⁹³ Contemporary accounts confirm that automobilization, as in much of Slovakia, was an extremely slow process – so slow that in the 1960s children could still play football in the streets near the square,⁹⁴ and older residents recall as few as three cars in town during the 1950s, mostly used as taxis.⁹⁵

Between roughly 1960 and 1975, however, the balance shifted. This period, coinciding with the automobile boom across Czechoslovakia,⁹⁶ saw cars claiming ever larger portions of the square: first the northern side for parking, then the entire western edge, leaving only the eastern strip for pedestrians and their cherished *korzo*.⁹⁷ Eventually, vehicles were allowed to circulate fully around the square, marking the final end of promenades – “*Korzo* stopped when there were too many cars”, as locals recall.⁹⁸

The consequences for how the square was experienced were unmistakable. People were effectively driven out, leaving no comparable public area for gathering or socializing. As a result, public communication – a vital element of communal life – lost much of its everyday relevance, retreating into private spaces. Interestingly, residents do not recall the arrival of cars as a particularly unpleasant sensory experience: there are no memories of excessive noise or bothersome smells. This likely reflects the slow pace of automobilization; cars appeared one by one, allowing the senses – especially smell – to gradually adapt. In the end, the automobile reshaped Levoča not through violence or spectacle, but through a slow, almost imperceptible reconfiguration of everyday life, transforming the square from a shared social stage into a space increasingly oriented toward circulation rather than prolonged social interaction.

The car's partner in crime in this process was the tower block, which established itself as the new standard of living in Levoča between the 1950s and 1980s. These

90 JANTO, *Socialistická Bratislava*, 178.

91 Regulačný plán (6 August 1938), Námestie Majstra Pavla v Levoči: využitie urbánneho priestoru s cieľom komplexnej rekonštrukcie, Investorský zámer, textová časť, PO 03/112, Krajský pamiatkový úrad Prešov – Pracovisko Levoča (Regulatory plan).

92 Soznam držiteľov, resp. majiteľov motorových vozidiel v Levoči (1950), Zoznam majiteľov motorových vozidiel, inv. no. 195 – box 88, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (List of automobile owners).

93 CHALUPECKÝ, *Dejiny Levoče* 2, 453.

94 Interview with Ernest Rusnák.

95 Interview with Mária and Anton.

96 SCHUSTER, *Povojnový vývoj*, 122.

97 Interview with Marta and Ján.

98 Interview with Mária and Anton.

modern housing projects attracted a significant portion of the town's population, offering far better living conditions than the ageing historical houses of the old town. Heating problems, persistent humidity and general deterioration were major incentives for people to move away from the centre. In many cases, this was the only viable option, as all historical buildings were listed as national heritage monuments and could not be adapted to modern standards.⁹⁹

The arrival of modernity thus reshaped Levoča's social life and local forms of belonging in gradual but perceptible ways. Although the historical environment curbed the more radical aspects of modernization, the emergence of new everyday routines could not be entirely halted. Deprived of spontaneous bodily encounters – handshakes, a pat on the shoulder, the casual chatter of the square – people experienced a slow reconfiguration of communal bonds between the 1950s and 1980s. Since sociality is among the most important sources of everyday sensory experience,¹⁰⁰ these changes were often perceived as a loss. Modernity, in other words, produced effects in Levoča comparable to those observed elsewhere, albeit in a gentler and less disruptive form. What distinguishes this case is not a direct opposition between modernization and socialism, but the uneven ways in which broader processes of change intersected with local ideological expectations. The transition unfolded so gradually – and, except for housing, often so imperceptibly – that it offered little visible confirmation of the promised new socialist society. In a system where unity was promoted as an ideological value, the retreat into privacy and the perceived “death” of community came to be experienced as problematic and contradictory developments.

In this sense, Levoča's visual landscape did not simply resist change; it also shaped how modernization was experienced and interpreted locally, demonstrating that even in a place often described as “frozen in time”, processes of modernization, individualization and social distancing quietly reshaped everyday life.

Sensing Socialism

Many of the forces discussed so far interacted uneasily with the ideological goals promoted by the communist regime. The last aspect to consider, therefore, is the activity of the regime itself. The square, as the main locus of the town's life, also became the principal – indeed, to a large extent, the only – site for various forms of propaganda directly organized by the authorities. These activities were largely independent of the broader developments described in the previous section and ended with the fall of communism in 1989. Whether explicitly ideological, such as the May Day parades, or expressed more subtly through events like brass band concerts, they all pursued a common objective: the creation of a socialist society.

In terms of propaganda management, as Nečasová observes in her study of the “new socialist human” in Czechoslovakia, there was no single central body determining the ideological direction for the entire country, nor does there appear to have been any department devoted specifically to agitation in Slovakia. Her research, therefore, relies primarily on journals and officially issued brochures due to the absence of any canonical text.¹⁰¹ She identifies three recurring themes within the official discourse – the worker, the woman and the Soviet Union – while noting frequent overlaps with other

99 CHALUPECKÝ, *Dejiny Levoče* 2, 460.

100 ROZENDAAL – SCHIFFERSTEIN, *Pleasantness in Bodily Experience*, 57.

101 NEČASOVÁ, *Nový socialistický člověk*, 17–18.

topics, resulting in a diverse overall picture.¹⁰² Although her focus is primarily on the Czech regions, applying the same analytical lens to Slovakia reveals striking parallels. Regional journals featured similar motifs: the “socialist woman”,¹⁰³ Soviet friendship¹⁰⁴ and the “tasks for the workers”,¹⁰⁵ alongside numerous articles related to agriculture.¹⁰⁶ The prominence of the last mentioned reflects both the region’s agricultural character and the regime’s efforts to adapt the discourse to local conditions. In the context of the square, three main channels were used to engage Levočans’ senses ideologically: the public address system, cultural and sporting events, and International Workers’ Day celebrations – listed here in ascending order of sensory intensity.

Before proceeding further, it is important to emphasize the intricate nature of propaganda and the crucial role of the senses in this process. Propaganda often produces unanticipated effects and responses – both from those who disseminate it and from those who receive it.¹⁰⁷ This is particularly evident in the realm of sensory citizenship, where, as already discussed, state interventions always have some effect, at least in terms of sensory engagement.¹⁰⁸ For propaganda to be effective, it cannot rely solely on negative emotions such as hatred; it must also mobilize positive feelings – joy, pride and belonging – which is precisely the aspect examined in the following section.¹⁰⁹ Yet, as many scholars have argued, socialist realism often operated in isolation from everyday reality, presenting an “official” version of the world that contradicted lived experience.¹¹⁰ Judging from Levoča’s case, the town’s environment seems to fit neatly within this pattern. Still, communist propaganda there was not entirely futile: although it failed to achieve its ultimate goal of creating a new socialist society, it did succeed, at least temporarily, in preserving a sense of community that might otherwise have disappeared much sooner. What it could not achieve, however, was the anchoring of that sense of togetherness in the ideology itself.

The first element on the list is the Public Address System (PAS), consisting of loudspeakers installed in the square. It offered the least sensory variety, as it engaged only one sense – hearing. In approaching sound as a historical source, we will draw on soundscape theory, which understands urban environments as constituted not only by material form but by historically specific constellations of sound. A city’s soundscape can be read as “an indicator of the social conditions which produce it”,¹¹¹ offering insight into how urban space was experienced, navigated and understood by its inhabitants. Importantly, socialist soundscapes were not coherent or totalizing, but internally contradictory, shaped by the coexistence of newly introduced ideological sounds and older, persistent acoustic practices.¹¹² This focus on lived and remembered

102 Ibidem, 12–13.

103 *Nová Dedina* 10:9 (3.3.1960).

104 *Nová Dedina* 10:4 (28.1.1960).

105 *Spišské hlasy* 13:14 (2.4.1960).

106 *Spišské hlasy* 13:32 (6.8.1960).

107 AUERBACH – CASTRONOVO, *Introduction*, 9–11.

108 DUREAU – PARK – TRNKA, *Introduction*, 7.

109 AUERBACH – CASTRONOVO, *Introduction*, 11.

110 PAPAŽIAN, *Literacy or Legibility*, 70–71.

111 SCHAFER, *Soundscapes and Earwitnesses*, 6.

112 WINTER, *Listening to East Berlin*, 84–85.

experience aligns with broader work in sensory history, which stresses that perception itself is historically constituted rather than universal or biologically fixed. Sensory experience has a history, shaped by social norms, power relations and historically specific ways of attending to the world.¹¹³ From this perspective, sound is not treated as a neutral backdrop to historical processes, but as an active component of social life that contributes to the production of collective presence and embodied ways of inhabiting space. Applying this approach to Levoča allows the analysis to situate local sonic experiences within broader processes of socialist modernization while remaining attentive to their uneven, contested and experientially grounded character.

The PAS system was managed by the Local Public Broadcasting Committee, which began operating in January 1951¹¹⁴ with clearly defined duties and objectives: to compile and approve the broadcast material and to ensure that the announcer was a "reliable person" capable of using the PAS effectively in the construction of socialism.¹¹⁵ The majority of the content consisted of everyday announcements intended simply to provide citizens with practical information.¹¹⁶ However, a considerable amount of purely propagandistic material was also broadcast – speeches and lectures designed to "educate" the masses. These typically commemorated important anniversaries¹¹⁷ or invited residents to various events¹¹⁸ and did not form part of the regular daily schedule.¹¹⁹ Special broadcasts, though, were quite frequent throughout the year, even outside the months associated with major communist traditions such as February or May. Occasionally, as in other parts of Czechoslovakia,¹²⁰ the system also served as a convenient tool for mobilizing citizens for mass events.¹²¹ The loudspeakers remained in operation until the 1970s – although the exact date of their removal is unknown, evidence of broadcast requests exist as late as May 1977.¹²²

113 TULLETT, *State of the Field*, 421.

114 Komisia pre miestny verejný rozhlas – ujatie sa činnosti (12 January 1951), Komisia pre miestny verejný rozhlas – ustanovenie, inv. no. 195 – box 88, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Local Public Broadcasting Committee – initiating operation).

115 MNV – zaistenie miestnych rozhlasov a umiernenie činnosti (October 1950), Komisia pre miestny verejný rozhlas – ustanovenie, inv. no. 195 – box 88, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Provision of PAS systems and moderation of activities).

116 Untitled announcement (31 December 1953), Hlásenia mestského rozhlasu 1951, 1953, 1954, inv. no. 694 – box 192, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Danger of slippery pavements).

117 Untitled announcement (22 April 1954), Hlásenia mestského rozhlasu 1951, 1953, 1954, inv. no. 694 – box 192, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Speech commemorating Lenin's birthday broadcasted through the PAS).

118 Relácia do mestského rozhlasu (26 February 1954), Hlásenia mestského rozhlasu 1951, 1953, 1954, inv. no. 694 – box 192, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Invitation to cinema and library).

119 MNV – zaistenie miestnych rozhlasov a umiernenie činnosti (Provision of local PAS systems and moderation of activities).

120 KRAKOVSKÝ, *State and Society*, 105.

121 Untitled (May 1954), Hlásenia mestského rozhlasu 1951, 1953, 1954, inv. no. 694 – box 192, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Announcement about organized public listening to the PAS broadcast).

122 Untitled report (20 May 1977), Zápisnice z verejných schôdzí občanov, inv. no. 708 – box 194, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Report from the XV Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia).

Unfortunately, very few documents concerning the PAS have survived beyond the 1950s, making it difficult to determine whether this pattern continued throughout its lifetime. What is particularly interesting, however, is how Levočans remember – or rather, do not remember – this auditory influence. The answer is simple: they recall nothing. None of the propagandistic content survived in their memories; the only remembered announcements were those concerning “important things”.¹²³ The explanation may lie in what people *do* remember: that the PAS served as a source of ordinary, practical announcements. In other words, they retained only the information that was immediately useful, while everything else faded into the background noise.

This phenomenon can be understood through the interplay of two complementary effects – synecdoche and asyndeton. The former describes our ability for selective listening, through which we attribute value to specific elements within the sonic environment – a behaviour we practice constantly in everyday life. The latter follows as a direct consequence: the elimination from perception or memory of sounds deemed less relevant. These “useless” elements are gradually evacuated from consciousness and, eventually, forgotten altogether.¹²⁴ This is precisely what happened to the broadcasts extolling great Soviet leaders or the heroic deeds of the proletariat: they provided no meaningful value for the listeners and were filtered out. The failure of these messages to register in collective memory suggests that communist ideology was ultimately incapable of engaging Levočans through the occupation of the square’s soundscape.

Could it, however, be more successful in sparking interest through less ambient and more sensory-rich experiences? Numerous studies of multisensory perception suggest the answer is yes: our ability to remember increases with the number of senses involved.¹²⁵ As everyday experiences in the square were gradually transformed, cultural and sporting events organized by the regime continued to provide occasions for collective gathering. These activities reintroduced elements of sociality and sensory pleasantness described in the previous chapter, bringing people together through shared, embodied experiences. They took place almost exclusively in the square, reinforcing its role as the central stage of communal life. The remaining question, however, is whether they succeeded in bringing Levočans any closer to the envisioned socialist ideal.

Although the centre of Levoča was not a typical sporting venue, it was occasionally transformed into one for cycling and motorcycling races. The square could serve either as a small circuit or as the start and finish point of a competition.¹²⁶ As with all sporting events during the communist period, these carried a clear ideological undertone for both participants and spectators. “Staying healthy” through physical activity was presented as a way of keeping the population ready for potential armed conflict, while spectating served to divert attention from the social and political difficulties of everyday life.¹²⁷ In terms of cultural activity, the goal was to ideologically refurbish culture – to turn it into a medium for the self-realization of the masses, the popularization of Party

¹²³ Interview with Mária and Anton.

¹²⁴ AUGOYARD – TORQUE, *Sonic Experience*, 26, 123–124, 185.

¹²⁵ DITOIU – CARUNTU, *Sensory Experiences Regarding*, 304.

¹²⁶ Interview with Marta and Ján.

¹²⁷ ŠVEDOVÁ – UHER, *Vybrané kapitoly*, 58.

resolutions and the education of the working class.¹²⁸ The ideological charge of cultural life in Levoča was further accentuated by the fact that all local cultural institutions were directly responsible for propaganda and agitation.¹²⁹ Almost all of these activities took place in or around the square – whether in its buildings, such as the theatre or cinema, or outdoors in the open space. There were lectures, classes, theatrical performances, discussions, brass band concerts and many other forms of communal participation.¹³⁰

The range of available activities was thus remarkably diverse. Yet not all of them left a lasting impression. Those that did – the “survivors” in memory – share one crucial quality: they heightened bodily presence in the square and offered vibrant sensory experiences. Brass bands, in particular, feature prominently in recollections of the period. They practiced and performed weekly in the square’s park, filling the town centre with live music and drawing regular audiences. Sporting competitions also attracted large crowds and amplified the acoustic landscape, whether through cheering or the roar of motorcycle engines. It is precisely these mid-sized, recurrent events that are remembered with the greatest fondness: “There was something happening every week”, recalls Marta, but after the revolution, “everything was destroyed”.¹³¹ Yet significantly, these events are not remembered as “communist” ones – their ideological dimension is entirely absent from people’s memories.

The most prominent examples of regime-related activity in the square were undoubtedly the various celebrations, often organized in the form of parades, leading both in the number of participants and in sensory intensity. These events took place directly in the square and were the only occasions that saw the historical façades temporarily decorated with flags and banners.¹³² Archival records mention numerous smaller commemorations throughout the 1950s, but since these were not remembered by participants, attention will be devoted only to the most significant one – famous for its spectacle, massive crowds and overwhelming sensorial richness: the May Day parade.

After February 1948, the tradition of May Day in Czechoslovakia was transformed into a colourful, nationwide manifestation of the people’s will to march toward the bright future of communism.¹³³ The march was a highly ritualized process, complete with local politicians on stages and portraits of Party leaders prominently displayed.¹³⁴ Its purpose was to strengthen solidarity both among citizens and between the populace and its political elites.¹³⁵

128 Hlavné spoločné úlohy kultúrno-osvetovej činnosti pre Levoču na rok 1966 (10 January 1966), Zápisnice zdravotnej komisie 1957–1966, inv. no. 114 – box 52, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (The main tasks of cultural and educational activities in Levoča in 1966); CHALUPECKÝ, *Dejiny Levoče* 2, 476–487.

129 Jednotný plán kultúrno-osvetovej činnosti r. 1967 v Levoči (12 December 1966), Zápisnice zdravotnej komisie 1957–1966, inv. no. 114 – box 52, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Unified plan for cultural and educational activities in Levoča 1967).

130 Hlavné spoločné úlohy kultúrno-osvetovej činnosti pre Levoču na rok 1966 (The main tasks of cultural and educational activities for Levoča in 1966).

131 *Ibidem*.

132 Untitled announcement (27 August 1948), Hlásenia mestského rozhlasu 1951, 1953, 1954, inv. no. 692 – box 192, Mestský národný výbor v Levoči (1923) 1945–1990 (2000), Spišský archív v Levoči (Request for decoration).

133 KRAKOVSKÝ, *Ať žije První máj*, 17.

134 SOBOTKOVÁ, *Komunistické slavnosti*, 58.

135 “Amerika stavia tanky, ale nemá na čítanky. Spontánnosť mája zničili okupanti, tvrdí historik”, SME, <https://plus.sme.sk/c/20519432/prvy-maj-historik-rozhovor-krakovsky-spontannost-maja-znicili-okupanti.html>

All of the participants in our oral history recall taking part in the May Day celebrations, often in vivid detail. There were songs, cheers, chanting, waving of flags, banners, brass bands, speeches, allegorical floats and even karate demonstrations – creating a festival of sound, colour and movement. Yet such sensory overload did not affect everyone in the same way. Ivan and Ernest were less enthusiastic – one viewing it as an obligatory socialist ritual,¹³⁶ the other appreciating it simply as a paid day off.¹³⁷ The remaining four respondents, however, spoke in strikingly different terms: they described the parades as “beautiful”, recalling their favourite moments with enthusiasm.¹³⁸ It was a special occasion that brought the entire town together for a few hours and produced an extraordinary set of sensescapes. Nevertheless, even these powerful experiences failed to embed ideological meaning. None of the participants took part for political reasons, and even those who enjoyed the festivities remember them as events “everyone simply had to attend”. This aligns closely with existing findings on everyday life under socialism, where respondents likewise perceived May Day primarily as a social opportunity – to meet friends, organize trips or simply enjoy the day.¹³⁹ In Levoča, too, the celebrations temporarily slowed the process of individualization, yet they did not move society any closer to the ideological ideal.

This absence of ideological connection, however, was not confined to a single holiday – it was general. Despite the period being remembered as “happier” or “better”, such feelings are not linked to communist ideals. People most often explain the difference by claiming they were “raised differently”¹⁴⁰ or “disciplined differently”,¹⁴¹ emphasizing stronger interpersonal bonds rather than ideological conviction. The socialist project and its utopian aspirations were never cited as relevant factors. This finding is far from unique: it resonates with many studies of so-called “communist nostalgia”, which interpret the positive reassessment of the past as a response to lost feelings of security, autonomy or belonging.¹⁴² More importantly, these studies highlight a longing for a very specific form of sociability – a “retrospective utopia” rooted not in politics but in the memory of communal life itself.¹⁴³

The case of Levoča supports this interpretation while also suggesting that the term “communist nostalgia” can be misleading. What people appear to long for is not communism itself, but a world that unfolded during its rule. The ideology often remained abstract and distant from everyday sensory life, making it difficult to become a direct object of longing. Although the regime invested heavily in efforts to be seen and heard, these initiatives did not consistently guide everyday experience toward the promised “bright tomorrow”, as ideological theory frequently failed to translate into the textures of daily life. Yet even where propaganda fell short of its primary aims, it could have secondary effects: by organizing collective events and shared practices, it

[accessed 8 October 2025].

136 Interview with Ivan Chalupický.

137 Interview with Ernest Rusnák.

138 Interview with Mária and Anton and Interview with Marta and Ján.

139 BELIČKOVÁ, *Vznik a vývoj priemyselného mesta*, 144.

140 Interview with Mária and Anton.

141 Interview with Marta and Ján.

142 BOYER, *From Algos to Autonomos*, 18; EKMAN – LINDE, *Communist Nostalgia*, 354; TODOROVA, *Introduction*, 7.

143 VELIKONJA, *Lost in Transition*, 535.

temporarily countered tendencies toward individualization associated with broader processes of modernization. In this sense, Levoča's society has both lost and preserved something – the communist era is remembered as a period of strong social unity. Because many of the regime's initiatives emphasized human connection rather than explicit division, it was not primarily blamed for what followed, but instead became associated in memory with the "good old times", before people were perceived as having been "torn apart from one another".¹⁴⁴ In a setting such as Levoča's square, where ideological ambitions encountered strong historical and sensory constraints, this may have represented the outer limits of what the regime's cultural strategies could achieve; as this chapter has shown, even its most sensorially rich efforts struggled to inscribe ideology deeply into the fabric of everyday sensory citizenship.

Conclusion

Just as sensory experience framed the opening of Levoča's twentieth century, it also helps bring its story to a close. It was through perception that multiple forces – historical and ideological – intersected, producing shared ways of sensing everyday life in the town. The square's monuments and architecture anchored local attachments in a long-past era of bourgeois prominence, shaping how change was perceived and negotiated over time. Because destruction or radical reconstruction were largely impossible, the communist regime found itself maintaining much of the material heritage left by earlier periods, even where this sat uneasily with official narratives of progress. At the same time, gradual shifts associated with technological development, housing policy, and changing patterns of comfort altered everyday practices and forms of social interaction, subtly reconfiguring the use of public space. These changes were not experienced as a clear break, but as a slow adjustment in how people related to one another and to the square itself.

Attempts to shape Levočans' perception of the world thus involved negotiating not only the weight of history, but also long-term transformations in everyday life. While the socialist project was unable to fundamentally reshape the square, its efforts to influence the sensorium remained effective only in affecting – producing emotions and memories detached from ideology. The recurring claim that life was better during the communist period does not stem from the regime having successfully created a lasting sense of community, but rather from the fact that it coincided with the final phase of relatively dense social interaction before later changes became more pronounced. What is remembered fondly, therefore, is not communism itself, but a moment of shared sociality that preceded more individualized ways of life. The sensory history of Levoča's square thus shows how locally rooted ways of perceiving and remembering can distance lived experience from ideological narratives. Extending this perspective to other towns may help uncover further instances in which perception itself – our most immediate contact with the world – shapes how historical change is experienced and recalled.

144 Interview with Mária and Anton.

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