

Solving the Housing Crisis in Interwar Košice

*Examples of Social Housing for the
Unemployed and Impoverished*

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Blocks of small-format flats in the south
of Košice in the streets Topolová
a Rastislavova, 1937–1941

Source: Archive of the City of Košice
(hereinafter AMK)

Even prior to the First World War, the challenging or indeed catastrophic housing situation in Košice was a regular topic of discussion in the city's press. The war years, followed by the collapse of the Habsburg Empire and the establishment of the First Czechoslovak Republic, threw the city into an entirely new reality, yet still confronting the problem of insufficient housing stock. Although the Czechoslovak state responded to the housing crisis by introducing new policies as early as the beginning of 1919, the chronic shortage of residential accommodation continued to have a negative impact on the city's population, in particular the lower classes. The study is the result of the author's long-term archival research and offers positive examples of the city's efforts to provide the poor with satisfactory solutions to the housing crisis throughout the entire interwar period.

After the end of the First World War, the formerly Hungarian city of Košice found itself part of the newly established state of Czechoslovakia, and by the early 1920s had become Slovakia's second largest city and a regional centre of industry, commerce, education and culture. However, its traditional political, business and cultural ties with the former capital of Budapest were abruptly severed, and forming links to the distant new capital of Prague was initially fraught with problems. Košice's population grew rapidly in this period, which triggered a sizeable construction boom and dramatic expansion of the city's area. Over the two decades of the First Czechoslovak Republic's existence, a series of new residential districts and modern architectural works were constructed, and the impact was also felt in the historic centre of the city. Many new buildings essential for a modern city gradually arose in Košice during this period: office buildings, modern facilities for postal and railway employees, police, firefighters and soldiers, and new public amenities such as state schools, school dormitories, churches, hotels, restaurants, department stores, cinemas, sports halls, outdoor pools and many more. In the first decade of the Republic, more than 150 million Kč were

invested into state construction projects in Košice against the mere 5–6 million Kč expended by private developers in the same period.¹ A total of 1400 new rental properties were built by the state sector in these years, in addition to the range of cooperative associations receiving public funding.² Over time, entire new districts and complexes of apartment buildings and family houses appeared on land which had previously been undeveloped municipal property.

However, despite this successful response to the need for housing, the initial years of the new democratic state in Košice were by no means straightforward. The prolonged stagnation in the construction industry during the war years, coinciding with the demobilisation of conscripted soldiers, the establishment of new families and the resulting restructuring of many households with the arrival of new family members, all combined to cause a serious housing crisis in the city. As was the case with other towns where new state offices were established (for example, Prague, Brno, Opava, Bratislava, or nearby Uzhorod), the large numbers of Czech nationals arriving in Košice in this period greatly exacerbated the city's already poor housing conditions. These new arrivals were

sent to Košice by the Prague authorities to ensure that the legislative power of the new state could be implemented in this ethnically, religiously and linguistically heterogeneous region, including large numbers of railway and postal workers, financial officials, radio employees, educators, police and also a considerable military presence. The general shortage of housing was further exacerbated as new workers in various sectors, many of whom were fathers, began to be joined by their wives and children. Although a certain proportion of the local Hungarian community gave up their positions and moved with their families to Hungary, whether on linguistic grounds or following their own political convictions, this departure did little to solve the growing housing crisis. The bleak situation in Košice in the early 1920s is captured eloquently in an illustrated article published in the magazine *Slovenský Svet* in 1921: “The dearth of housing in Košice is so great that Czech railway workers who arrived in Slovakia have been forced to live in railway wagons until they find accommodation.³ In 1920 and 1921, apartments were allocated by the housing commission, and the housing crisis was so acute that gaining any kind of accommodation whatsoever was considered a huge stroke of luck.”⁴

The state decided to resolve the desperate situation in the new republic through the provision of various financial relief efforts, and the method chosen was the massive funding of new housing in the form of cooperative building projects. On February 20th 1919, only four months after the establishment of the First Czechoslovak Republic, Act no. 98 Coll. on the State Housing Fund was passed, followed only three months later on May 23rd 1919 by Act no. 281 Coll. on State Support for the Construction Industry which was joined on March 11th 1921 by Act no. 100 Coll. on the Construction Industry.⁵ However, the ongoing stimulus the state provided to housing policy through numerous forms of legislative intervention in which the authorities repeatedly attempted to respond to the fluctuating economic conditions in the interwar period reached Košice with a significant delay. State investment involved the construction of both new public office buildings and residential buildings for its employees. Additionally, it aimed to support the development of the eastern regions of the Republic through the so-called Slovak preference scheme of 1923, whereby Czech contractors active in Slovakia received preferential treatment in the assignment of work even when they quoted price offers up to 5% higher than their competitors, an approach heavily criticised in the local press.⁶ Likely, this provision encouraged many well-known Czech architects and builders to establish local branches in Košice in the interwar years,⁷ perhaps most notably the Prague architect Jan Vodňaruk, responsible for several high quality works in Košice in the early 1920s. His main office was based in the Prague district of Vinohrady,⁸ but in 1923 he established a construction branch in Bratislava where, in tandem with his work in Košice,⁹ he built a series of cooperative and state

projects such as the complex of family houses in Hausbergl and Račisdorf.¹⁰

Perhaps for the same reason, although primarily to support the development of the eastern part of the Republic, a national convention of Czechoslovak engineers and architects was held in Košice between July 20th and 24th 1923. More than four hundred architects and engineers attended the event, indicating remarkable interest on the part of the professional community in the opportunities on offer in east Slovakia as well as the adjacent region of Subcarpathian Ruthenia, with attendees making an excursion to the latter area at the convention's end.¹¹

Housing for the Destitute

Conversion of Former Army Barracks to Social Housing
The extremely difficult conditions which plagued Košice in the years after 1918 were felt more acutely among the lower levels of society in the city, primarily those who had arrived in the city from the countryside in search of work and found themselves without a roof over their heads. The chronic lack of housing stimulated enormous pressure from city inhabitants to improve living conditions in general, by whatever means necessary. Indicating the city's dire situation is a letter from June 1920, written by the municipal authorities to the Ministries of Public Works and Social Welfare in Prague.¹² The city, the letter informed the two Ministries, had undertaken urgent measures to address the severe situation but could not do continue to do so without state assistance. The most pressing issue was the need for accommodation for workers and minor state employees left without work following the war's impact on the economy and the transition from Austro-Hungarian rule to the new state of Czechoslovakia. The city's urgent attempt to solve the crisis among the poorest inhabitants at the start of the 1920s is laid out in detail in the archival materials that document the reconstruction as temporary accommodations of the barracks of the former military camp in Barca in the south of Košice.¹³ Acquisition from the army of approximately 40 barracks of the military reserve hospital and their gradual conversion for residential use was seen by the city authorities as the simplest, fastest and cheapest solution to the housing shortage. Built between 1914 and 1915, these wooden structures originally housed soldiers of the Czechoslovak army and the Ukrainian legions, but when they were transferred to the city authorities in 1922, they were in a catastrophic condition: the buildings had been badly damaged both during and after the 1919 coup and the invasion of the city by Hungarian forces, and in their current state were uninhabitable.¹⁴

Prior to the planned conversion of the barracks into residential accommodation, the city authorities initiated a public tender bid to find the cheapest contractor for the project, hoping that the promise of a rapid solution to this pressing social problem would convince the government in Prague to step in with assistance. Since the housing issue, in a Europe exhausted by five years of war, had

been recognised as an obvious priority by other European politicians and government programs, the people of Košice had hoped that they would receive sufficient support from the national authorities. As an essential precondition of stability and economic prosperity, the need to achieve a degree of social cohesion was the rationale behind many similar projects aimed at providing housing for the disadvantaged, who would otherwise struggle to find the means for decent accommodation.¹⁵ And, as the city authorities were unable to finance such a large-scale project from their own resources, they relied instead on arranging suitable loans from the Košice branches of Prague-based financial institutions, having lost contact with the Hungarian financiers whose services they had used in the past.

While still awaiting the decision of the Ministry regarding the provision of state funds, a request made by the city authorities drew attention to the long-term financial problems of the municipality, the ongoing problems with feeding the population and quartering soldiers, and the efforts to solve the burgeoning unemployment crisis, with the city having taken out almost a million Kč in loans in an attempt to deal with the complicated situation: “With reference to the Act dated May 23rd 1919 and Act no. 219 of May 30th 1920, we request that our construction program receive the support outlined in the provisions of these laws”. It was expected that if the state guaranteed the loans and, as had previously been arranged in Bratislava, simultaneously provided supplementary funds guaranteed on the basis of future rental income, the city authorities would be able to build 400 workers’ apartments, thereby reducing unemployment and providing a boost to the local economy. The city authorities also believed that each of the approximately 40 military barracks could be reconstructed to provide a minimum of 14 apartments (10 two-roomed and 4 single-roomed), resulting in a gain for the city of a total of 400 to 500 new apartments. There was considerable demand for this provisional housing among city inhabitants who were eligible due to their lack of any alternative accommodation, and up to 150 families applied for the accommodation immediately. Reconstruction work was held back by a lack of funding, and the extremely difficult financial situation of the city meant the selection for realisation of the cheapest of the three options for the conversion of the barracks into basic apartments. The final budget and design of the reconstruction was prepared in October 1921 by Ing. Eduard Czmár, an employee of the municipality’s Technical Department.¹⁶

The barracks retained their original three-tract arrangement with an internal corridor providing access to individual rooms,¹⁷ but the space was modified to shape the interior spaces into extremely basic apartments, with 26 such structures in each barrack.¹⁸ Living space for each family was comprised of a single 16 m² room with a solid-fuel stove and chimney and an adjacent storage room inside the former corridor. Access to the temporary

“apartments” and the accompanying communal hygienic facilities was provided directly from the exterior of the building.¹⁹ The contract for the conversion of the first barrack building was given to the Košice construction firm of Ing. Hugo Kaboš,²⁰ and the city then announced a public tender for the reconstruction of the other barrack buildings, negotiating a loan of 100,000 Kč for the work. Seven local construction firms expressed interest in the tender process.²¹ The construction expenses were estimated at 10,000,000 Kč, of which 4,900,000 Kč were obtained through state subsidies, and support of 2,000,000 Kč expected through bank loans.

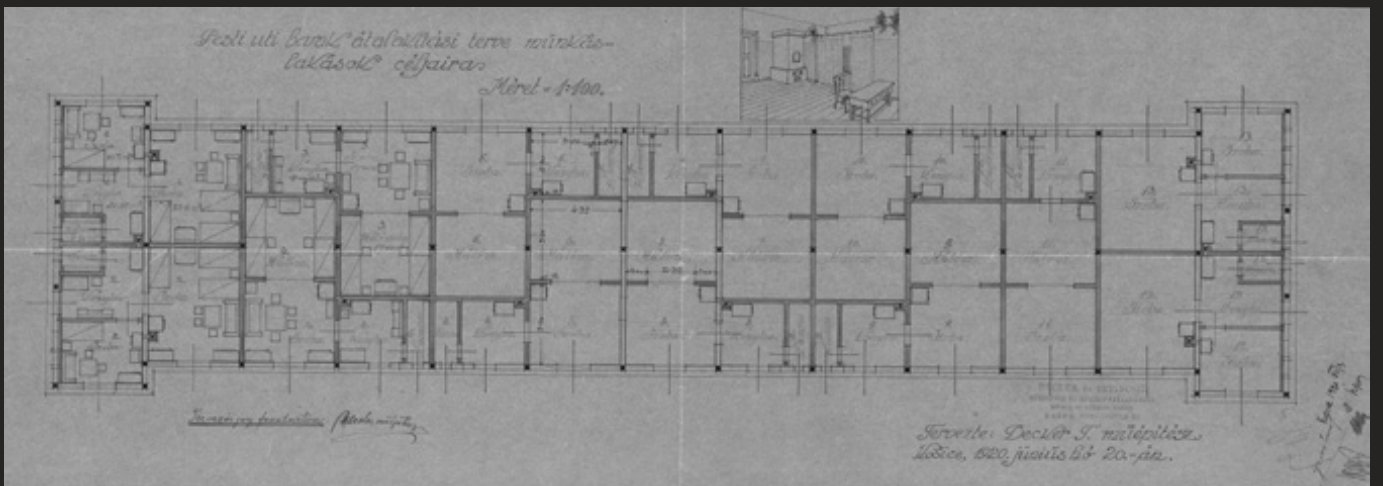
The conversion of another 36 barracks into complexes of 14 apartments (eight two-roomed apartments and six one-roomed apartments) over an area of 12 jutra (an older measurement unit used in Czechoslovakia which was equivalent to 2,837 m²) was finally undertaken by the Association of Building Contractors [Zváz Podnikatel’ov Stavieb] and the Association of Construction Workers [Zváz Stavebných Robotníkov].²² Between 1921 (Type A) and January 1925 (Type B), the city gradually acquired a total of 300 provisional one- or two-roomed apartments.²³ Supporting the conversion of the military barracks into emergency housing, supplemental planning permits were granted justified by the state’s higher interest in the project.²⁴ The plans also included the construction of a co-operative store, a state school, an infectious diseases clinic, a children’s playground, a kindergarten, a community centre and fire and police stations, along with the extension of the tramline to the barrack estate.²⁵

At the end of 1925, the city authorities commenced work on the elementary school and nursery project, based on a detailed budget prepared by Czmár. In addition to five classrooms accessed through an entrance hall, the designated area planned to include a kindergarten, assembly hall and two apartments with one or two rooms for teaching staff on both sides of the building. The hygiene facilities were provisional and would be located outside the school and kindergarten buildings.²⁶ However, when the proposed plans and budget for the temporary elementary school were submitted to the school inspectorate, including an urgent request from the city authorities for state support, the submission was rejected, primarily due to the high costs of the project but also on hygienic reasons, citing the use of outdoor toilets for pupils and the lack of a public water supply and sewer system in the temporary camp. A more suitable solution for the inspectorate took the form of a new school building or in an extension to the existing elementary school on Martinovičová Street, which the children from the barrack camp were already attending.²⁷ Nonetheless, in October 1925, the city’s cultural committee sent a request to the Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment seeking funding for the construction of a barrack elementary school with five classrooms and a nursery.²⁸

The residents of the barracks estate were also allocated land and gardens on which they could grow their

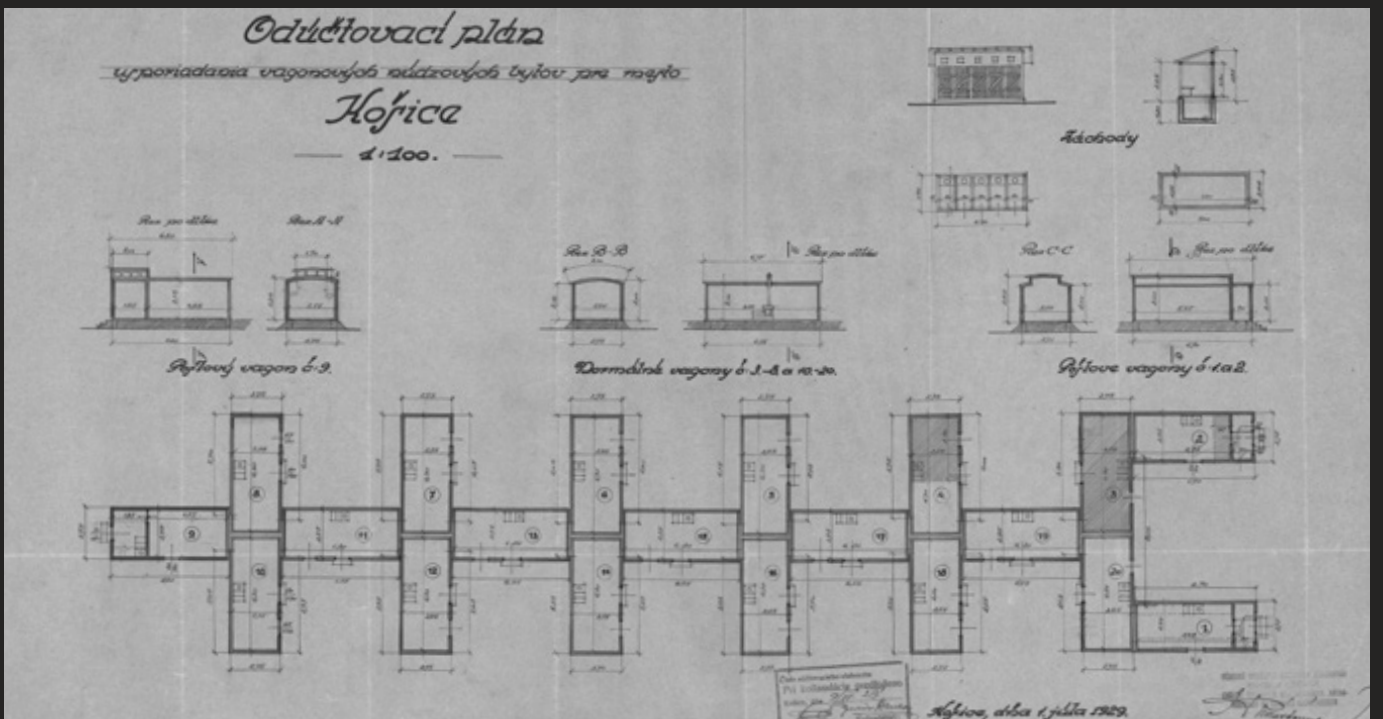


A. Kassai Megfigyelő Barakk-Kórház
Termesztet Után Rajzolta Wolff János Gusziáú



The Barca military camp
in the south of Košice, 1876
Source: collection of
Ing. E. Kočík

Adaptation of a former barracks of
the Barca military camp in Košice
into 13 workers' flats, 1920
Source: AMK



Košice South – Barca,
 photograph of the “barracks colony”
 Source: VSM KE, fond of historical
 photographs and postcards: private
 archive of Ing. L. Kočík

Colony of housing
 in rail wagons, 1929
 Source: AMK

own vegetables; unemployed tenants without rental debt had the use of these allotments free of charge.²⁹ Archival documents reveal that the efforts of the city authorities to help the destitute with this temporary housing had a greater civic purpose. The residents organised a wide range of noteworthy and beneficial social events. The “Barracks Sports Club” operated for several years with the aim of encouraging and expanding all manner of sports activities. Thanks to small contributions from the city, the Club rented the “Teheľňa” sportsground for 850 Kč per year and maintained contacts with other sports clubs. In addition to sports competitions, Club members also organised a garden harvest festival (1925) and a Shrovetide carnival or *fašiangy* (1936).³⁰ Also active in the estate was a “Girls’ Circle” which was mainly intended to provide useful free-time activities for girls aged between 7 and 15. Under professional guidance, the girls and young women would create various types of handicrafts but also spend time playing sports and social games, singing, acting, drawing or learning ethics. The Circle was organised by a Catholic charity from 1932 onwards, and the hundred members were not required to pay any membership fees due to their poverty.³¹

Nonetheless, city inhabitants regarded the “barrack camp” solution to the housing crisis as insufficient or even shameful. The Tenant’s Association went so far as to criticized the project for failing to take full advantage of the benefits introduced in the Act on the Construction Industry.³² The author of an article on the failings of the barrack also highlighted the wartime destruction of the original sewer system, the reconstruction of which would require an expenditure of two million Kč.³³ From the very beginning, the city’s efforts to convert the wooden barracks into housing was criticised in the local press by the respected Czech engineer Bedřich Minařů as uneconomical due to its provisional nature.³⁴ In a professional evaluation published in *Slovenský Východ* in response to an article on the barrack estate, Minařů clearly expressed his support for the construction of new buildings.³⁵ Further criticism of the barracks’ use as temporary accommodation was voiced in a 1925 newspaper article, which compared the relics of the Great War on Peštianská Trieda unfavourably with the plans of the private brickworks on Šafránová Street to build rental apartment buildings for employees consisting of 50 one-roomed and 50 two-roomed apartments featuring kitchens: “It is commendable that this is the project of a private business, and the aims of this investment should serve as an example for other private firms”.³⁶

Despite the rudimentary and provisional nature of the so-called “barrack camp”, there was no shortage of applications for accommodation in the estate from local residents who had found themselves in difficulties for various reasons. These applicants included the families of workers at the municipal sawmill, whose modest family houses were located on land allocated for the planned construction of an estate by the Svěpomoc Railway

Workers’ Cooperative [Družstvo železničných zamestnancov “Svěpomoc”].³⁷ In response, it was proposed for the workers’ original wooden dwellings to be dismantled and re-erected on a site near the barrack estate. The Prague architect Jan Vodňaruk, who constructed an estate of family houses for railway workers in the northeast of Košice between 1922 and 1923, was also involved in this project.³⁸

The minutes of a meeting of the Košice Committee for Social Welfare relates the story of ten families of police employees left literally without a roof over their heads in the aftermath of a fire.³⁹ A conflict broke out between the police directorate and the city authorities, the latter opposing the proposal to accommodate the homeless families in the barrack estate. With the support of the social insurance office, the city authorities insisted that alternative accommodation be found in order to ensure that the barrack estate could serve its original purpose.⁴⁰ The families were eventually housed in the former barracks and remained there for some time, arguing that they could not be evicted from the property according to the provisions of Act No. 48 Coll. on the protection of tenants dated March 26th 1925.⁴¹ Given the persisting shortage of housing in the city, the city authorities had no other alternative. The police authorities still required a further 30 apartments, and therefore a report on the situation was sent to the Ministry with authority to administer the entire territory of Slovakia. Only with the construction of modern apartment buildings in the south of the city in the early 1930s was the issue of suitable housing for police employees fully resolved.⁴²

As the economic crisis of the late 1920s and early 1930s worsened the number of people living in emergency or provisional accommodation continued to rise in Košice. Those who lost their jobs could literally be thrown out onto the street from one day to the next if they were unable to pay their rent. Further efforts to resolve the ongoing housing crisis introduced new legislation on the construction industry, intended to stimulate the building of new apartments and slow the ever-rising rents. The situation was also addressed through the allocation of rent-regulated apartments to prevent families from losing their homes if they lacked the financial means to pay rents on the open market. Dating back to the wartime years, rent regulations had first been introduced in two directives issued by the Austrian government in January 1917 and January 1918⁴³ before being implemented into the new legislative framework of the First Czechoslovak Republic.⁴⁴

However, neither the laws on the construction industry nor the rent regulations were of any significant use to those unable to afford any kind of accommodation whatsoever. The desperate straits in which many Košice residents found themselves are attested by the thick file of applications for housing in the barrack estate in the south of the city from as late as 1933 and 1934, forming a total of more than 200 files of requests from citizens

who had been evicted from their homes following enforcement proceedings over non-payment of rent.⁴⁵ Individuals submitting these requests were also required to append a “Statement of Poverty”: a pre-printed form notarised by a city official stating that the applicant was a citizen of the city who had been unemployed for some time and who had neither moveable nor immovable assets, capital nor an income exceeding the average daily wage for labourers. Despite the strict regulations and the knowledge that most applicants for apartments in the barrack estate had suddenly been left homeless, the situation was irresolvable, and many of the applications were refused.⁴⁶

Until the end of the 1930s, the city authorities resolved many issues in the barrack estate at their own expense, including various disputes and repairs; additionally, they organised the collection of rent and the winter road maintenance in addition to funding the regular clearance of cesspits.⁴⁷ On the basis of a proposal made by the city council, the city authorities also arranged and financed work on the barracks on Švehlova Trieda (now Južná Trieda) as late as 1937, more specifically fixing leaking roofs and 38 damaged chimneys, carried out by the Bratislava firm of K. C. Menzel through its Košice branch, in fact opened specifically to fulfil this contract.⁴⁸ Among the most badly damaged of the barrack buildings were those occupied by numerous desperate homeless people who had then made their own ad hoc structural adaptations. In addition to supervising the educational, cultural and security needs of the barrack estate, which was assigned its own administrator, the city also provided the residents with free medical treatment.⁴⁹

“Wagon Apartments” as the Cheapest Solution

The desperate shortage of all types of housing continued through the late 1920s and even into the early 1930s, resulting in further temporary solutions to this chronic problem. The archives in Košice include a file which makes brief reference to a tender for the erection of so-called “wagon apartments” in the south of the city. The city authorities had decided upon this extremely provisional solution to an acute need to find accommodation for families from the locality known as Haťové Riadky, evicted as a result of a particularly harsh court decision. The situation, a source of considerable concern for the city authorities, emerged as a result of the so-called “tobacco interest”: the 1929 decision by the management of Košice’s tobacco factory to build residential apartment buildings for 46 families of its employees on land that it owned.⁵⁰ The plight of those evicted from the existing buildings on this land was so dire that it was necessary to adopt even greater cost-cutting than in the case of the barrack estate in Barca. It is likely that the city representatives were inspired by a similar solution from the nearby city of Uzhhorod, where the authorities had purchased 20 disused railway wagons to provide shelter for 31 of the 90 families who applied for this accommodation.⁵¹ A similar problem had arisen in Prague, where several

such settlements dating to the First Republic are still visible today.⁵²

Given the financial circumstances, the city authorities decided that it was necessary to purchase decommissioned railway wagons from the Ministry of Railways which would be suitable for use as emergency housing after modification. In order to ensure the plan’s rapid execution and favourable financial conditions, the deputy mayor was sent to Prague to conduct negotiations at the Ministry.⁵³ The price of converting one wagon was estimated at around 6,000 Kč; therefore the overall cost of preparing thirty wagons would be approximately 180,000 Kč, excluding labour costs and the expenses of transporting, installing and insulating the cars. The finance commission recommended that the city also obtain a loan of 200,000 Kč and announce a tender process to find contractors for the necessary work immediately.⁵⁴ Although the deadline for offers for the conversion of railway wagons into temporary accommodation was set as November 13th, 1928, the city authorities were still dealing with the issue as late as 1930. On the basis of Resolution No. 26424/28 the contract was awarded to the Production Collective of Professional Construction Workers [Výrobné družstvo odborných stavebných robotníkov], which implemented the necessary work and prepared a so-called “removal plan” for the layout of the wagons in a scale of 1:100.⁵⁵ The construction work was carried out between November 15th 1928 and January 18th 1929, with the city contracting the firm of Ján Kládek to perform further maintenance on the wagon apartments.⁵⁶

The subsequent fate of the thirty converted wagons is still unclear, as well as that of a further thirty wagons purchased with the promise of a 180,000 Kč loan following the unanimous agreement of the city’s finance commission. The rental income from this newly established emergency housing would be used to cover the interest costs of the loan and to repay the capital.⁵⁷ The city authorities saw the step of accommodating the homeless families in the wagon estate near the barrack estate as a temporary measure: “There is a moral responsibility on the part of the city authorities to ensure more permanent and decent housing for these unfortunate families. At this time, the city will only provide apartments for these impoverished families for humanitarian reasons, even though it will cost around 100,000 Kč, which is not the city’s responsibility!”

In response, Dr. Vojtech Blanár, a member of the City Council, proposed that the city’s Technical Department be authorised to prepare plans for the construction of basic apartment buildings consisting of one-room dwellings, the costs of which would be covered in the following year’s budget.⁵⁸ However, despite the efforts and activities of the city authorities to resolve the issue in the shortest possible time, the housing crisis in Košice persisted into the spring of 1930. For this reason, an emergency meeting of the City Council was held in early February 1929 to discuss the investment budget for 1930, in which

the Council insisted that, in addition to the planned construction of two modern elementary schools in the north and south of the city at a cost of 3,000,000 Kč, a community centre should also be built at the same cost and also an epidemiological hospital which would be funded using a loan of 1,800,000 Kč.⁵⁹ However, it was also necessary to take into account the expenses of the planned residential buildings with one-roomed apartments. It was estimated that the construction of each building would cost 30,000 Kč, and therefore the plan for 100 such buildings would amount to 3,000,000 Kč. A further 3,000,000 Kč were allocated to the upgrading of streets, although ultimately the city would spend a total of 24,000,000 Kč on the improvement of existing streets and the construction of new roads.⁶⁰

Solutions to the Housing Crisis in Košice through the 1930s

Criticism of the City Council's approach to the unsustainable housing situation, in which "hundreds of people are still living in conditions below the level of human decency", was even voiced from within the ranks of the city representatives themselves, as evidenced by a letter from a member of the Council from the spring of 1928.⁶¹ The letter proposes that the City Council appoint a commission to negotiate with the authorities in Bratislava and Prague for a 3,000,000 Kč loan for the construction of residential buildings. Intended for the poorest social classes, these small bedsit apartments with an estimated cost of 20–25,000 Kč and single-room apartments with separate kitchens and facilities at a cost of between 25–35,000 Kč were based on similar models from Prague. The expected loan would allow the city to construct more than a hundred of these apartments. Considerable public interest arose during the negotiations conducted by the city representatives in Prague, and the results and hopes that the discussions evoked were followed closely in regular articles in the local press.⁶²

A 1930 article in the Košice newspaper *Slovenský Východ* stated that the peak of the construction boom in the city was reached in 1928, with 250 planning permits being issued for new buildings and 77 permits for renovations or extensions. This expanded the city's housing stock by a total of 627 apartments, consisting of 287 one-roomed apartments, 191 two-roomed apartments, 78 three-roomed apartments, 15 four-roomed apartments and 9 five-roomed apartments, all with kitchens and facilities, and 44 bedsit apartments. In the following year of 1929, 165 planning permits were granted for new buildings and 64 permits for renovations and extensions, resulting in a total of 354 new apartments, approximately half the number built in the previous year.⁶³ The author of the article suggests that the main reason for the slowdown in the construction industry in the early 1930s was the difficulties in obtaining mortgage loans. "Slovakia lacks a sufficient range of options (such as the savings banks which are found in other towns) for obtaining mortgages

at interest rates of between 5 ¾ and 6 ½ %. The only possibilities are the local branches of the Bratislava Mortgage and Land Bank, but they are unable to meet the requests of their clients. The commercial banks have recently stopped offering mortgages, while the General Pension Institute and the General Social Insurance, which mostly provided cheap loans for municipal and collective building projects in Slovakia, are also markedly less willing to approve loans".⁶⁴

As the economic crisis intensified, the number of homeless people continued to rise throughout the country, not only in Košice.⁶⁵ Prague, for example, was under pressure from a critical housing crisis and the emergence of shanty towns on the city's outskirts, forcing the city authorities to announce a public tender in 1929 for the construction of small apartments for the poor in Pankrác and Holešovice and a further tender in 1936 for apartments in Břevnov for "the impoverished of Prague".⁶⁶

Further criticism of the persistent housing shortage in Košice was voiced in 1930 in a local press article, under a headline announcing that the city was currently facing the most serious crisis to date. The author suggested that the city authorities should follow the example of other towns and set up a special commission to stimulate growth in the construction industry. Additionally, the article drew attention to the impact of speculation on land prices, arguing that this played a far from insignificant part in the stagnation of the private construction sector. A further cause was the difficulty that many tenants faced in finding a modern apartment, with the author also noting that the monthly rent of such accommodation in Košice was much higher than that of higher-quality apartments in the suburbs of Prague.⁶⁷

The city authorities sent regular updates to Prague regarding the housing situation in the city, such as a letter from December 31st, 1930 in which a city official reports the construction of a social apartment building and plans for 32 small family houses for municipal employees. The official also complains about the low general standard of housing, with many residents still living in basements or unhygienic accommodation despite city's provision of cheap plots of land and supported the individual building activities of the poor. "The highest demand is for one-roomed apartments, which are the most commonly built form of housing in Košice. From January to December 1930, a total of 427 new apartments were constructed in the city, consisting of 266 one-roomed apartments, 104 two-roomed apartments, 35 three-roomed apartments, 17 four-roomed apartments, 4 five-roomed apartments and 5 six-roomed apartments. This figure is 104 more than were built in the previous year."⁶⁸

According to a census carried out on December 1st, 1930, Košice had a total of 15,432 residences, each with an average of 5 inhabitants calculated from the city population. A total of 2,885 families owned their homes, more than half of which were one-roomed apartments. Rent regulations were in place for 4,322 rental properties, but

these numbers changed to some degree after 1930 after the general increase in rents for state-owned properties and the withdrawal of regulated status for some types of apartment, with the result that almost 70 % of properties in the city were subject to market pricing.⁶⁹ An August 1932 article in *Slovenský Východ* titled “The Construction Boom in Košice in the Previous Year” offered a summary of construction in the city in 1931, noting that in addition to other larger public buildings, a total of 166 smaller residential buildings had been built, the majority of which were for poorer residents, with the housing consisting of 44 single-roomed apartments, 288 kitchenette rooms and 119 two-roomed apartments with kitchens.⁷⁰

Having monitored the situation and the solutions to the housing crisis in Prague and North Bohemia, the people of Košice also decided to adopt a mutual assistance approach involving the construction of cheap family houses. The project of individual two-roomed brick houses with an approximate budget of around 25,000 Kč aroused immediate interest among the general public, with up to fifty local families expressing interest at the very first meeting. Purchasing of the land and building materials and paying for construction work would be made collectively, and houses could be built by anyone with a regular monthly income even if they lacked the initial capital. The project required the participation of at least 200 interested parties to become financially viable and ensure a 50 % reduction in construction costs. Each of the builders would immediately become the owner of their resulting property. A public meeting at which interested parties could meet with the developer of the project and representatives of a construction firm from Bohemia was scheduled at the Orient Café on Komenského Street on June 24th 1932, but our research has not been able to clarify the subsequent history of the mutual assistance project.⁷¹ The new estate to the north and south of Myslavská Cesta, composed of of very modest family houses for the poor constructed through mutual assistance, has now been almost completely built over. These houses were individually designed and built by master masons on land which had been subdivided from larger privately owned parcels. Several desperate families also built illegal shacks in the near vicinity which the city authorities later refused to legalize, insisting instead upon their demolition.⁷²

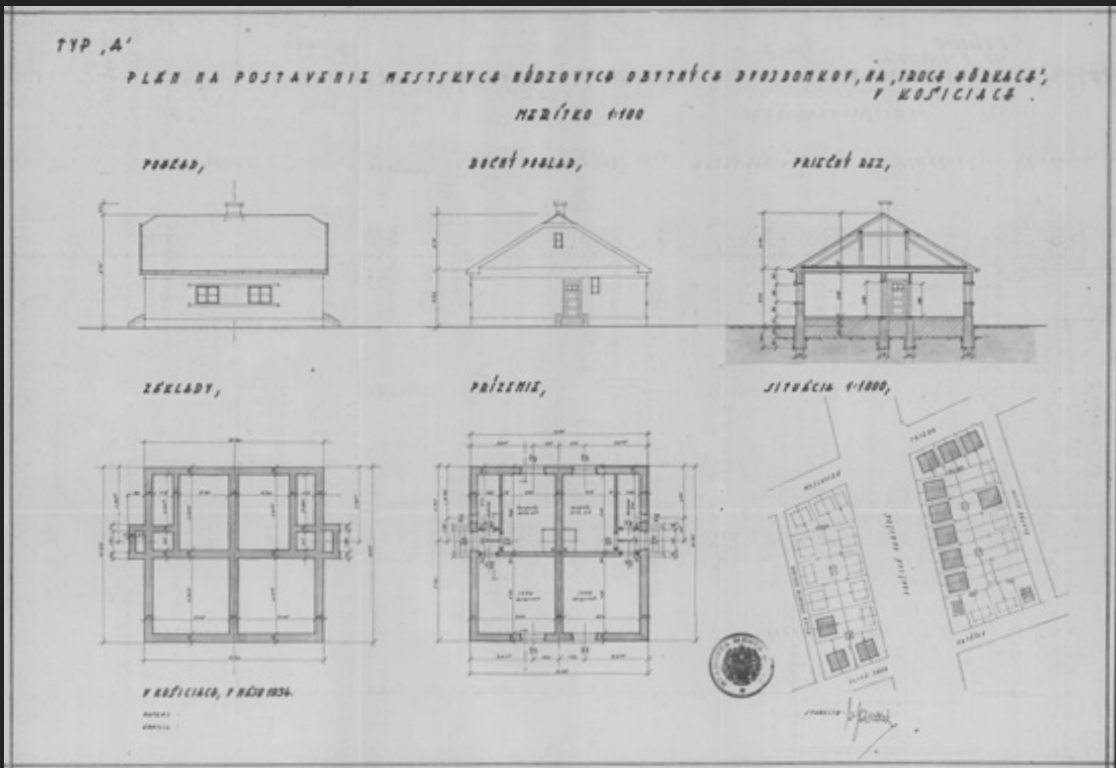
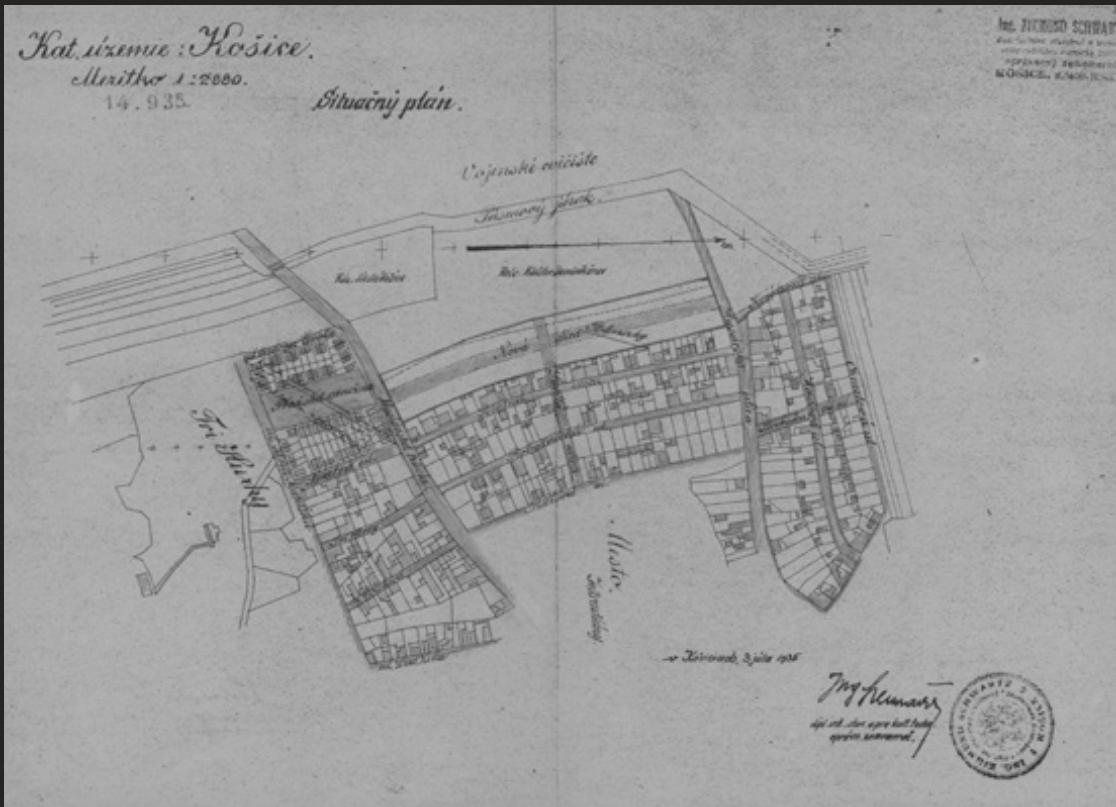
*The Construction of a Workers’
District - the “Maxoň Estate”*

Despite numerous difficulties, the city authorities in this period established a new locality with small, well-built residential structures on the western outskirts of the city to the southwest of Myslavská Cesta.⁷³ This workers’ estate consisting of a total of 58 residences, mostly semi-detached houses with some freestanding buildings, was officially named the Maxoň Estate in honour of the mayor of the time, Milan Maxoň, but was known by locals as Tri Hôrky.⁷⁴

This benevolent gesture on the part of the city authorities was essentially a consequence of the ongoing crisis of the Great Depression and more specifically a response to the tragic situation of a large group of around 80 impoverished local families who were unable to pay rent and who had no chance of finding work. Emergency housing was found for 17 of these households in municipal buildings which had fortuitously become available, but the remaining families were forced to camp out in the open, which was obviously unacceptable from a humanitarian point of view.⁷⁵ A group of 42 families, represented by two delegates who would negotiate with the city authorities to prepare a contract with specific conditions, submitted a proposal to the city for speedy resolution of the situation. To allow construction work to start as soon as possible after the future residents had signed the contract (prepared in both Slovak and Hungarian), the families outlined their requirements in the proposal itself.⁷⁶ In September 1933, the city authorities made a definitive decision to construct a series of small family houses for the long-term unemployed who had been evicted from their homes.

Overall sponsorship of the project came from the city authorities themselves; the city provided 80 square *sáh* (a Czechoslovak unit of measurement equivalent to 1.7928 m) of suitable land for the buildings and was also the applicant for planning permission.⁷⁷ Neither the regulatory plan of the site nor the individual parcels of land for the estate of emergency housing in Tri Hôrky received definitive approval, but the proposal was proceeded with in accordance with the provisional plan.⁷⁸ Despite the extremely limited financial resources, the city authorities made every effort to resolve the situation of the unemployed residents. In addition to allocating land, project documentation and a financial budget, or assisting to provide large quantities of various building materials, the city regularly stepped in to resolve all manner of issues that the project faced. In a letter addressed to the Regional Office in Bratislava, the city authorities provided a detailed account of the complicated situation and requested support in the form of financial subsidies to allow the project to continue. The letter also draws particular attention to the social importance of solving the issue of housing the city’s most vulnerable inhabitants – the unemployed who were attempting to build their own properties through mutual aid.

Interested parties in the project could prepare the land to their own requirements, on their own initiative implementing drainage work and preparing building materials (for example, unfired clay bricks known as *valky*). The final result of the project would be the completion of 20 semi-detached houses, each with a construction cost of around 6,000 Kč, which could accommodate 40–42 families. To ensure that work on the houses could continue in the spring, the city authorities applied for financial support from the state.⁷⁹ The planning application specified that the houses should have stone foundations with



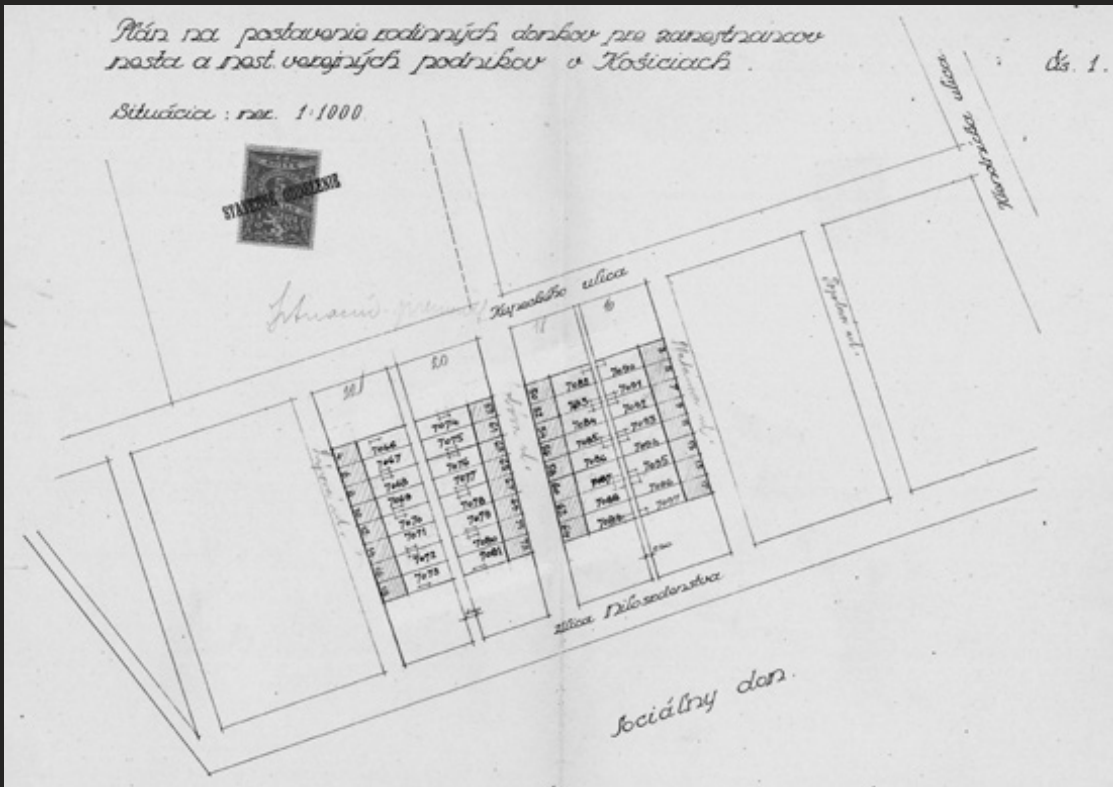
Situation plan for emergency duplex houses in Tri Hôrky, 1935
 Source: AMK

Municipal emergency duplex houses in Tri Hôrky, type A
 Source: AMK

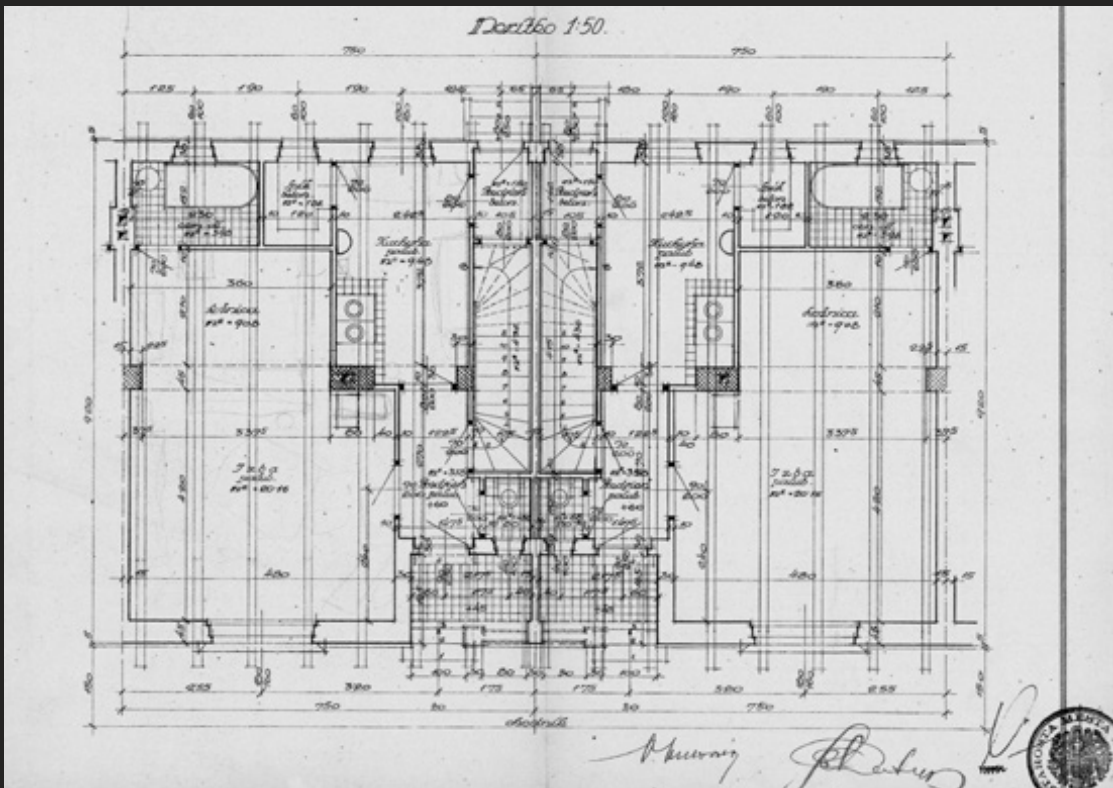
Plán na postavenie rodinných domov pre zamestnancov mesta a mest. verejných podnikov v Košiciach.

čís. 1.

Situácia: m. 1:1000

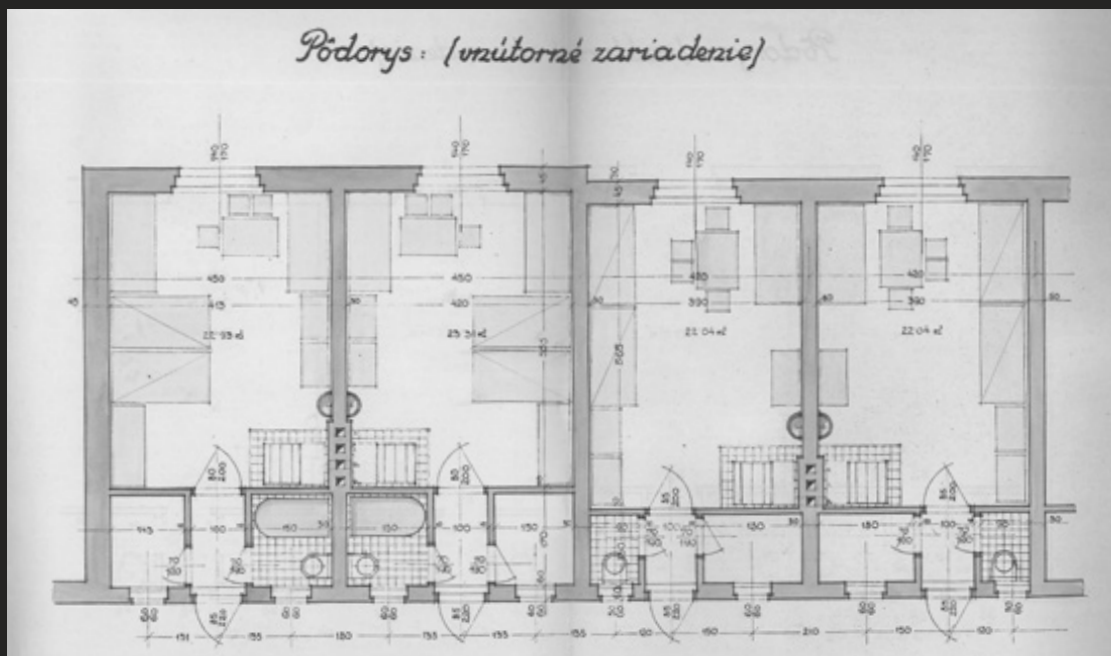
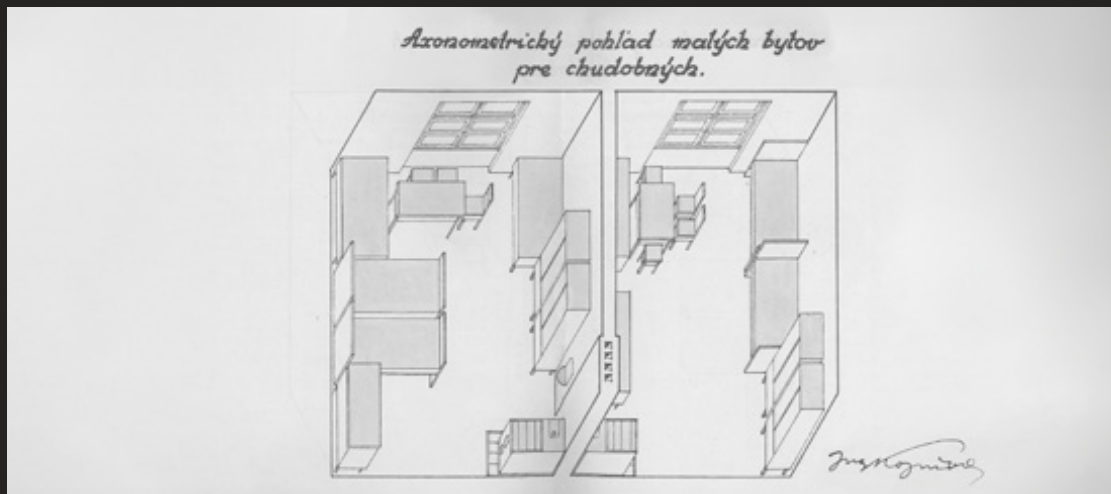
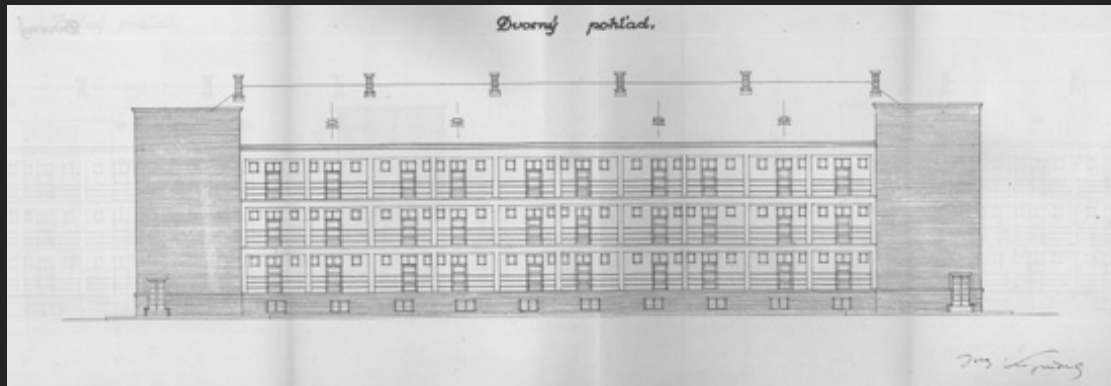


Detail 1:50



Situation plan of single-family row houses for municipal employees, 1930
Source: AMK

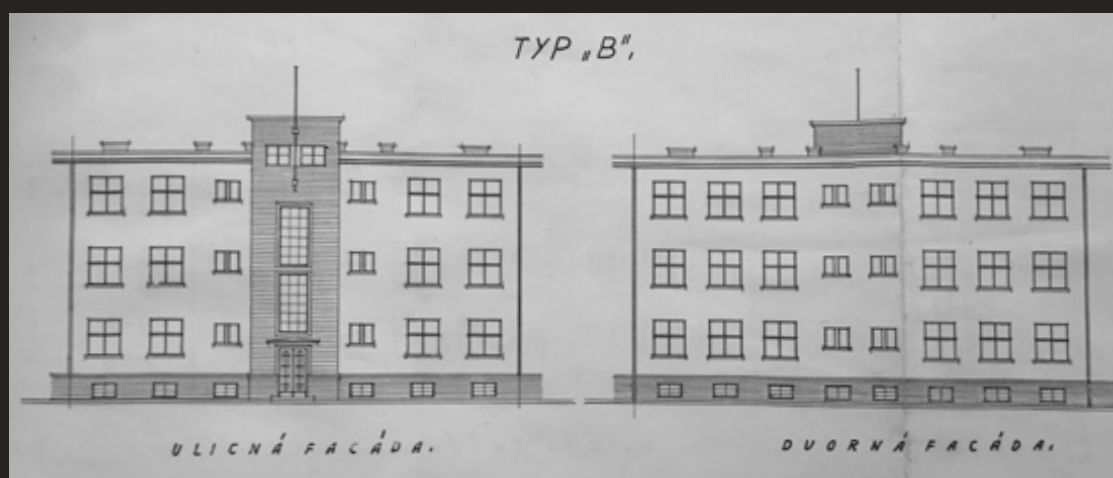
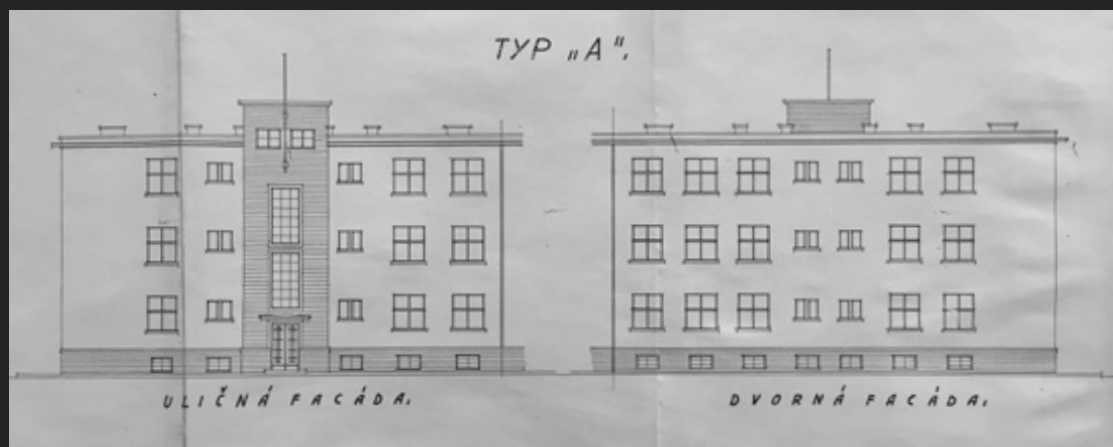
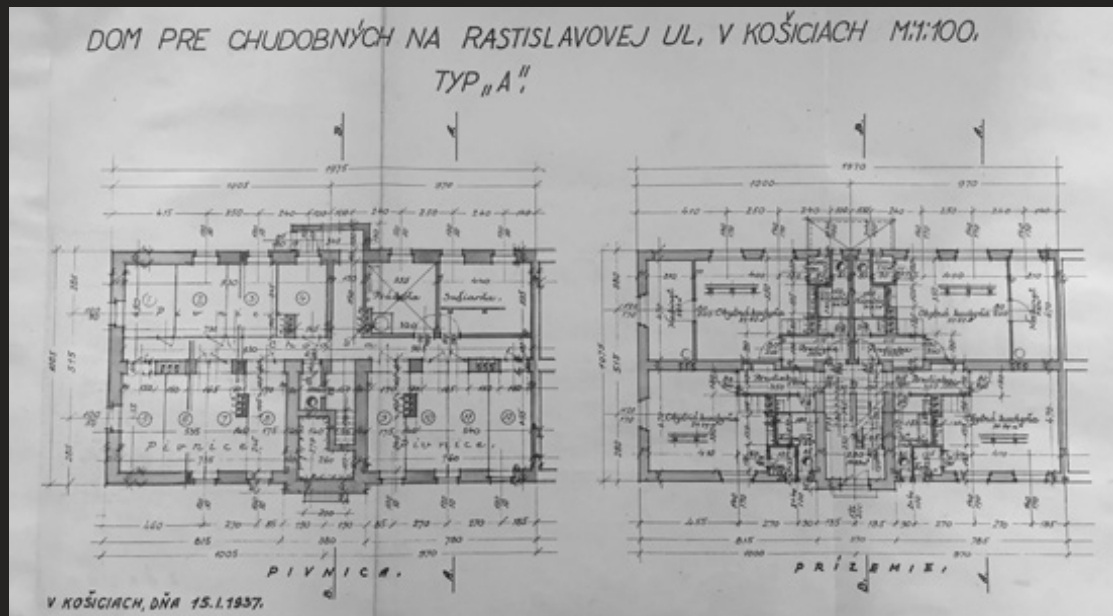
Row houses for municipal employees, plan of ground floor, 1930
Source: AMK



Housing for the poor - small-scale flats in Košice, Kalinčiakova street, view from the courtyard, Ing. Kopřiva
Source: AMK

Housing for the poor - study for furnishing alternatives for small-scale flats in Košice, Ing. Kopřiva
Source: AMK

Housing for the poor - study for interior furnishings for small-scale flats in Košice, Ing. Kopřiva
Source: AMK



Housing for the poor, type A, plan
of ground floor and basement,
Rastislavova Street, 1937
Source: AMK

Housing for the poor, type A,
street and courtyard façade,
Rastislavova Street, 1937
Source: AMK

Housing for the poor, type B,
street and courtyard façade,
Rastislavova Street, 1937
Source: AMK

lime mortar, exterior walls of unfired clay bricks, and gable walls and chimneys of fired bricks. The construction of the houses would be carried out according to the building plans and land surveys and would be conducted under the supervision of qualified professionals from the city's Technical Department.

Several designs for the smaller single-storey houses have survived, for example a type A semi-detached building with one-roomed residences with kitchens, storage rooms and entrance halls, a type B variant without storage rooms, a type C structure with a kitchenette room, storage area and anteroom and more modest variants without storage rooms. The intelligently conceived architectural plans featuring houses finished with classic gables or with simple hip roofs were prepared in May 1934 and were stamped and signed by the city mayor. As the sewer system had not yet been extended to this region of the city, the city authorities therefore prepared two variants for a proposed communal dry toilet.

However, an official complaint was lodged with the city authorities protesting the free allocation of land in the Tri Hôrky area to the homeless and unemployed. The protest was a result of the concerns of current residents of the locality, in particular their experiences with some specific participants in the project during the course of construction. Objections were also made to the location of the work, which was not connected to the mains water supply or the sewer network, or to the lack of access to the site.⁸⁰ Officials from the Central Office of Social Affairs in Prague first learned about Košice's mutual aid project for the construction of housing for the unemployed through an article in the newspaper *Právo Lidu* published on October 12th 1934 and consequently sent a letter to the Košice municipality requesting further information on how the project was organised. The Office also demanded detailed information on the loans used to finance the project and a detailed budget.⁸¹

Another article on the Košice project published in the Czech newspaper *České Slovo* caught the attention of the Masaryk League against Tuberculosis, a civic association based in Dvůr Králové. The League was aware that the vast majority of tuberculosis patients came from the ranks of the unemployed and were urgently seeking ways of dealing with this problem. Pointing out their health condition, malnutrition and generally poor social situation, the head doctor of the charity urged the Košice residents to send their plans and budgets without fee in the hope that the League could gain both an overview of the Košice project and also gain permission to adopt the same approach.⁸² As of today, little is known of the possible results of the subsequent cooperation between the officials of the Technical Department in Košice and both the Office of Social Affairs in Prague and the Masaryk League against Tuberculosis in Dvůr Králové. The same lack of knowledge holds for the request made to the Košice authorities by the municipality of Hlohovec for documents relating to the Tri Hôrky project when they too faced a complicated

situation. The response by the Košice officials included detailed working instructions relating to the recently completed estate of 58 family houses for the homeless (1935) but the city also provided a budget and several architectural plans. The city authority's generous approach to unemployed citizens who had been left homeless after eviction and the findings of the investigations into their financial and social situation was an inspiration to many observers from other towns and cities. In addition to the benefits discussed above, the city also organised a public kitchen on the building site which provided decent meals for the entire families of the unemployed workers during the construction work.⁸³

Family Houses for Municipal Employees

Finally, the city authorities decided to make use of new legislation introduced in 1930 to support the construction industry in building what were then termed minimal or "smallest residences",⁸⁴ and announced a public tender process for the construction of family houses for municipal employees. The expenses of the project would be covered by a loan of 2,000,000 Kč contracted with the Social Insurance Office in Prague and the local branch of the Slovak General Lending Bank, but the city authorities also stated their intention to apply for funding from the Ministry of Public Works. A total of 36 one-roomed terraced houses were built on land between the streets of Kupeckého, Milosrdenství and Platanová according to quality designs prepared by the well-known Czech architect Rudolf Brebta, active in Košice in this period.⁸⁵

Wooden Houses as a Solution to the Housing Crisis

Another proposed solution to the city's housing crisis was suggested in March 1930 by the Institute for the Timber Industry in association with of the Košice Chamber of Commerce: a project utilising wooden houses.⁸⁶ It was argued that the formation of a co-operative for the construction of temporary wooden housing would provide work for local people and stimulate the demand for timber. The city authorities undertook to support the proposal and offered land on Piešťanská Trieda or in Čermel for the construction of different wooden-house designs. They also held a meeting with the Drevodom collective from Bratislava and the Institute for the Timber Industry in Košice where they agreed to prepare an exhibition titled "Living in Wooden Houses", to be held in built examples of the houses.⁸⁷ This plan was likely inspired by the exhibition "Living in Wood" held in Bratislava between 1930 and 1931, presenting various types of wooden houses including a design by Zdeněk Rossmann.⁸⁸ The architect Dušan Jurkovič, who showed a remarkably sensitive perception of the dimensions of the housing crisis among the lower classes in Slovakia, prepared detailed plans for five standard designs clad in fire-resistant stucco.⁸⁹ State officials in Prague were enthusiastic about lending funds for the project and also offered material support by supplying timber from state forests.⁹⁰ The Košice public

were presented with a comprehensive report from the Alois Novák construction firm, which outlined technical and financial details of three types of designs ranging from a small, fully fitted single-roomed house with a price of 17,000 Kč to a larger structure with a mansard roof estimated at 31,000 Kč. The attractive price and the possibility of rapid completion drew considerable interest, especially among the poorer strata, and on the day the project was announced, 70 applicants registered their interest, a number which would later rise to 250. The Košice City Council recommended that the Ministry of Public Works in Prague be petitioned to issue new directives regarding the authorisation of wooden buildings, as the state authorities were still bound by earlier legislation from the time of the Habsburg Empire which forbade construction with wooden materials.⁹¹ However, these prejudices born from a fear of fires were finally overcome, and between 1920 and 1923 a series of 24 one-roomed wooden houses for state employees (including one log house and four plank houses) were built in Uzhhorod, which are still in use today.⁹² Despite the clear demand for the wooden houses among the local population, it is not clear whether any of these buildings were actually constructed in Košice.⁹³

Apartment Buildings for the Poor

As the economic crisis deepened, the Košice municipality used another approach to the provision of decent housing for the most deprived, using a new law passed in 1936 that prioritised the funding of small residences with a floor area of up to 34 m². In January 1937, the city submitted a planning application for the construction of two-storey provisional apartment buildings with 36 residences with kitchens and fittings.⁹⁴ The cost of this municipal social project was estimated at 750,000 Kč and would use financial assistance under the provisions of the 1936 Act No. 65 on the Construction Industry. Unfortunately, despite the provision of land on Kalinčiaková Street behind the hospital complex in the south of the city, this excellent project never came to fruition due to the Nazi breakup of Czechoslovakia in 1938. The designer of the complex of apartment buildings, complete with basements and functional flats of various layouts, was the Czech architect Ing. Milošlav Kopriva (1894–1968), the then head of the municipality's Technical Department. The architect had more success with another social housing project in the south of the city, consisting of two variants of apartment buildings which were already under construction by 1938.⁹⁵ Planning permission for 8 of these two-storey apartment buildings with 72 small residences was granted in 1937, with work starting on the project on March 1st 1937 and concluding on May 1st 1941⁹⁶ with the completion of the final section.⁹⁷

Conclusion

The results of our research clearly demonstrate that the Czechoslovak state only partially fulfilled the role of ensuring social welfare for the most deprived citizens

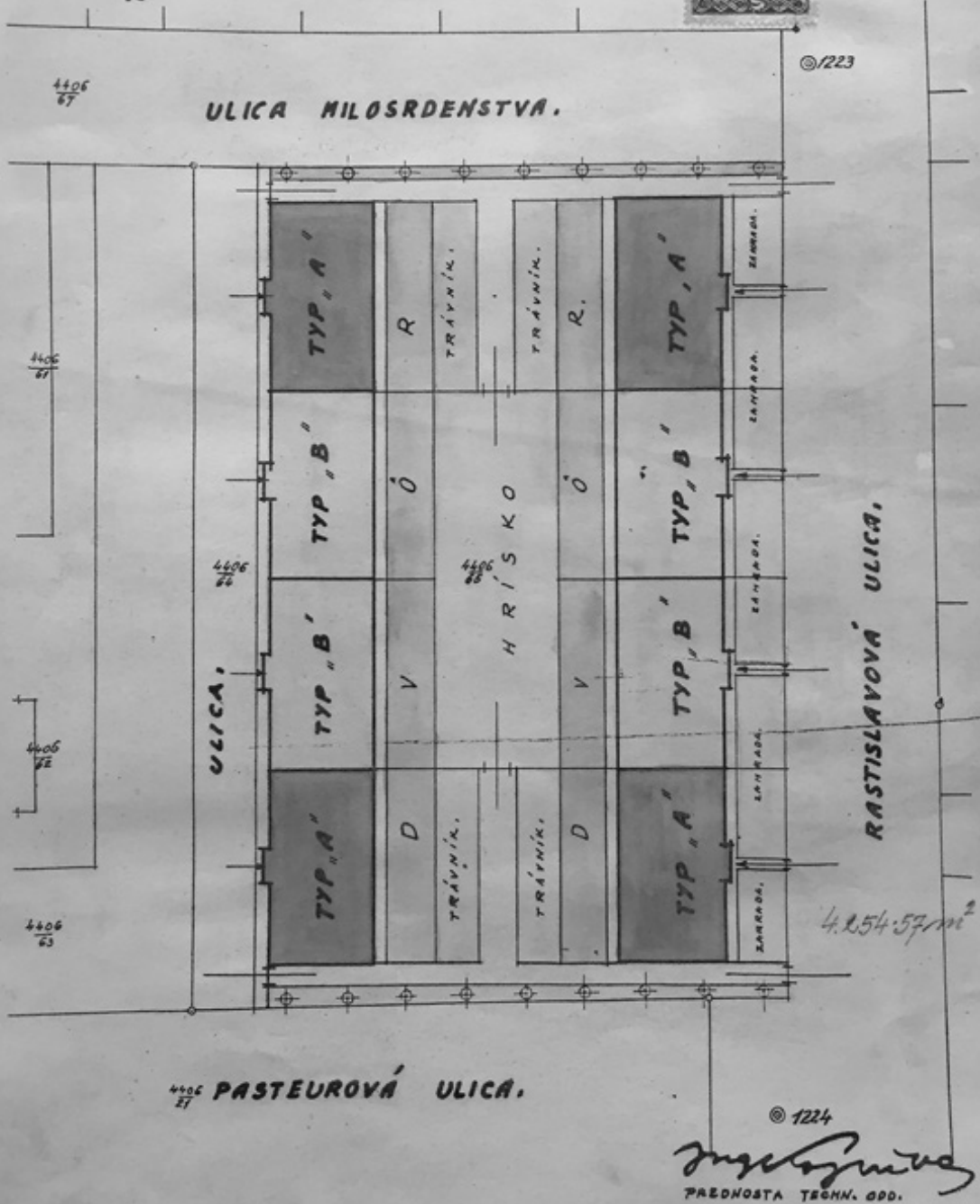
in Košice in the interwar period. This gap is especially apparent in the field of social housing, where the initiative and financial support in all of the above-mentioned cases came primarily from the municipal authorities. Despite the persistent criticism levelled by the local press, the tireless efforts of the city authorities to help the needy in the interwar period are undeniable. Their successes are evident in the case of the early projects, whether to convert military barracks and railway wagons in the south of the city into provisional housing or the construction of small family houses in the Tri Hôrky estate. Both the new tenants in the first examples and the owner-occupiers of the latter received extensive support from the state, not only in terms of the provision of planning documentation and funding, but also in the form of construction inspections provided free of charge by professionals from the city's Technical Department. Of course, none of these projects were free of problems, and there was a constant struggle to obtain adequate funds. The city authorities appealed not only to Prague for assistance, but also sought help from various institutions for, among others, free building materials, wood, refurbished high-quality windows and doors, or even the necessary tools and equipment.⁹⁸ The social program of the early 1930s in Tri Hôrky was so successful that it even drew the interest of the city authorities in Prague.

However, if we consider the situation in Košice within the context of the last years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1908–1918),⁹⁹ the municipal efforts to provide housing for the poorest classes during the period of the First Czechoslovak Republic appear in a far more favourable light. Throughout the pre-war Habsburg period, the city authorities did practically nothing to assist the unemployed. For example, an article in the local newspaper *Felvidék Ujság* titled "Charity" called upon charitable organisations to become involved in construction projects, primarily in terms of providing shelters for the poor, drawing attention to the injustice of laws that criminalised homelessness and allowed homeless people to be sent to prison.¹⁰⁰ In 1909, there were public calls for the provision of epidemiological barracks in case of need (as in, for example, the ongoing cholera epidemic in Russia) and for provisional housing for local residents who were living in unsuitable conditions, but these demands were not implemented.¹⁰¹ In 1908 and 1909, a general housing crisis in the Empire affected not only Budapest but also many rural towns, including Košice, the second largest city after the capital. An article published in *Abauj-Kassai Közlöny* described the crisis as a hopeless situation, even suggesting the need for changes in society.¹⁰² The local press also regularly commented on the acute need for workers' accommodation and workers' estates during the decade before the outbreak of war, but the situation in this context was equally pessimistic. Neither the city authorities nor the state were willing to finance any of the many proposals for housing estates for workers made in this period, and the projects remained unbuilt by 1917.¹⁰³

TOPOĽOVÁ UL.

SITUAČNÝ PLÁN

M. = 1: 500,



Housing for the poor, situation plan between the streets Rastislavova, Pasteurova, and Milosrdenstva 1937
Source: AMK

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- 8 Košice City Archives (hereinafter AMK), Technical Department (TO), Construction Collection (SF). Arch. J. Vodňaruk, staviteľ, ústřední kancelář Praha - Královské Vinohrady, Chodská 7. Tel. 7909. Filiálka Bratislava, Obilní nám. 2, tel. 1420. Also: Architekt J. Vodňaruk, staviteľ Bratislava, filiálka Košice. Núdzové byty. Slovenská 8, šk. 184.
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- 50 Fond MMK, šk. 131. Rada mesta Košíc, list. č. 26424 m. rady/1928. Predmet: prípis riaditeľstva štátnych dráh v záležitosti odpredaja 20 vagonov pre núdzové byty. AMK.
- 51 Popelka, R., 2013, p. 34. See also: *Podkarpatské Hlasy*, 1926, 2(14), p. 2.
- 52 SINKOVIČOVÁ, Eva. 2020. Pražské nouzové kolonie. Dodnes v nich najdeme prvorepublikové príbytky i prestavěné železniční vagony [online]. Available at: <https://vltava.rozhlas.cz/prazske-nouzove-kolonie-dodnes-v-nich-najdeme-prvorepublikove-pribytky-i-8145168> (Accessed: 4 June 2024).
- 53 Fond MMK 1922 – 1938. Uznesenie rady mesta Košíc, list č. 23742 m. rady 1928.: Záležitosti umiestnenia vyložených rodín z budovy na Hatových riadkoch č. 6.
- 54 Fond MMK 1922 – 1938. Rada mesta Košíc, list č. 15285 rady 1929. Predmet: Mienka finančnej komisie v záležitosti stavania ďalších núdzových vagonových bytov. V Košiciach, zo zasadnutia m. rady dňa 13. augusta 1929. AMK.
- 55 Fond MMK, Rada mesta Košice, listina č. 25196/1929. Predmet: Kolaudácia vagonových bytov na Peštianskej triede. AMK.
- 56 Fond MMK, šk. 131, INV. č. 318. Predmet: Vagonové byty, súbeh. AMK.
- 57 Fond MMK, Rada mesta Košice, Výťah zo zápisnice finančnej komisie mesta Košíc z dňa 16. júla 1929. Prestavba ďalších 30 vagonov pre núdzové byty. AMK.
- 58 Fond MMK, šk. 13. 1922 – 1938. Výťah zo zápisnice mestského zastupiteľstva o zasadnutí z 9. októbra 1928. Predmet: Umiestnenie vyložených rodín. AMK.
- 59 The aim of social policy in architecture and urbanism in the First Czechoslovak Republic was not only to improve the living standards of citizens but also to expand their education (with schools, student dormitories), to modernize the healthcare system (with hospitals, sanatoriums), or to improve the care system for orphans, the elderly or handicapped. Findings from a wider Czechoslovak context can be found in the work of Martin Jemelka and his team at the Masaryk Institute at the Czech Academy of Sciences or the work of Gabriela Dudeková Kováčová from the Institute of History at the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava. See, for example: *From Philanthropy to the Welfare State System* - thematic issue of the journal *Architektúra & Urbanizmus*, 56(3-4), 2022, pp. 130-295.
- 60 Z rady mesta Košíc. Košice, 4. februára 1930. *Slovenský Východ*, 5 February 1930, p. 3.
- 61 Fond MMK, šk. 118, 1928. 3 000 000 pôžička na stavbu obytných domov. Návrh člena mestskej rady Jozefa Smrža do jej zasadnutia dňa 17. apríla 1928. AMK.
- 62 Z rady mesta Košíc. Výsledky intervencie v Prahe. – Košická magnezitka bude pracovať. – O stavbu bankových úradníkov. *Slovenský Východ*, 20 March 1930, p. 2.
- 63 Ako sa v Košiciach stavalo a stavia. Najväčší stavebný ruch

- bol v roku 1928. *Slovenský Východ*, 18 May 1930, 12(114), pp. 1, 2.
- 64 Ako sa v Košiciach stavalo a stavia, 1930, pp. 1, 2.
- 65 For example, the so-called “emergency estates”, many of which was authorised by the city authorities from 1924 onwards, and which were supported by the Prague municipality. See: Hnídková, V., Janečková, M. and Rollová, V., 2020, p. 489.
- 66 NOVÝ, Otakar. 2021. Bytová otázka. In: *Česká architektonická avantgarda*. Prague: Prostor, p. 414.
- 67 V Košiciach je nateraz najväčšia bytová kríza. *Slovenský Denník*, 12(15), 19 January 1930, p.1.
- 68 FM, šk. č. 137. List č. 21627/1930. m.r. Bytové a stavebné pomery v Košiciach. AMK.
- 69 Bytové pomery v Košiciach [The housing issue in Košice]. In: *Slovenský Východ*, February 17th 1935, p. 14.
- 70 Stavebný ruch v Košiciach v minulom roku. *Slovenský Východ*, 14 August 1932, p. 4.
- 71 Nová stavebná akcia. *Slovenský Východ*, 19 June 1932, p. 4.
- 72 Fond MMK 1936, 9 - 7230 IV, i. č. 321, šk. č. 137. Stavba núdzových búd bez povolenia – zbúranie! IV. 2344. AMK.
- 73 FM, šk. č. 137, „Tri hôrky“, tzv. „Maxoňova kolónia“ rodinných domov. AMK.
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- 75 Fond MMK šk. 137, 1936, 9 - 7230 IV, i. č. 321, šk. č. 137. Premiestnenie nezamestnaných z Peštianskej triedy č. 4, dočasné ubytovanie do mestskej budovy na Zbrojnícku ul. č. 14. z. č. 1663, odd. IV. AMK.
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- 81 Fond MMK, šk. 137, „Tri hôrky“. List č. 74 081/34 – IV. Nez 19/1. Ústrední sociální úřad hlavního města Prahy (odbor IV.). V Praze I., Bartolomějská ulice, č. p. 306/5 n. V Praze 6. listopadu 1934. AMK.
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