

The Spatiality of Prostitution in Budapest During the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy

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Abstract: This study examines the spatial structure and social embeddedness of prostitution in Budapest during the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, with particular focus on the Dualist era. Drawing on an extensive topographic database compiled from police records, prison registries, and archival maps, it documents the activities of 13,891 individuals and the locations of 2,615 prostitution-related establishments across 559 streets. The findings challenge the concept of a single, segregated red-light district: prostitutional institutions – brothels, private apartments, and entertainment venues – were dispersed throughout the city, albeit with notable concentrations in Terézváros, Erzsébetváros, Józsefváros, and the Inner City. Spatial patterns were shaped by urban morphology, population density, transport networks, and regulatory frameworks, while also reflecting social stratification and moral geography. The analysis operates at multiple spatial scales, from district-level distributions to individual buildings, and applies network analysis to identify 45 key hubs that structured the city's prostitutional system. The results highlight both the historical continuity of certain prostitution sites and the adaptability of the sex industry to urban modernization, revealing its integration into Budapest's economic, social, and cultural life.

Keywords: Urban history, prostitution, urban space, spatial history, Budapest, Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, social geography, network analysis

Rezumat: Acest studiu examinează structura spațială și înrădăcinarea socială a prostituției în Budapesta în timpul Monarhiei austro-ungare, cu accent deosebit pe epoca dualistă. Bazându-se pe o bază extinsă de date topografice, compilată din înregistrări ale poliției, registre ale închisorilor și hărți de arhivă, acest studiu documentează activitățile a 13.891 de persoane și locațiile a 2.615 unități legate de prostituție pe 559 de străzi. Constatările contestă conceptul unui singur cartier

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roșu segregat: instituțiile de prostituție - bordeluri, apartamente private și locuri de divertisment - erau dispersate în tot orașul, deși cu concentrații notabile în Terézváros, Erzsébetváros, Józsefváros și în centrul orașului. Modelele spațiale au fost modelate de morfologia urbană, densitatea populației, rețelele de transport și cadrele de reglementare, reflectând în același timp stratificarea socială și geografia morală. Analiza operează la scări spațiale multiple, de la distribuții la nivel de district la clădiri individuale, și aplică analiza rețelei pentru a identifica 45 de centre cheie care au structurat sistemul de prostituție al orașului. Rezultatele evidențiază atât continuitatea istorică a anumitor locuri de prostituție, cât și adaptabilitatea industriei sexului la modernizarea urbană, dezvăluind integrarea acestuia în viața economică, socială și culturală a Budapestei.

Cuvinte-cheie: Istorie urbană, prostituție, spațiu urban, istorie spațială, Budapesta, Monarhia Austro-Ungară, geografie socială, analiză de rețea

Introduction

From the second half of the 19th century, Budapest emerged as a model city of East-Central European modernization. The intensive urbanization, economic development, and social differentiation that followed the unification of the city significantly transformed both the physical and functional structure of urban space, bringing new social practices to the surface. Among these was prostitution, which – despite being under state regulation and enveloped in social stigma – became deeply embedded in the everyday life of the city. The spatial manifestations of prostitution in Budapest were highly diverse: brothels, private apartments, boarding houses, cafés, music halls, and even caves served as venues for the sex industry.¹ Regardless of their legal status or ownership structure, these establishments together constituted a structured

¹ In the United States, brothels were also referred to as “disorderly houses,” “immoral resorts,” and “houses of ill fame.” Áron Tótfős, “‘A főváros kellő közepén ott fetreng a prostitúció.’ A budapesti prostitúció topográfia (1873–1928),” in *Hogyan lett Budapest a nemzet fővárosa? Tanulmányok Budapest 150. és a Társadalom- és Gazdaságtörténeti Doktori Program 30. Születésnapjára*, edited by Kövér György, Koloh Gábor, Somorjai Szabolcs, (Eötvös Publishing House, 2023), 517. In some cities, even public lavatories were used for the purposes of prostitution. Howard Brown Woolston, *Prostitution in the United States* (New York: The Century Company, 1921), 143, 153.

network, which this study interprets as a system of prostitutional institutions. Although these spaces were both well-known and yet hidden elements of the urban fabric, their study has long remained peripheral within both domestic and international urban history scholarship.

Until the end of the 20th century, the spatiality of prostitution remained a marginal topic of academic inquiry. Phil Hubbard, professor at King's College London, also drew attention to this, emphasizing that the spatial-forming role of sexuality had long been ignored in social-historical discourse.² His own research interprets the geographical location of the sex industry in the context of social exclusion and power relations. A similar approach was adopted by Angela Serratore, contributor to *The New York Times* magazine, who described the sites of prostitution as moral geographies.³ Markian Prokopovych, history professor at Durham University, while studying several cities in the region (Vienna, Prague), particularly emphasized the role of Józsefváros as the central space of Budapest's sex industry.⁴

In the Hungarian academic literature, the history of prostitution has been explored in several provincial towns (e.g., Szeged – Márta Knotik⁵; Cluj – Zsolt Gyarmati and Zsuzsa Bokor⁶; Veszprém – György Hogya⁷; Sopron – Péter Güntner⁸; Miskolc – Mihály Szécsényi⁹; Székesfehérvár – József Horváth

² Phil Hubbard, *Sex and the City: Geographies of Prostitution in the Urban West*, (Routledge, 2020), 1–2.

³ Angela Serratore, "A Preservationist's Guide to the Harems, Seraglios, and Houses of Love of Manhattan: The 19th Century New York City Brothel in Two Neighborhoods." PhD diss., Columbia University, 2013.

⁴ Markian Prokopovych, "Prostitution in Prague, in the Nineteenth and the Early Twentieth Century," *Trafficking in Women* 9, no. 7 (2017): 1–10. Prokopovych, "Prostitution in Budapest, in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century," in *Trafficking in Women (1924–1926): The Paul Kinsie Reports for the League of Nations*, edited by Elizabeth Kelly (United Nations Publications, 2017), 38–43.

⁵ Márta Knotik, "Kávéházak, vendégfogadók, korcsmák és bormérések Szegeden," in *A Móra Ferenc Múzeum évkönyve. Történeti Tanulmányok. Studia Historica* 5., edited by Zombori István (Móra Ferenc Museum, 2002), 67–68; 70; 73–74; 77; 84.

⁶ Zsolt Gyarmati, *Nyilvánosság és magánélet a békeidők Kolozsvárán* (Komp-Press – Friends of Korunk Association, 2005), 83–112.

⁷ György Hogya, *Örömlányok és bordélyházak Veszprém városában* (Veszprém: Viza Printing House, 2008), 84.

⁸ Péter Güntner, "A soproni prostitúció története (1862–1918)," *Aetas* 12 (1) (1997): 54–57.

⁹ Mihály Szécsényi, "A belvárosi bordélyházak kitelepítése és kisajátítása Miskolcon (1907–1926)," *Levéltári Évkönyv* IX (Miskolc, 1997): 270–291.

Csurgai¹⁰; Oradea – Áron Tóttós¹¹, etc.). However, a complex investigation into the spatial organization of prostitution in Budapest has thus far been lacking. The present author has addressed the spatiality of the Hungarian capital and, as part of it, the topography of prostitution within the framework of a doctoral dissertation on the social history of prostitution in Budapest.¹²

The central thesis of this study is that prostitution in Budapest was not concentrated in a single “red-light district,” but was spatially fragmented across the city. At the same time, certain neighbourhoods – primarily Belváros, Terézváros, Erzsébetváros, and Józsefváros – became significant nodes of prostitution due to greater tolerance, economic opportunities, and the concentration of entertainment industries. It is plausible to assume that this spatial pattern was not accidental but was instead connected to the functional segmentation of the urban structure, population density, and transport infrastructure.

The aim of this research is to explore how these spaces were organized in Budapest during the Dualist era. I examine the evolution of institutional frameworks, the types of sex workers, and the roles of public, semi-public, and private spaces. Through various scales of urban space (district, street, building), we can also understand how prostitution-centred practices were tied to modes of urban spatial usage. These overlapping spatial scales formed the living environments of prostitutes. This is the scale, the physical and simultaneously mental space, where human interactions occurred.¹³

Based on the typology of public–semi-public–private spaces (following Gábor Gyáni), the social categorization, spatial location, and moral evaluation of prostitution can be linked to broader processes of social stratification.¹⁴ These spatial concepts not only shaped the moral interpretation of women

¹⁰ Csurgai Horváth József, “Székesfehérvár és a prostitúció (Fehérvár piros lámpás századai),” in *Piroslámpás évszázadok*, edited by Bana József (Archives of the City of Győr with County Rights, 1999), 45–54.

¹¹ Tóttós, “Bordélyházak és kéjnőtartók a polgárosodó Nagyváradon,” *Socio.Hu Társadalomtudományi Szemle* 5, no. 1 (2015): 77–104.

¹² Tóttós, “A városi prostitúció társadalomtörténete Magyarországon (19. század második fele – 20. század eleje). Különös tekintettel Pest-Budára és Budapestre.” PhD diss. Eötvös Loránd University 2025.

¹³ Tóttós, “A főváros kellős közepén,” 517.

¹⁴ Gábor Gyáni, *Az utca és a szalon. A társadalmi térhasználat Budapesten 1870–1940* (Új Mandátum Publishing House, 1998), 22.

as “respectable” (moral) or “disreputable” (immoral), but through the notions of public and private, we may also understand why discourse distinguished between “common” street prostitutes and elite-serving courtesans who remained outside of public view. Thus, prostitutes may be placed along the axis of private and public. Luxury courtesans worked in private clubs and apartments, while “common” street prostitutes moved through the spaces of urban public life.¹⁵ Between these poles were those who engaged in sex work as a supplementary source of income. The private sphere of prostitution primarily provided a discreet environment for wealthier social classes, served by private apartments and exclusive clubs.¹⁶ Between public and private spaces were the semi-public venues, where intimacy was enacted in the presence of others. These locations – while partially shielded from the public – were accessible to paying clients. This category included brothels, meeting spots, and various hospitality and entertainment venues, even small shops (e.g., vegetable, fruit, or fashion boutiques), whose back rooms were illegitimately used for prostitutional purposes.¹⁷

Research Methodology and Sources

In this research, I define spaces of prostitution as all locations where prostitution-related activities occurred, regardless of their visibility or social acceptance.¹⁸ A space becomes a prostitution-centred space when sex work takes place there regularly and repeatedly. Such spaces are created and reproduced through social practices and interactions among participants – prostitutes, clients, and agents of power. The spaces of power helped shape these places through regulation and law enforcement, while their meanings and social functions were also formed by everyday use.¹⁹

¹⁵ Tóth, “A főváros kellős közepén,” 520.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Malte Fuhrmann, “Western Perversions’ at the Threshold of Felicity: The European Prostitutes of Galata–Pera (1870–1915).” *History and Anthropology* 21, no. 2 (2010): 166.

¹⁸ My definition was influenced by the conceptualizations of Sascha Finger and Judith Butler. According to their approach, spaces of prostitution come into existence only through the activity of the prostituted woman who performs and thereby constitutes them. Judith Butler, “Performance acts and gender constitution, An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory,” *Theatre Journal*. 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–531. Sascha Finger, “Prostitúciós terek performativitása – szexmunkások és nyilvános tér Magyarországon,” *Tér és társadalom* 2, no. 4 (2013): 118.

¹⁹ Tóth, “A főváros kellős közepén,” 521.

The spatial structure of prostitution in Budapest can be examined at the levels of neighbourhoods and streets, as demonstrated by international examples such as the research conducted by Louise Settle in Edinburgh, Mark Wild in Los Angeles, and Jamie Schmidt Wagman in St. Louis.²⁰ All three concluded that prostitutes were surrounded by social contempt, which led to their spatial segregation. In light of these findings, this study aims to explore how the topography of Budapest reflected the spatial organization of prostitution: whether 'red-light districts' developed in the Western sense, or if the sex industry was diffusely present throughout the city.

The core sources of this research are the files of the Budapest City Archives concerning morality policing.²¹ In particular, the relatively little-studied police records from the years 1891–1895 and 1897 have been utilized. In addition to personal details of the prostitutes, these records documented exact addresses (district, street, house number, floor, door), and, in some cases, they also specified the nature of the establishment (such as a brothel or private prostitute). These handwritten, tabulated records were maintained by the police on a daily and monthly basis, listing individuals who acquired or terminated their pleasure cards, or were referred to a hospital.

The topographical database has been further expanded with spatial data from the prison registries of the Budapest City Archives,²² from the Hungarian National Archives,²³ and from the official yearbooks of the capital city of Budapest.²⁴ In addition, I have integrated locational references from

²⁰ Louise Settle, "The social geography of prostitution in Edinburgh, 1900–1939," *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies* 33, no. 2. (2013): 238. Mark Wild, "Red light Kaleidoscope, Prostitution and Ethnoracial Relations in Los Angeles 1880–1940," *Journal of Urban History* 28, no. 6 (2002): 728. Jamie Schmidt Wagman, "Women Reformers Respond during the Depression. Battling St. Louis's Disease and Immorality," *Journal of Urban History* 35, no. 5 (2009): 706–707.

²¹ BFL VI.1.b. BFL VI.15. BFL VI.15. f.3. For detailed references to the sources used, see Tótfős, "A városi prostitúció," 465–471.

²² BFL VII.1.d. BFL VII.2.c. BFL VII.5.c. BFL VII.18d. BFL VII.101.c. BFL VII.101.d. BFL VII.102.a. BFL VII.103. BFL VII.104.a. BFL VII.106. BFL XV. BFL XVI.2.a.

²³ MNL OL K150.

²⁴ Gusztáv Thirring (ed.), *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve II, évfolyam 1895–1896* (Published by the Statistical Office of the Capital City of Budapest, 1898), 143. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve III évfolyam 1897–1898* (1899), 155. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve IV évfolyam 1899–1900* (1901), 88. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve V évfolyam 1902* (1902), 61. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve VI évfolyam 1903* (1903), 71. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve VII*

relevant literature and published sources. As a result of the research, a database has been compiled documenting the life events and activities of 13,891 individuals—primarily prostitutes, and, to a lesser extent, institutional managers. It records the sex industry establishments with which they were associated at specific moments in time.²⁵

Period	N	%
1860–1869*	114	0.82
1870–1879	1140	8.21
1880–1889	922	6.64
1890–1899	9138	65.78
1900–1909	692	4.98
1910–1919	1298	9.34
1920–1929	268	1.93
Unknown	319	2.30
Total	13891	100.00

**The earliest data originates from 1863*

Table 1. Temporal distribution of sources used for the topographic database of Budapest prostitutes²⁶

évfolyam 1904 (1904), 77. Thirring, Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve VIII évfolyam 1905 (1905), 79. Thirring, Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve XI évfolyam 1907 (1907), 95. Gábor Doros, József Melly, A nemibetegségek kérdése Budapesten II (Budapest Statistical Communications 61/2.) (Budapest Municipal Printing House, 1930), 800. Fővárosi Közlöny (Budapest Municipal Gazette) 1900–1937.

²⁵ The database comprises 8,057 prostitutes (appearing in a total of 12,770 records) and 668 managers of prostitution-related establishments—of whom 457 were brothel keepers and 211 operated various entertainment and hospitality venues or other commercial premises. The database includes a small number of cases from Kispest, Újpest, Erzsébetfalva, and Pesterzsébet as well. However, the present dissertation focuses exclusively on the nine districts that fell within the administrative boundaries of Budapest at the time. I published my research findings concerning Újpest in an edited volume in 2023. Tóth, “A főváros kellős közepén,” 517. See also the references in footnote 17: Tóth, “A főváros kellős közepén,” 465–471; 517.

²⁶ Thirring, Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve II., 143. Thirring, Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve III., 155. Thirring, Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve IV., 88. Thirring, Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve V., 61. Thirring, Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai

Data processing was supported by Mihály Ráday's *Handbook of Budapest Street Names*²⁷ and the *Budapest Time Machine* application²⁸ operated by the Budapest City Archives (BFL). Ultimately, 11,310 names and their associated precise addresses (district, street, house number; in several hundred cases also floor and door number) were identified. Among these individuals, 1,639 were associated with more than one sex industry location, totalling 4,276 links. This indicates the mobility of prostitutes, as well as the fact that certain brothel keepers and business owners operated multiple establishments simultaneously or consecutively. These phenomena also highlight some structural limitations of the database.

The primary value of the topographic study of prostitution in Budapest lies in the detailed locational data. The database covers all nine administrative districts of Budapest as established in 1873, with data pertaining to 559 individual streets and 2,615 identified buildings.²⁹ Since the overwhelming majority of the sources date from the years 1890–1899, visualizing the spatial distribution of institutions became feasible through mapping this particular decade. Over 70 map sheets from the 1895 administrative map series of Budapest were digitized and augmented with identifiable prostitution sites using *CorelDraw*.

Évkönyve VI., 71. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve VII.*, 77. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve VIII.*, 79. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve XI.*, 95. 1907: 95. Doros-Melly, *A nemibetegségek kérdése Budapesten*, 800. *Fővárosi Közlöny* 1900–1937. BFL VI.1.b. BFL VI.15. BFL VI.15.f.3. BFL VII.1.d. BFL VII.2.c. BFL VII.5.c. BFL VII.18d. BFL VII.101.c. BFL VII.101.d. BFL VII.102.a. BFL VII.103. BFL VII.104.a. BFL VII.106. BFL XV. BFL XVI.2.a. MNL OL K150. For detailed references to the sources used, see Tötös, “A városi prostitúció,” 465–471.

²⁷ Mihály Ráday, *Budapesti utcanevek: A–Z. Budapest* (Budapest: Corvina, 2013).

²⁸ *Hungaricana*, “Budapest Time Machine,” accessed November 20, 2024: <https://www.hungaricana.hu/hu/adatbazisok/budapest-idogep/>.

²⁹ Terézváros and Erzsébetváros were officially separated in 1882. Dezső Ekler, “Madách út vagy szerves városfejlődés. A Belső-Erzsébetváros történetéről,” in *Tértörténetek: válogatott írások*, edited by Ekler Dezső (Budapest: L'Harmattan – Kossuth Club, 2018), 11–32.

The visualization encompasses three temporal snapshots:³⁰ 1870–1879,³¹ 1890–1899,³² and 1910–1919.³³ Their aim is to illustrate the spatial distribution and temporal evolution of prostitution. The maps represent locations in Pest by district, while in the case of Buda, data deficiencies limited comprehensive coverage. One constraint of historical cartography is that all snapshots are based on the 1895 map series, even though the city's street layout had changed over time. Nevertheless, the maps—offering such detailed coverage for the first time—are able to depict the full urban extent of prostitudinal institutions, including both legitimate and illegitimate sites. While the maps will require further refinement in the future, it is reasonable to assume that such modifications will not significantly alter the overall picture.

Based on the information gathered from the maps, what is clear is that Budapest did not have a classic “red-light district”: prostitudinal institutions were scattered throughout the entire city. However, comparing the three temporal snapshots reveals a concentration process in which, starting from the 1870s, the number of sex industry establishments increased and gradually shifted toward areas beyond the Small and Grand Boulevards. This trend reflects the impact of urban development and modernization on prostitudinal spaces, as well as the effort to push brothels out of the city centre toward the periphery.³⁴ To better understand the spatial dynamics of prostitution, district-level analysis is indispensable. It enables the detailed mapping of local characteristics, concentrations, and spatial usage patterns.

³⁰ Throughout period under scrutiny, a total of 1,719 unique prostitution-related locations were successfully mapped. The individual establishments were consolidated. In addition to brothels, private apartments, and meeting places, venues of entertainment and hospitality, as well as prostitution-related institutions of unknown category – most of which were likely private apartments – were also marked with distinct colors.

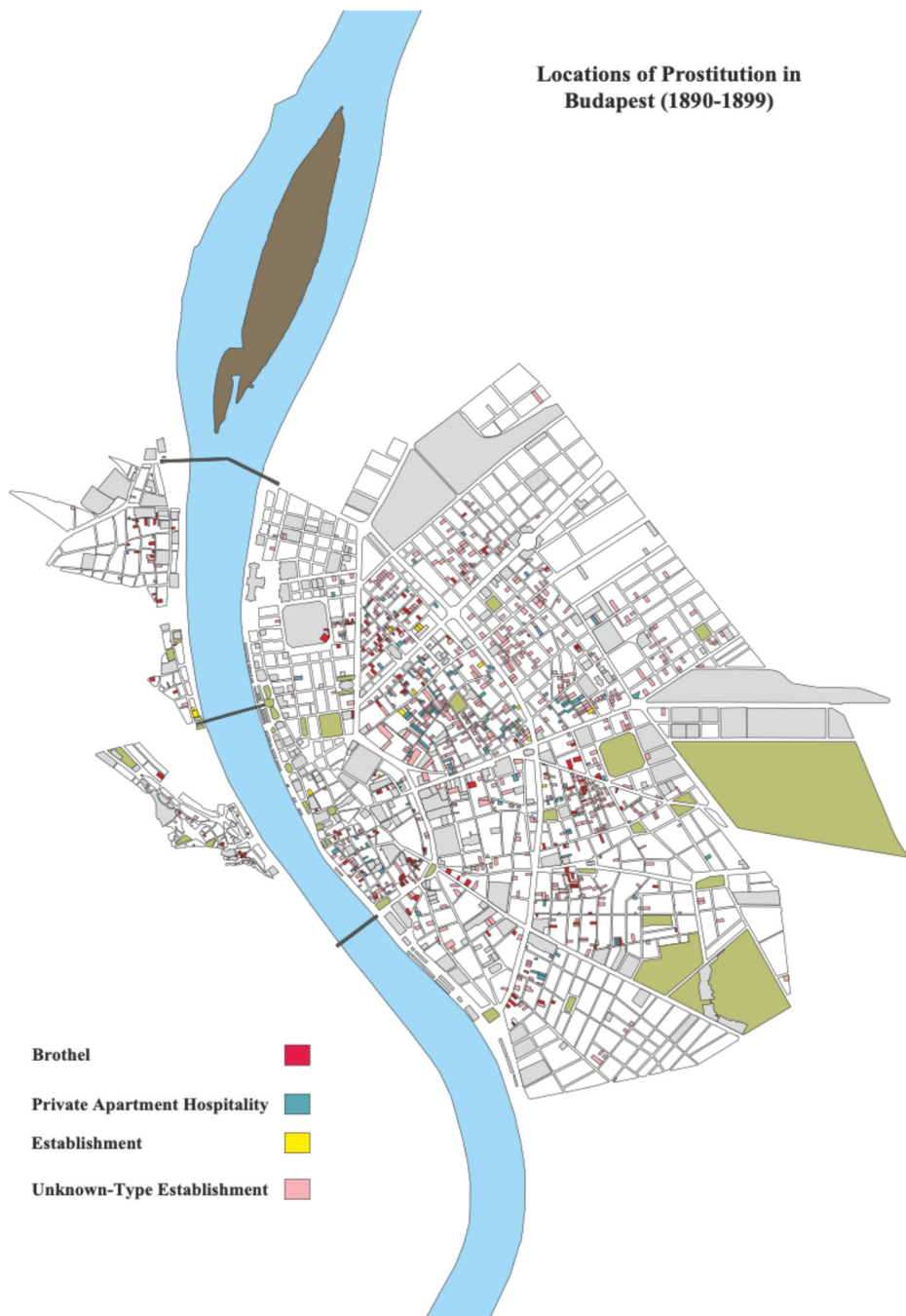
³¹ A total of 238 prostitution-related locations from this period were successfully mapped.

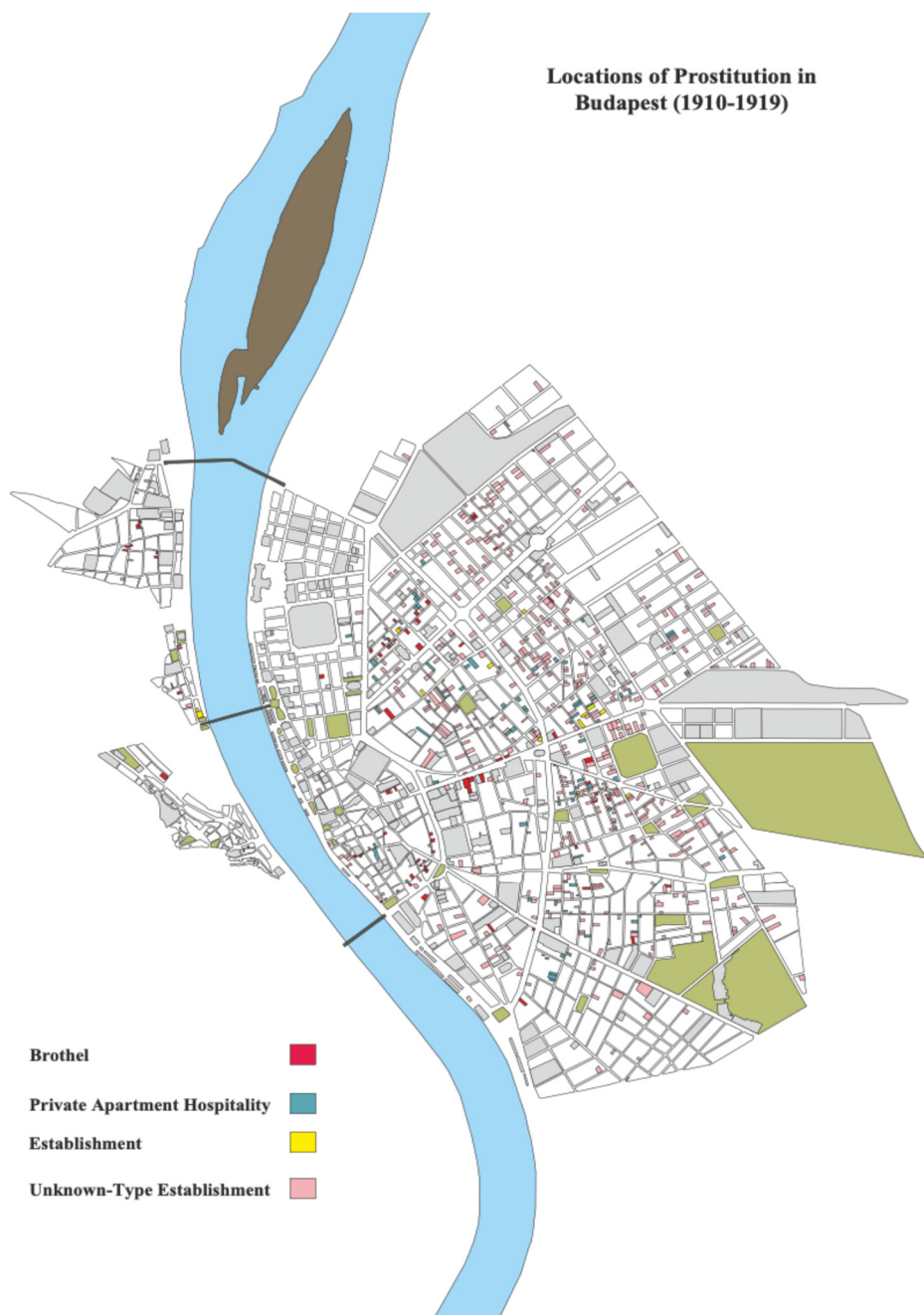
³² A total of 943 unique prostitution-related locations from this period were successfully mapped.

³³ A total of 538 unique prostitution-related locations from this period were marked on the map.

³⁴ Tóth, “A városi prostitúció,” 82; 85.







Prostitution by district

In 19th–20th century Europe – though less prominently than in the United States³⁵ – red-light districts also emerged. However, these never exercised exclusive spatial use. The term refers to urban areas where prostitution was more concentrated and somewhat separated from the general population. According to studies by French social historian Alain Corbin, in several French cities – such as Marseille, Montpellier, or Toulon – prostitutional activities were indeed tied to specific districts, though other social groups lived in these neighbourhoods as well.³⁶ The areas labelled as red-light districts did not enjoy exclusive spatial use at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. In the case of Hungarian cities – such as Győr,³⁷ Székesfehérvár,³⁸ Sopron,³⁹ Oradea,⁴⁰ or Cluj⁴¹ – no segregated red-light districts developed. Institutions were typically located on the outskirts or on the periphery, partly due to the smaller size of these cities. However, overlap between downtown entertainment quarters and prostitutional sites was frequent. The streets hosting prostitutional institutions were not closed off, and city residents could move freely between these areas and the rest of the city.⁴²

³⁵ Some of the more well-known red-light districts operated in New Orleans (Storyville), New York (Tenderloin), Chicago (the Levee), and San Francisco (Barbary Coast). Eric R. Platt, Lilian H. –Hill, “A Storyville Education: Spatial Practices and the Learned Sex Trade in the City That Care Forgot,” *Adult Education Quarterly* 64, no. 4. (2014): 285; Neil Larry Shumsky, “Tacit acceptance: Respectable Americans and Segregated Prostitution, 1870–1910,” *Journal of Social History* 19, no. 4. (1986): 665. L. Craig Foster, “Tarnished Angels: Prostitution in Storyville, New Orleans, 1900–1910,” *Louisiana History* 31, no. 4 (2007): 387–397. Alecia P. Long, “Poverty Is the New Prostitution: Race, Poverty, and Public Housing in Post-Katrina New Orleans,” *The Journal of American History* 94, no. 3 (2007): 798. Joel E. Black, “Space and Status in Chicago’s Legal Landscapes,” *Journal of Planning History* 12, no. 3. (2013): 234.

³⁶ In Montpellier, prostitutes and prostitution-related institutions were concentrated in the so-called *Cité Pasquier* district, while in Toulon, they were placed in the area known as the *quartier réservé Chapeau Rouge*. In 1907, the mayor of Provence established a separate *quartier réservé* specifically for brothels. In 1874, authorities in Marseille made significant efforts to situate brothels in streets close to the port. Corbin *Women for Hire*, 54–55.

³⁷ József Bana, *Piroslámpás évszázadok* (Győr: Győr Megyei Jogú Város Levéltára, 1999).

³⁸ Csurgai Horváth, “Székesfehérvár és a prostitúció,” 45–54.

³⁹ Güntner, “A soproni prostitúció története,” 49–64.

⁴⁰ Tötös, “Bordélyházak és kéjnostartók,” 77–104. Tötös, “Prostitúció a polgárosodó Nagyváradon,” in *Előadások a magyar tudományos napján az erdélyi Múzeum–Egyesület I. szaksztyályaiban*, edited by Egyed Emese – Pakó László, (Transylvanian Museum Society, 2015), 293–310.

⁴¹ Bokor, *Testtörténetek*, 41–49.

⁴² Shumsky, “Tacit acceptance,” 666–667. Laura Vaughan, *Mapping Society. The Spatial Dimension of Social Cartography* (UCL Press, 2018).

In Budapest, the distribution of prostitutional institutions varied significantly by district, as evidenced by cartographic sources, archival documents, and printed materials (see the attached maps). In the Inner City (Belváros), brothels were predominantly concentrated along the lines of the former city walls, in areas historically affected by prostitution, especially in the parallel streets around the Károly barracks, the County Hall, and Kálvin Square. By the 1910s, however, prostitutional sites linked to entertainment venues and private apartments had nearly vanished from this district, though a few brothels remained. Lipótváros was in a unique position: it had the fewest prostitutional institutions, most of which were linked to the Újépület (New Building). The demolition of this structure at the end of the 19th century also marked the disappearance of the prostitutional presence in the area, allowing the local elite and city administration to justifiably claim the district's 'cleanliness.' In contrast, Terézváros was one of the most densely developed districts of the sex industry, particularly in the area bounded by Teréz Boulevard, Andrásy Avenue, and Váci Boulevard, where brothels, private apartments, and entertainment venues all operated.

Prostitution extended into the streets around the Nyugati Railway Station, and although the number of such sites declined by the 1910s, the area maintained a strong presence. In Erzsébetváros, prostitution was predominantly linked to private apartments and hospitality venues. From the 1870s onward, brothels gradually receded into the background. The area around Keleti Railway Station, known as "Hungarian Chicago," became notorious not only for prostitution but also for its high crime rate. In Józsefváros, prostitutional institutions were present on multiple streets, though a few concentrated zones can be clearly identified: around Nagyfuvaros, Kender, Fecske, Conti, and Bérkocsis Streets, as well as the area near the Market Hall. In Ferencváros, brothels and private apartments clustered around the parallel and perpendicular streets connected to the Mária-Terézia barracks. As for Buda, data scarcity limits general conclusions, but prostitutional activity was traceable in the streets across from the Ganz factory and surrounding areas. Overall, sex industry establishments were frequently located near military sites, industrial plants, and major transportation hubs – especially in the Inner City, Terézváros, Erzsébetváros, and Józsefváros. Notably, no classic red-light district developed in Budapest, and prostitutional institutions were not confined to a single part of the city. The sex industry extended across densely populated and built-up

urban areas, although certain districts – such as Terézváros – hosted fewer such locations, as confirmed by cartographic representations. Nevertheless, many streets in Budapest became prostitutional hotspots where both legal and illegal establishments operated.

From an international perspective, one notable example is the Bremen model, which became known in several German cities (e.g., Bremen, Hamburg).⁴³ According to this system, prostitutes were concentrated into a single street – the so-called *bordellstrasse* – where other residential functions (e.g., domestic servants) were prohibited.⁴⁴ In Budapest, no street existed where housing outside prostitution was formally banned, though there were instances to the contrary. Authorities attempted to limit prostitutional activity to certain streets, but these efforts never resulted in sustained spatial segregation. Returning to the Bremen system: its goal was to spatially control prostitution and curb the spread of venereal diseases. Bremen's example is particularly notable because the strictly regulated zone was established through the cooperation of the local government, police, and medical professionals.⁴⁵ News of the model reached Budapest as well: police officer Emil Schreiber⁴⁶ personally studied the system and, in his 1917 professional publication, advocated for its implementation. He argued that the capital's 1909 prostitutional regulatory decree already reflected this approach. However, Budapest's unique legal and economic environment – particularly the lack of investor interest – ultimately prevented implementation.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, the authorities continued striving to restrict prostitution, ideally to the level of specific streets.

According to district-level data from the Metropolitan Statistical Office between 1894 and 1906 (see *Figure 1 and Table 2*), approximately 72% of prostitutes were concentrated in three districts – Terézváros, Erzsébetváros, and Józsefváros.

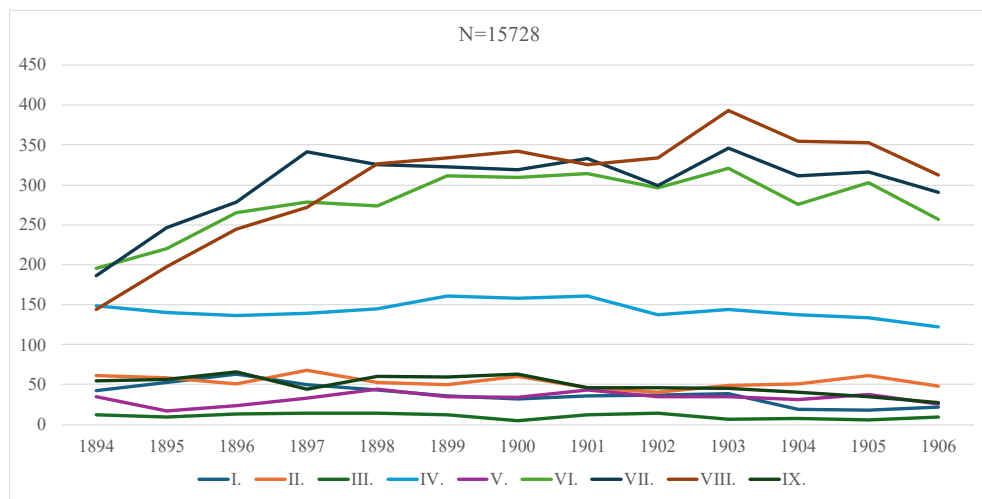
⁴³ Emil Schreiber, *A prostitúció* (Budapest: Pátria, 1917), 253.

⁴⁴ Richard J. Evans, "Prostitúció, állam és társadalom a birodalmi Németországban," in *A nyilvánvaló nők. Prostitúció, társadalom, társadalomtörténet*, edited by Léderer Pál (Budapest: Új Mandátum Publishing House, 1999), 251.

⁴⁵ Abraham Flexner, *Prostitution in Europe* (New York: The Century Company, 1914), 173; 177–178.

⁴⁶ Emil Schreiber (1863–?) was born in Kaposvár and earned a doctoral degree following his legal studies. He first worked as a police writer and was later appointed chief of police. Between 1886 and 1920, he served within the ranks of the Budapest police. In addition to prostitution, his primary areas of focus were vagrancy control and industrial law. He participated in numerous study trips and international conferences, where he also delivered lectures. His research focused on prostitution and human trafficking.

⁴⁷ Schreiber, *A prostitúció*, 117; 119.



Year	I.	II.	III.	IV.	V.	VI.	VII.	VIII.	IX.	Total
1894	42	61	12	149	35	196	186	144	55	880
1895	53	58	10	140	17	220	246	198	57	999
1896	63	51	13	136	24	265	278	245	66	1141
1897	50	68	14	139	33	278	341	272	44	1239
1898	43	53	14	145	44	274	325	326	60	1284
1899	36	50	12	161	35	311	323	334	59	1321
1900	32	60	5	158	34	309	319	342	63	1322
1901	36	46	12	161	43	314	333	325	46	1316
1902	37	41	14	137	35	296	299	334	46	1239
1903	39	49	7	144	35	321	346	393	45	1379
1904	19	51	8	137	31	276	311	355	41	1229
1905	18	61	6	134	38	303	316	353	35	1264
1906	22	48	10	122	26	257	291	312	27	1115
Total (count)	490	697	137	1863	430	3620	3914	3933	644	15728
Total (%)	3.12%	4.43%	0.87%	11.85%	2.73%	23.02%	24.89%	25.01%	4.09%	100.00%

Figure 1 and Table 2. Temporal distribution of the number of registered prostitutes in Budapest by district (1894–1906)⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* II., 143. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* III., 155. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* IV., 88. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* V., 61. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* VI., 71. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* VII., 77. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* VIII., 79. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* XI., 95. 1907: 95.

In the Inner City (Belváros), they were also significantly present, accounting for about 12%, while their numbers remained negligible in other Pest and Buda districts. Temporal analysis of the data indicates that by the late 1890s, the number of prostitutes in Józsefváros surpassed those registered in Terézváros and Erzsébetváros, making it one of the most important centres of prostitution in the capital. Contemporary press outlets, including *Fidibusz*, often morally stigmatized Lipótváros and Terézváros as the most immoral districts.⁴⁹ Certain parts of Józsefváros were associated with a distinct set of values, where poverty, crime, and prostitution formed an organic, everyday part of urban life. Especially notable were areas around Rákóczi Square, Horváth Mihály Square, Mátyás Square, Üllői Road, and the zone bordered by Népszínház and Szigony Streets – sources identified these as locations with a heightened presence of social deviance.⁵⁰ These localized hotspots clearly illustrate that prostitution was not only concentrated on the district level, but also within smaller urban neighbourhoods, closely tied to socio-economic marginality.

The data published by the Metropolitan Statistical Office merits some refinement.⁵¹ Through the topographic database of prostitution in Budapest, the spatial distribution of prostitutes can be examined not only by district, but also by institution type (see Table 3). The chart below also clearly shows that on the Buda side, most prostitutes operated in brothels, while on the Pest side, they resided primarily in private apartments. In terms of their presence in entertainment and hospitality venues, as well as other businesses, prostitutes were most commonly found in Erzsébetváros, Józsefváros, Ferencváros, and the 2nd District of Buda. In Viziváros, prostitution was limited to cafés and licensed prostitution zones (*kéjnéptelep*), and in other Buda districts, authorities similarly did not tolerate other types of establishments. In contrast, in Erzsébetváros, Józsefváros, and Ferencváros, prostitutes worked in a wide

⁴⁹ Zsúron. *Fidibusz*, no 2. (1906): 9.

⁵⁰ Balázs Varga, "Városnézés A kortárs magyar film Budapestje," *Budapesti Negyed* 9, no. 31 (2001): 97.

⁵¹ At the current stage of the research, the district-level distribution of prostitutes does not allow for the calculation of a segregation index. Nevertheless, it would be worthwhile in the future to continue the investigation in this direction and to examine the issue in proportion to the population at the level of city blocks, streets, or districts. Furthermore, the spatial distribution of entertainment venues within the city and their relationship to prostitution should also be further refined in future research, although the present framework did not allow for such an analysis.

array of venues: cafés, licensed zones, boarding houses, restaurants, bodegas, pubs, massage salons, cabarets, concert halls, music halls, and meeting places. Notably, Terézváros was the only district where sexual services were documented even in fruit shops – a striking illustration of the spatial and institutional diversity of prostitution.⁵²

The district-level data published by the Metropolitan Statistical Office provides a useful foundation for investigating the geographical distribution of prostitution; however, the topographic database of prostitution in Budapest also enables analysis by institution type (see Table 3). According to the database, prostitutes in Buda mostly operated in brothels, while in Pest, they were primarily present in private apartments. Prostitution in entertainment venues and commercial spaces was especially notable in Erzsébetváros, Józsefváros, Ferencváros, and the 2nd District of Buda.

1. In absolute numbers

Category / District	I.	II.	III.	IV.	V.	VI.	VII.	VIII.	IX.	Total
Brothel	98	73	34	162	39	246	76	160	29	917
Private Apartment	55	44	17	135	74	198	176	192	55	946
Entertainment, hospitality venue and other business	15	34	5	37	13	30	77	83	20	314
Total	168	151	56	334	126	474	329	435	104	2177

2. In percentages

Category / District	I.	II.	III.	IV.	V.	VI.	VII.	VIII.	IX.	Total
Brothel	58.33%	48.34%	60.71%	48.50%	30.95%	51.90%	23.10%	36.78%	27.88%	42.12%
Private Apartment	32.74%	29.14%	30.36%	40.42%	58.73%	41.77%	53.50%	44.14%	52.88%	43.45%
Entertainment, hospitality venue and other business	8.93%	22.52%	8.93%	11.08%	10.32%	6.33%	23.40%	19.08%	19.23%	14.42%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 3. Distribution of Prostitutes in Budapest by District and Major Categories of Sex Industry Institutions (1865–1929)⁵³

⁵² Tótfős, “A városi prostitúció,” 87.

⁵³ Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve II.*, 143. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve III.*, 155. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve IV.*, 88.

In Viziváros, prostitution was limited to cafés and licensed zones, with other institution types prohibited in this and other Buda districts. Conversely, in the Pest districts – especially Erzsébetváros, Józsefváros, and Ferencváros – prostitutes worked in a wide variety of venues: cafés, licensed zones, boarding houses, restaurants, bodegas, pubs, massage salons, cabarets, concert halls, music halls, and meeting points. Special attention should be given to Terézváros, where fruit shops were the only ones to also document the presence of sexual services – clearly illustrating the spatial and institutional diversity of prostitution. The examined data highlights that prostitution in Budapest was organized not only territorially, but also institutionally, in a differentiated manner. This reflects distinct social norms, regulatory practices, and local urban fabric characteristics.

District-level statistical data provides an important starting point for analysing the geography of prostitution in Budapest. However, due to their limited explanatory power, such data must be nuanced. These datasets offer a bird's-eye view of the phenomenon, while overlooking differences in population density, built environment, and architectural structure. Whereas the inner districts (especially Districts VI–VIII) were densely populated and intensely built-up, outer areas retained a less urbanized character.⁵⁴ Between 1869 and 1900, Budapest's population tripled, but population distribution remained uneven across districts. The distribution of prostitutes followed this pattern of concentration: most lived in Terézváros, Erzsébetváros, Józsefváros, and the Inner City, as confirmed by police reports from 1899. During the winter months, the number of prostitutes typically increased compared to the summer.⁵⁵ At the time of the city's unification, the built-up area of Pest extended only as far as the Grand Boulevard (Nagykörút), but after the Millennium, intensive urban development began: one-story buildings were replaced by three- or multi-

Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* V., 61. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* VI., 71. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* VII., 77. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* VIII., 79. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* XI., 95. 1907: 95. Doros-Melly, *A nemibetegségek kérdése Budapesten*, 800. *Fővárosi Közlöny* 1900–1937. BFL VI.1.b. BFL VI.15. BFL VI.15.f.3. BFL VII.1.d. BFL VII.2.c. BFL VII.5.c. BFL VII.18d. BFL VII.101.c. BFL VII.101.d. BFL VII.102.a. BFL VII.103. BFL VII.104.a. BFL VII.106. BFL XV. BFL XVI.2.a. MNL OL K150. For detailed references to the sources used, see Tóth, "A városi prostitúció," 465–471.

⁵⁴ Károly Vörös "A Fővárostól a Székesfővárosig, 1873–1896," in *Budapest története a márciusi forradalomtól az őszirózsás forradalomig*, edited by Vörös Károly (Budapest: Akadémiai Publishing House, 1978), 382.

⁵⁵ Jelentés a Budapest Fő- és Székvárosi állami rendőrség 1899. évi működéséről, 213.

story houses, and on the eve of World War I, even the areas beyond the Boulevard had become densely developed. Urban planning aimed to spatially separate the working class from the bourgeoisie, partly for public health reasons.⁵⁶

The spatial patterns of prostitution were not random: the location of prostitutes was shaped by market logic, accessibility, proximity to transportation nodes, and regulatory measures. This is why prostitutional institutions were often located in downtown business and entertainment districts, as well as busy transport zones. Both sex workers and establishment owners preferred central, well-connected areas—especially important for street workers, who sought to align with the movement patterns of potential clients. While the police partly restricted this through regulations, they also attempted to manage it. The persistence of prostitutional sites depended not only on supply and demand, but also on the tacit acceptance of urban society. As long as prostitution was considered isolatable and controllable, most city dwellers – at least implicitly – tolerated its presence. However, prostitutional spaces were symbolically stigmatized: locals noted them and often avoided them, while others deliberately sought them out.

The Urban Sex Industry at the Level of Streets, Squares, and Buildings

The street was one of the most important arenas of prostitution in the period. It served as the primary site of solicitation: prostitutes approached potential clients there, whom they then guided to private apartments, boarding houses, or meeting places. It is thus essential to examine this spatial level specifically.

The spatial structures of urban prostitution had already developed by the Middle Ages: many European cities had side streets or squares associated with prostitution. According to Richard J. Evans and other historians, the spatial patterns of 19th-century urban prostitution remained largely unchanged until World War I.⁵⁷ This is also true for Budapest: while the topography of the city's sex industry changed over time, historical continuity of certain locations is also observable. In the 18th and 19th centuries, brothels were primarily

⁵⁶ Gyáni, *Bérgaszárnya és nyomortelep: a budapesti munkáslakás múltja* (Budapest: Magvető Publishing House, 1992), 21.

⁵⁷ Evans, "Prostitúció, állam és társadalom," 250.

concentrated in Buda, especially in the Tabán area and along the Danube bank between the Sáros and Rác Baths. According to Frigyes Korn's 1833 report, the right bank of the Danube was crowded with prostitutes in the evening, while Ferenc Keller's 1841 report mentions significant prostitutional activity in the outskirts of Krisztinaváros and beyond the Tabán.⁵⁸ In Pest, brothels were mostly located at the base of the old city walls, on the inner side of what is now the Small Boulevard (Kiskörút), extending to Deák Square and through Deák Ferenc Street to the Danube. Based on the research conducted by Mihály Szécsényi and contemporary reports by Béla Bíró and László Siklóssy, the brothels on Bástyá and Magyar Újvilág Streets were permanent fixtures in this area from the 18th to the 20th century.⁵⁹ Zsuzsanna Kalla reached similar conclusions: in reform-era Pest, prostitutional institutions clustered along the Small Boulevard, near Nagy Híd Street, Kálvin Square, and Vármház Boulevard, while in Buda, the area around Gellért Hill was prominent.⁶⁰

In summary, between the 18th and 19th centuries and the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, a significant portion of prostitutional institutions in Budapest remained in the same streets and neighbourhoods across generations. Urbanization and spatial restructuring only partially altered this geographical continuity. Thus, the topography of the sex industry was shaped not only by modernization processes but also by local traditions and the historical embeddedness of spatial use.

Before the unification of Budapest, the Inner City was defined by narrow, winding streets and low-rise one- or two-story buildings. After unification, intensive urban development led to a cityscape increasingly dominated by multi-story rental buildings.

⁵⁸ Béla Bíró, *A prostitúció* (Publication of the Royal Hungarian Police National Specialized Training Courses, 1933), 50. János Cséri, *Budapest Fő- és Székváros prostitúció-ügye* (Separate reprint from *Klinikai Füzetek*, 1893), 13.

⁵⁹ Bíró, *A prostitúció*, 47; Szécsényi, "A budapesti prostitúció átalakulása az 1960-as években," in *Urbs. Magyar Várostörténeti Évkönyv V*, edited by Á. Varga László (Budapest City Archives, 2010): 314. According to the description by László Siklóssy, "in the old files, we read about suburban prostitution. In any case, it is peculiar that in Pest, even today, a line of prostitution can be traced along the former city walls. This spatial pattern – which I will elaborate on shortly – has existed for generations. Whether, in the old intolerant times, such women could only be found in the suburbs, and whether they gradually drifted toward the edge of the Inner City in more tolerant eras, is difficult to determine. But that this prostitution line already existed at the beginning of the 19th century is beyond doubt." László Siklóssy, *A régi Budapest erkölcsse* (Budapest: Osiris, 2002), 238.

⁶⁰ Zsuzsa Kalla, "Prostitúció a reformkori Pesten," *Rubicon* 14, no. 1 (2011): 56–57.

1. Brothels

District	Brothel		Street with brothels		Number of brothels per street
	N	%	N	%	
I. (Krisztinaváros, Tabán, Vár)	58	9.70%	17	8.67%	3.41
II. (Viziváros)	47	7.86%	19	9.69%	2.47
III. (Óbuda)	18	3.01%	7	3.57%	2.57
IV. (Belváros)	88	14.72%	29	14.80%	3.03
V. (Lipótváros)	35	5.85%	14	7.14%	2.50
VI. (Terézváros)	116	19.40%	28	14.29%	4.14
VII. (Erzsébetváros)	72	12.04%	23	11.73%	3.13
VIII. (Józsefváros)	112	18.73%	46	23.47%	2.43
IX. (Ferencváros)	52	8.70%	13	6.63%	4.00
Total	598	100.00%	196	100.00%	3.05

2. Private apartments

District	Private Apartment		Street with private apartment		Number of private apartments per street
	N	%	N	%	
I. (Krisztinaváros, Tabán, Vár)	24	6.19%	15	6.64%	1.60
II. (Viziváros)	13	3.35%	8	3.54%	1.63
III. (Óbuda)	8	2.06%	7	3.10%	1.14
IV. (Belváros)	55	14.18%	42	18.58%	1.31
V. (Lipótváros)	25	6.44%	15	6.64%	1.67
VI. (Terézváros)	88	22.68%	35	15.49%	2.51
VII. (Erzsébetváros)	81	20.88%	50	22.12%	1.62
VIII. (Józsefváros)	76	19.59%	46	20.35%	1.65
IX. (Ferencváros)	18	4.64%	8	3.54%	2.25
Total	388	100.00%	226	100.00%	1.72

3. Hospitality and entertainment venues and other businesses

District	Other prostitutional institution		Street with other prostitutional institutions		Number of other prostitutional institutions
	N	%	N	%	
I. (Krisztinaváros, Tabán, Vár)	25	9.47%	11	8.03%	2.27
II. (Viziváros)	26	9.85%	15	10.95%	1.73
III. (Óbuda)	4	1.52%	4	2.92%	1.00
IV. (Belváros)	38	14.39%	24	17.52%	1.58
V. (Lipótváros)	22	8.33%	11	8.03%	2.00
VI. (Terézváros)	32	12.12%	16	11.68%	2.00
VII. (Erzsébetváros)	61	23.11%	22	16.06%	2.77
VIII. (Józsefváros)	40	15.15%	26	18.98%	1.54
IX. (Ferencváros)	16	6.06%	8	5.84%	2.00
Total	264	100.00%	137	100.00%	1.93

Table 4. Spatial Distribution of Prostitutional Institutions and Streets by Urban District (1860–1929)⁶¹

⁶¹ Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* II., 143. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* III., 155. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* IV., 88. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* V., 61. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* VI., 71. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* VII., 77. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* VIII., 79. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* XI., 95. 1907: 95.

The construction of Liberty Bridge and Elisabeth Bridge, ordered in 1893, accelerated this transformation: Kígyó Square, Irányi Dániel, Duna, and Kötő Streets, along with landmark buildings such as the old City Hall, the Curia, and the baroque buildings of the Athenaeum were demolished.⁶²

The structure and architectural character of the Inner City changed drastically, with new buildings offering previously unknown levels of comfort. A striking example of the transformation of prostitutional spaces is the Tabán. From the 18th century onward, the Tabán was one of the most significant sites of prostitution in Buda, where sexual services were mainly provided in small taverns. Between 1860 and 1890, the rural character of this neighbourhood and its association with prostitution gave it a poor reputation. By the early 20th century, however, the Tabán underwent social and spatial rehabilitation: brothels disappeared, the district lost its sex-industry identity, and with it, its earlier stigmas faded.⁶³

The topographic database of prostitution in Budapest does not permit a qualitative description of sex industry spaces, but it is suitable for their spatial analysis in quantitative terms. The database contains 2,615 buildings on 559 individual streets where prostitutional activity occurred. Statistically, this means an average of 4.67 prostitutional institutions per street. By institution type: 3.05 brothels, 1.72 private apartments, and 1.93 other venues (e.g., hospitality businesses) per street (see Table 4).

Brothels were particularly concentrated in Terézváros and Ferencváros, where the average number per street reached or even exceeded four. In contrast, the lowest values were found in Viziváros, Óbuda, and Lipótváros. The relatively low average for Józsefváros (2.43) is due to the fact that, while Terézváros had more brothels concentrated on fewer streets, in District VIII they were more evenly dispersed across a wider area. According to the database, one-quarter of all brothels in the capital operated in Józsefváros, but with a more even spatial distribution. As for private apartments, Terézváros and Ferencváros had the highest average number of such residences per street – 2.5 on average.

Doros-Melly, *A nemibetegségek kérdése Budapesten*, 800. *Fővárosi Közlöny* 1900–1937. For detailed references to the sources used, see Tóth, “A városi prostitúció,” 432–433.

⁶² András Sipos, *A jövő Budapestje 1930–1960. Városfejlesztési programok és rendezési tervek* (Budapest: Napvilág Publishing House, 2011), 83.

⁶³ Péter Buza, *Pest–budai történetek. Rendhagyó városnéző séta* (Budapest: Tourism Promotion and Publishing Company, 1984), 22; 136.

Streets with these types of institutions were mostly concentrated in Erzsébetváros, Józsefváros, and the Inner City, accounting for 61%, with a significant presence also in Terézváros. The lowest numbers of streets with private apartments were found in Buda, as well as in Ferencváros and Lipótváros. Semi-public spaces – such as cafés, cabarets, boarding houses, etc. – were also predominantly located on the Pest side, especially in the Inner City, Terézváros, Erzsébetváros, and Józsefváros. More than 64% of streets with such venues were found in these four districts. Interestingly, Viziváros also exceeded the 10% threshold, in contrast to other parts of Buda. Overall, between 78% and 86% of prostitutional institutions were located in Pest, while only 14% to 22% were in Buda. This spatial distribution clearly highlights the dominance of the Inner City and Districts VI–VIII, a pattern confirmed by archival sources and scholarly research. In his studies, Markian Prokopovych also emphasizes these districts: in Terézváros, he identifies Király, Mozsár, Nagymező, and Ó Streets; in Erzsébetváros, the areas around Akácfa, Dob, Dohány, and Hársfa Streets; and in the Inner City, Bástyá, Magyar, Képiró, and Királyi Pál Streets as frequented by prostitution.⁶⁴ A 1905 article in *Népszava* even mentioned specific addresses, including Magyar Street 34, Vármegye Street 10 and 15, and Királyi Pál Street 9 – the latter being owned by spice merchant Péter Egressy, who rented out his apartment to prostitutes.⁶⁵

During the interwar period, Budapest's prostitutional institutional system underwent significant transformation, especially following the closure of brothels in 1928. As a result of these changes, the number of legally registered prostitutes, as well as the proportion of streets and buildings used for prostitutional purposes, declined markedly compared to the conditions of the dualist era. In 1929, only 35 officially registered "houses of ill repute" (kéjnőlakás) – known at the time as bárcásház – were operating in Budapest, offering a total of 424 rentable rooms for use by prostitutes.⁶⁶ These establishments were most heavily concentrated in Józsefváros. In certain streets, these bárcásház appeared in clusters: four operated on Rózsa Street in Terézváros;

⁶⁴ Prokopovych, "Prostitution in Budapest," 39.

⁶⁵ Bűntanyák a Belvárosban. *Népszava* 141 (1905): 6.

⁶⁶ In Viziváros, 15 rooms were located in 2 houses; in the Inner City, 32 rooms in 2 houses; in Terézváros, 66 rooms in 8 houses; in Erzsébetváros, 119 rooms in 8 houses; in Józsefváros, 135 rooms in 11 houses; and in Ferencváros, 57 rooms in 4 houses. Doros-Melly, *A nemibetegségek kérdése Budapesten*, 804.

three each in Conti and Kender Streets in Erzsébetváros, and in Liliom Street in Ferencváros.⁶⁷ The official records distinguished between public⁶⁸ and private⁶⁹ meeting places. The former included 75 rooms in seven buildings, while the latter comprised 119 rooms in 22 buildings, rented by prostitutes. Therefore, the Budapest authorities documented a total of 618 rooms used for prostitution in 1929, indicating both the spatial contraction and the increasing regulation of prostitution.

One of the most striking examples of the spatial and social conflicts associated with prostitution in Budapest is Conti Street in Józsefváros. Prostitutional presence in this urban area was continuously documented from the 18th century onward, and by the dualist period it had come to be regarded as one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the city.⁷⁰ The Public Safety Almanac (*Közbiztonság Almanachja*) of 1914, citing a report by Mrs. Géza Antal, described the corner of Conti and Bérkocsis Streets as “the most dangerous police post in the capital:”⁷¹ a site of pickpockets, pimps, jassz boys, noisy taverns, apache dancing, and even murders. One emblematic incident illustrating the everyday violent conflicts was the attack on police officer Alajos Balázs, who had attempted to send a streetwalking woman home.⁷² This example clearly demonstrates how prostitution-related deviance and policing problems were densely concentrated in this urban space. Conti Street’s social perception was dual in nature: on the one hand, it was notorious for its shady bars and its role as a prostitutional hotspot; on the other, it also functioned as a cultural and journalistic centre. The editorial office of *Népszava* operated here, and nearby were the headquarters of *A Hét* and the *Budapesti Hírlap*. The cafés and nightlife venues of the district were frequented by journalists,

⁶⁷ Doros–Melly, *A nemibetegségek kérdése Budapesten*, 804.

⁶⁸ In Erzsébetváros, 32 rooms were located in 3 houses, while in Józsefváros, 43 rooms were found in 4 houses.

Doros–Melly, *A nemibetegségek kérdése Budapesten*, 806.

⁶⁹ In the Inner City, 25 rooms operated in 3 houses; in Terézváros, 52 rooms in 10 houses; in Erzsébetváros, 27 rooms in 6 houses; and in Józsefváros, 15 rooms in 3 houses. Doros–Melly, *A nemibetegségek kérdése Budapesten*, 806.

⁷⁰ Géza Buzinkay, “A budapesti sajtónegyed kialakulása,” in *Urbanizáció a dualizmus korában. Konferencia Budapest egyesítésének 125. évfordulója tiszteletére a budapesti történeti múzeumban*, edited by Szvoboda Dománszky Gabriella (Budapest: Budapesti Történeti Múzeum, 1999) 291.

⁷¹ Gézáné Antal, “Három őrszem,” *Közbiztonság Almanachja* 5, (1914): 211.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 213.

actors, musicians, and prostitutes alike. As Géza Buzinkay put it, the “dubious reputation” of these venues was closely tied to the district’s complex social composition.⁷³

By the late 1920s, the regulation of prostitution had become a matter of political debate. In 1927, Christian Democrat politician András Csilléry expressed concern at a meeting of the Administrative Committee over the presence of prostitutes operating on Conti Street. He cited the proximity of children living in the area and nearby industrial schools as particularly troubling. He proposed relocating prostitutes beyond the Grand Boulevard.⁷⁴ A similar position was voiced during the 1927 budget debate by József Büchler, a Social Democratic printer,⁷⁵ and Ernő Weiller, a Democratic Party lawyer, who in 1930 also emphasized the necessity of ‘managing’ prostitution, highlighting the problems around Conti, Fecske, Népszínház, and Víg Streets.⁷⁶

The decade-long continuity of debates surrounding Conti Street illustrates the persistence of social resistance to prostitutional spaces. The moral discourse typical of petitions and parliamentary interventions against brothels and other prostitutional institutions often concealed specific economic interests. According to the pamphlet *Revelations from the World of Prostitution (Leleplezések a prostitúció világából)*, prostitution-related areas truly became “the scenes of street scandals,”⁷⁷ where not only sexual services but also crimes (thefts, robberies, murders) occurred regularly. This is supported by publications and studies by Mónika Mátay, Roland Perényi, and Réka Völgyi, which document numerous examples of violent acts committed against prostitutes.⁷⁸

The use of public space by prostitutes was increasingly subject to strict regulation. Paragraph 19 of decree no. 49.465/fk.900, issued by the Chief of Police in 1900, stipulated that ‘public women’ were forbidden from lingering

⁷³ Buzinkay, “A budapesti sajtónegyed kialakulása,” 291.

⁷⁴ *Fővárosi Közlöny* 1927, 1700.

⁷⁵ *Fővárosi Közlöny* 1927, 9.

⁷⁶ *Fővárosi Közlöny* 1930, 2161–2162.

⁷⁷ *Leleplezések a prostitúció világából*, 5.

⁷⁸ Mónika Mátay, “Egy prostituált lemeszárlása: a Város, a Nő és a Bűnöző,” *Médiakutató* 3, no. 1 (2003):

https://epa.oszk.hu/03000/03056/cikk/2003_03_osz/01_egy_prostitualt/index.html – Accessed August 29, 2024. Roland Perényi, *A bűn nyomában. A budapesti bűnözés társadalomtörténete 1896–1914* (Budapest: L’Harmattan, 2012). Perényi, *Holttest az utazókosárban. A Mágnás Elza-rejtély* (Budapest: Kiscell Museum, 2014). Réka Völgyi, “Az utcaszögletek mártírjai.” *Prostituált képek a XX. század eleji Budapesten* (Budapest: Clio Institute, 2020).

in the streets for extended periods, especially near public institutions—churches, schools, kindergartens, theatres—or from appearing in an indecent manner. They were also prohibited from loitering in gateways or on street corners, and from behaving or dressing in an ostentatious way. Prostitutes were allowed to receive only with one man at a time in a room, and only if the apartment in question was located at least 150 meters from a school or church.⁷⁹ Despite these strict regulations, urban practice often told a different story.

Despite legal restrictions, sex industry institutions often operated in the immediate vicinity of prestigious areas. Regulation explicitly forbade brothel owners and prostitutes from appearing or renting apartments on Andrásy Avenue, Kossuth Lajos Street, and the Grand Boulevard, among other prominent locations.⁸⁰ In practice, however, sex-related institutions functioned in the adjacent side streets. This phenomenon was not unique: as in New York's Broadway district,⁸¹ luxury prostitution in Budapest concealed itself along the edges of high-status zones. Over time, these areas became increasingly marginalized, and the clientele of prostitutes transformed. A notable example is the case at 70 Kerepesi Road. The six-room, luxuriously furnished apartment of actress Matild Losonczi, rented in a palace owned by Izidor Weisz, functioned as a hidden brothel for elite clients.⁸² Police investigations revealed that she paid 850 forints in weekly rent and initially advertised in newspapers, later expanding her clientele through recommendations. Clients usually arrived by car, and operations continued with the tacit consent of the police. In 1905, after uncovering police corruption, Police Chief Béla Rudnay suspended the officer responsible for patrolling the area.⁸³ This example illustrates that prostitution's public presence was not merely a policing issue, but intersected with moral, social, and urban-political conflicts. Despite formal prohibitions, prostitution remained present in the vicinity of representative spaces – mostly in more concealed forms, such as private or semi-public apartments – clearly evidenced in archival sources, press reports, and official documents.

⁷⁹ These restrictive provisions were not novel; earlier regulatory decrees had already contained them. What was new, however, was that specific streets and squares were explicitly designated as prohibited and inaccessible to prostitutes. Miklós Rédey, Imre Laky, *Rendőrségi Lexicon* (Budapest: Pátria Joint-Stock Company, 1903), 258.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁸¹ Serratore, *A Preservationist's Guide to the Harems*, 6–7.

⁸² Emberhús a piacon. *Népszava*. 1905. 120. 7.

⁸³ Emberhús a piacon. *Népszava*. 1905. 120. 7.

The Spatial Network of Prostitution

Mapping the locations of prostitutional institutions is insufficient in itself for the topographic study of Budapest's sex industry. It is essential to identify the primary hubs – i.e., the streets and buildings where prostitutes were most concentrated. To answer this, I applied network analysis methods,⁸⁴ which enabled the mapping of relationships between prostitutes and prostitutional institutions.⁸⁵ The analysis, conducted with *Gephi* network software, was based on the topographic prostitution database of Budapest, which contains the names of 7,769 prostitutes and 2,348 unique addresses (street and house number) – a total of 10,117 data points. The database covers all nine districts of Budapest. The links between prostitutes and institutions (e.g., brothels, private apartments, licensed zones, meeting places, etc.) were established based on their documented presence during specific phases of their careers. In total, 9,848 such connections were identified.

The analysis revealed the main nodes of prostitution: 45 prominent locations to which a significant portion of the prostitutes were connected. Around these, other contact points—prostitutes and smaller sex industry sites—were drawn as if by a forcefield, illustrating the structured nature of prostitution in Budapest. The thickness of the lines and the density of the network diagrams also point to the recurring associations of prostitutes with certain institutions. The smaller dots represent groups of prostitutes connected to only a single institution, while the larger nodes indicate more frequent

⁸⁴ International scholarship has shown that prostitution operated within a networked system, in the sense that individual prostitution-related institutions were closely linked to specific clothing, beverage, and food shops, fashion houses, and laundries. These relationships were essential for the continuous operation of brothels and other establishments. In the future, it would be worthwhile to examine these economic connections as well. Harald Fischer-Tiné, "White women degrading themselves to the lowest depths: European networks of prostitution and colonial anxieties in British India and Ceylon ca. 1880–1914," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 40, no. 2 (2003): 180.

⁸⁵ The roots of social network analysis go back to the interwar period. However, the strengthening of this research approach only occurred in the final third of the 20th century. As with other methodologies, it is important to recognize that network analysis is not applicable to all areas of historical research. A concise overview of both international and Hungarian historiography is provided by György Kövér in the preface to the 2020 volume of the *Yearbook of Economic History*, which exempts the present study from elaborating on the historiography of the topic. György Kövér, "Előszó," in *Hálózat & Hierarchia. Magyar gazdaságtörténeti évkönyv 2020*, edited by Kövér György, Pogány Ágnes, Weisz Boglárka (Research Centre for the Humanities – Hajnal István Foundation, 2020), 10–15.

institutional changes and actors with more dynamic roles in the prostitution market. The network not only visualizes the hierarchy of prostitutional spaces but also reflects the social embeddedness of the “public women.” Prostitutes were not merely isolated individuals living on the periphery, but social agents embedded in complex relationship networks—across sex industry employers, authorities, clients, citizens, and family members—integrated into urban society. Network research thus offers a new perspective for the historical analysis of this social phenomenon, contributing to the exploration of previously under-researched dimensions of Hungarian social history.

A detailed analysis of the 45 key nodes identified through the network study of Budapest’s prostitution shows that 35% of the 9,848 documented connections in the database can be linked to these sites.⁸⁶ These centres – typically containing between 3 and 9 institutions – exhibited an outstanding concentration of prostitutes, with some buildings associated with 50, 100, or even more than 200 “public women.”

The most frequented sites were located in the following districts and streets:

- In Krisztinaváros, Tabán, and the Castle District: Horgony Street (nos. 8, 12, 16);
 - In Viziváros: Gancz Street (nos. 20, 28) and Gyorskocsi Street (nos. 32, 36);
 - In Óbuda: Bécsi Road (no. 21) and Viador Street (no. 10);
 - In the Inner City: Bástya (nos. 18, 20), Himző (no. 4), Képiró (no. 8), Lövész (no. 10), Lőwy (nos. 10, 11, 15, 21), Magyar (no. 50), Megyeház (no. 7), and Rostély (no. 7);
 - In Lipótváros: Hajnal Street (no. 47);
 - In Terézváros: Ó Street (nos. 10, 16), Rózsa (nos. 70, 101), Lázár (no. 7), Szerecsen (no. 49), Petőfi (no. 6), and Aradi (no. 28);
 - In Erzsébetváros: Dohány (no. 60) and Kazinczy (no. 55);
 - In Józsefváros: Nagy Templom (no. 32), Conti (no. 6), Futó (no. 11), József (no. 57), Őr (no. 4), Fecske (no. 3), and Népszínház (no. 35);
 - In Ferencváros: Liliom (no. 4), Mester (no. 1), and Kinizsi (no. 23)
- Streets—these institutions were associated with between 50 and 242 prostitutes.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ See also Tóth, “A városi prostitúció,” 474–475.

⁸⁷ Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* II., 143. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* III., 155. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* IV., 88. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* V., 61. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* VI., 71. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* VII., 77. Thirring, *Budapest*

These locations were the main nodes of prostitution in turn-of-the-century Budapest. According to sources – including the memoirs of Frigyes Podmaniczky⁸⁸ – these urban areas represented the “gravitational centres” of prostitution, while Lipótváros, with the exception of Hajnal Street, remained only marginally affected.

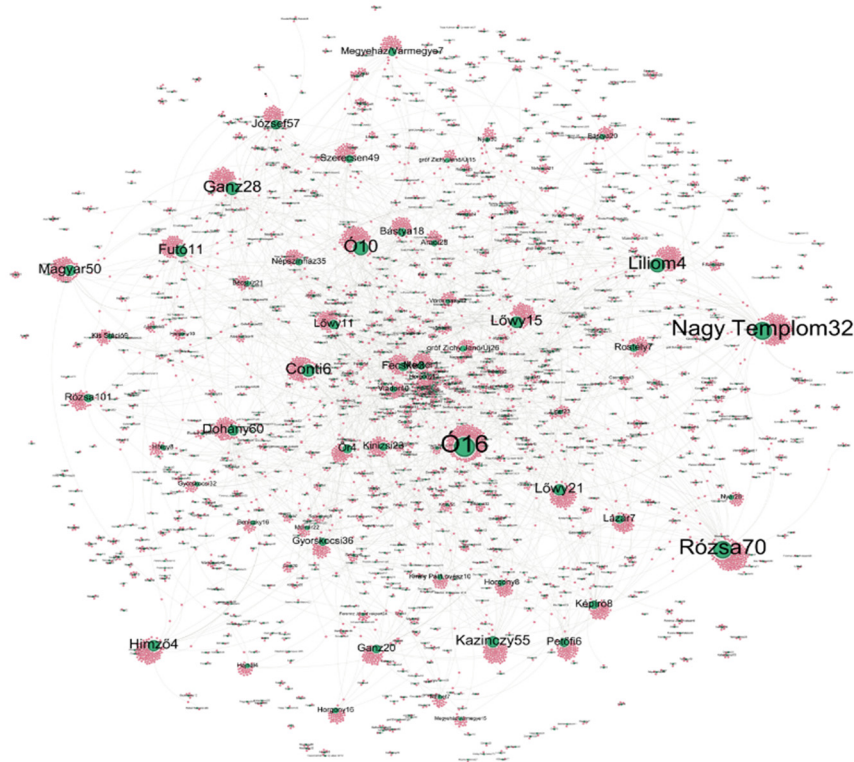


Figure 9. Prostitution networks in Budapest, 1863–1929⁸⁹

székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve VIII., 79. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve XI.*, 95. 1907: 95. Doros–Melly, *A nemibetegségek kérdése Budapesten*, 800. *Fővárosi Közlöny* 1900–1937. BFL VI.1.b. BFL VI.15. BFL VI.15.f.3. BFL VII.1.d. BFL VII.2.c. BFL VII.5.c. BFL VII.18d. BFL VII.101.c. BFL VII.101.d. BFL VII.102.a. BFL VII.103. BFL VII.104.a. BFL VII.106. BFL XV. BFL XVI.2.a. MNL OL K150. For detailed references to the sources used, see Tótfős, “A városi prostitúció,” 465–471.

⁸⁸ As cited by Siklóssy, 281.

⁸⁹ Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve II.*, 143. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve III.*, 155. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve IV.*, 88. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve V.*, 61. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros*

Overall, the functioning of sex industry institutions extended beyond the prostitutes themselves: numerous economic actors were connected to them. In addition to pimps, local businesses – particularly clothing stores, laundries, and doctors – and service providers were direct or indirect economic beneficiaries of the presence of prostitution. Prostitutes themselves also appeared as active consumers in the economies of the affected urban neighbourhoods, thereby becoming part of the complex economic and social network of the sex industry.

Conclusions

This study provides a detailed analysis of the spatial structure and social embeddedness of prostitution in Budapest. The investigation revealed the topographical distribution of prostitution within the city. The empirical foundation of the research was a large-scale database concerning more than ten thousand individuals, thousands of buildings, and nearly five hundred streets. This database was compiled from documents held in the Budapest City Archives and other public collections. The topographic data, when mapped, clearly demonstrated that Budapest had no formally designated red-light districts. Institutions of prostitution were embedded throughout the urban fabric, although a strong concentration could be observed in specific districts – primarily in Terézváros, Erzsébetváros, Józsefváros, and, to some extent, in the Inner City. Brothels, private apartments, and entertainment venues all functioned as sites of prostitutional activity. Their spatial location was related to patterns of urban transportation, the real estate market, population density, and urban spatial practices shaped by social norms. The perception of prostitutional spaces was often defined in moral terms, and, at the level of streets, such spaces became etched in the collective memory of city residents as “problematic” or to be avoided. Nonetheless, as long as prostitution seemed containable and separable, it remained an accepted phenomenon for the majority of the urban population.

Statisztikai Évkönyve VI., 71. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* VII., 77. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* VIII., 79. Thirring, *Budapest székes főváros Statisztikai Évkönyve* XI., 95. 1907: 95. Doros-Melly, *A nemibetegségek kérdése Budapesten*, 800. *Fővárosi Közlöny* 1900–1937. BFL VI.1.b. BFL VI.15. BFL VI.15. f.3. BFL VII.1.d. BFL VII.2.c. BFL VII.5.c. BFL VII.18d. BFL VII.101.c. BFL VII.101.d. BFL VII.102.a. BFL VII.103. BFL VII.104.a. BFL VII.106. BFL XV. BFL XVI.2.a. MNL OL K150. For detailed references to the sources used, see Tóth, “A városi prostitúció,” 465–471.

Annex

Archival Sources

Budapest City Archives (BFL)

- VI.1.b. *Records of the Royal Hungarian State Police Headquarters of Budapest.*
 - VI.15. *Records of the Budapest Police Headquarters Law Enforcement Agencies.*
 - VI.15.f.3. *Sample Document Collection 4. Large Box – White Slave Trade 3/a.*
 - VII.1.d. *Litigation Records of the Royal Court of Appeal of Budapest.*
 - VII.2.c. *Litigation Records of the Royal Court of Budapest.*
 - VII.5.c. *Criminal Litigation Records of the Royal Criminal Court of Budapest.*
 - VII.18d. *Criminal Litigation Records of the Royal Prosecution of Budapest.*
 - VII.101.c. *Records of the Royal National Penitentiary of Budapest. Convict Registers.*
 - VII.101.d. *Records of the Royal National Penitentiary of Budapest. Prisoner Registers.*
 - VII.102.a. *Records of the Royal Penal Court Prison of Budapest. Prisoner Registers.*
 - VII.103. *Records of the Royal District Court Prisons of Districts IV–X of Budapest.*
 - VII.104.a. *Records of the Royal Penal District Court Prison of Budapest. Prisoner Registers.*
 - VII.106. *Records of the Pest (Budapest) Royal Court Prison.*
 - XV. *Records of Collections.*
 - XVI.2.a. *Records of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. Records of the Budapest Revolutionary Court.*
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- K150. *Archives of the Ministry of the Interior.*