

Budapest's fight for clean air

2000 is target year for full pollution control

In London's worst fog on record, in 1952, some 4,000 people died, and, in 1962, another 2,800 were killed, their lungs choked with the dense smoke, coal-based chemicals and mist. Some simply dropped dead in the streets. The high death toll shocked Britons and the public in other European countries and the resulting parliamentary uproar forced the governments to underwrite costly campaigns to combat air pollution, the No. 1 enemy of urban populations.

Although the situation in Budapest has never been as tragic as it was once in London, industrial plants—accounting for two thirds of Hungary's industrial production—have been steadily spewing their murky smoke into the air of the city.

"We have started just in time," says György Sárdi, a senior official of Budapest Council's Commission for Air Pollution Control which was formed in 1968. As an initial step, the Commission banned the instalment of new coal-burning facilities, in private homes and industrial establishments alike. In addition, the local authority banned the use of fuels with high sulphuric content.

The Budapest Council also launched a costly drive to switch over to the use of smokeless fuels such as gas, electricity and oil as the city's energy sources. Until now, over 1,000 buildings in the Inner City have been switched to less harmless fuels and, Sárdi says, by the year 2000, under a long-term scheme, the city's pollution problems are expected to be entirely solved.

Industrial establishments that exceed the permitted level of fuel emission, fixed in a 1974 decree, to pay pollution fines. These fines add up to an annual total of 30 million forints. During the initial periods, factories preferred to pay the fines rather than instal expensive filtering equip-

ment; but now the offending factories or plants are obliged to instal filtering equipment to convert the emission of dark smoke from chimneys to a harmless white one. Simultaneously, efforts are being made to extend the park areas of Budapest. Some 500,000 square metres of new parks are laid out in the capital annually, says Ferenc Reményi of the Public Utilities Department.

More trees

Tree leafage is an important aid in combatting air pollution, as it dispels mist, purifies the air, and regulates humidity and temperatures. "We are planting lines of trees along the roads, some 10,000 a year, partly to replace old ones, partly to increase the number of trees, now totalling about 600,000 in this city of two million.

Felling of trees is strictly banned under a 1975 local authority ordinance. The regulation says that trees may be felled only if absolutely necessary, and the constructors or builders are required to plant new ones, of as large a trunk diameter as the ones that have been felled. In some cases, to replace one single tree felled, the constructors are obliged to plant at least 24, to make up for the leafage of a bigger tree than has been felled.

In this way the Budapest Council has managed to augment the public park area of Budapest from just over 9 million square metres in 1968 to well over 12 million square metres this year.

Thanks to this circumspect planning, "a slow, but steady improvement has taken place in the past five to six years," according to Sárdi. "But, as in most big cities, we are still facing the battle to control emissions from motor vehicles. We are trying to ease the problem by, among other measures, forcing transportation underground, building new Metro lines and a string of two-level crossings, substituting buses for trolley buses. Level-crossings can be a big help as they reduce the number of traffic lights, thus making for a smoother flow of traffic."

Car emissions pose a big problem, since the number of private cars has more than trebled, during this decade, from 240,000 in 1970 to 738,000 in 1977.

Now, the Ministry of Transport has set a limit to the amount of motor vehicle emission. That means that cars which exceed this limit are banned from traffic—their licence plates are removed until emission is controlled. This is a tedious and big task, but it is an absolutely necessary one if Budapest wants to breathe cleaner air.

And, so the battle goes on.

Melinda Patsubay