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In the Shadow of Fortune I.
Gambling, Crime, and Modernity in Interwar Budapest

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Abstract: This paper examines the interconnections between gambling and crime in interwar Budapest, focusing on the social and institutional contexts of illegal gaming. By situating gambling within the broader framework of urban modernity, it explores how the practice reflected and reinforced social inequalities, shaped urban spaces, and challenged the capacities of law enforcement. Drawing on contemporary police writings, crime journalism, and official statistics, the analysis reveals how illicit gambling was represented and regulated, as well as how these representations contributed to the construction of "deviant" urban identities. The paper argues that illegal gambling was both a symptom and a catalyst of the social tensions generated by modernization and economic crisis, offering a distinctive lens through which to interpret the moral and cultural context of interwar Budapest.

Keywords: gambling, urban crime, card games, law enforcement, interwar Budapest

"*Only a man who plays his cards should take them in hand.*
He must be the master of both his cards and his money.
Whoever lets the cards master him becomes their slave."[1]

Introduction

The nightlife of interwar Budapest reflected both the glamour of a modern metropolis and the shadowy zones where entertainment and crime were closely intertwined. In this world, gambling—especially its unlicensed and illegal forms—became a defining social practice. It not only mirrored existing social inequalities but also helped to reinforce them, influencing the use of urban space and the everyday operations of law enforcement. Emerging in cafés, dive bars, elegant nightclubs, and private flats, gambling venues combined excitement, risk, and the pursuit of quick profit, while also functioning as spaces of social interaction.

This paper explores the connections between gambling and crime in interwar Budapest. Beyond its criminological relevance, the topic offers broader perspectives on social history by revealing tensions between social norms, deviance and everyday life. The analysis's objective is to elucidate how illegal gambling embodied the dynamics of risk, hope, and alternative routes to prosperity during a period of social transformation.

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[1] Izidor Kálnoki, *A bacc-asztal mellől* (Budapest: Schenk, 1908), 60.

However, an examination of these issues cannot be separated from the institutional and urban context in which gambling, as an illegal practice, became visible and interpretable in the first place. The urbanization that took place during the 19th century resulted in social and spatial transformation, thereby rendering crime perceptible in a novel manner. This shift in perspective rendered crime not solely a legal problem, but also a cultural and narrative phenomenon. An early reflection of this phenomenon can be found in Hungarian crime and urban literature, which emerged in the middle of the century. The works of Ignác Nagy, Lajos Kúthy, and later Soma Gúthi addressed the dark side of metropolitan life, the uncertainties of social mobility, and prevalent forms of deviance. These texts not only reflected on the consequences of urbanization, but also prepared the conceptual and imaginative framework in which the "underworld" could become a distinct, recognizable phenomenon.[2]

The modern police force in Hungary evolved into an institutional entity in the latter half of the 19th century, a development that occurred in close temporal conjunction with the Compromise of 1867. This event was in turn closely associated with the accelerated urbanization and transformation of Budapest into a major metropolis. In the capital, which was unified in 1873, the challenge of maintaining public safety emerged as a significant issue, surpassing the capacities of the existing, partly military or local law enforcement agencies. Consequently, a unified, state-controlled police force was established in 1881, which already bore the hallmarks of modern bureaucratic policing. Concurrently, the "underworld" evolved into a distinct category within the historical context of crime, transcending its status as an isolated phenomenon to become a networked, partially professionalized form of criminal activity. Although gambling had been an integral part of urban life long before the turn of the century, it was not until the establishment of the police force that it began to receive the attention of law enforcement and criminal investigation agencies. The fact that the police were now in existence did not in itself mean that all areas of crime could be immediately mapped or effectively controlled.[3] For a considerable duration, illegal gambling was regarded as an "invisible" or tolerated crime, operating on the periphery of the private sphere and the semi-legal entertainment industry. It was only in the first half of the 20th century, particularly

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2 The following section will provide further information regarding the writers previously referenced: Sándor Kálai, "Médium, műfaj, mediáció. (Kuthy Lajos: Hazai rejtelmek)," in *"Szirt a habok közt" Tanulmányok Imre László 70. születésnapjára*, eds. Péter Bényei, Mónika Gönczy, and Pál S. Varga (Debrecen: Debrecen University Press, 2014), 179–185; Sándor Kálai, "Fekete könyvek—Gúthi Soma bűnügyi elbeszélése," *Korunk* 28, no. 3 (2017): 16–24; Mónika Mátay, "Egy reformkori író-celeb: Nagy Ignác," *Magyar Könyvszemle* 139, no. 3–4 (2023): 337–357.

3 The following section will provide a more detailed overview of the process of professionalization of the police force: Roland Perényi, *A bűn nyomában. A budapesti bűnözés társadalomtörténete 1896–1914* (Budapest: Uránia Ismeretterjesztő Alapítvány—L'Harmattan, 2012), 159–198.

during the interwar period, that a professional, administrative and discursive framework emerged within the police force that consciously interpreted gambling as a social danger and a structural element of the underworld. The advent of war and economic crises, the emergence of "modern" statistical and expert approaches to crime, and the recognition that gambling was not an isolated moral problem but a key area of survival strategies, corruption, and organized crime played a decisive role in this.

Three main questions guide the inquiry. First, how did gambling become integrated into Budapest's social life, and through what mechanisms and actors did it intersect with crime? Second, how did law enforcement respond—what measures were taken to curb illegal gambling, and how effective were they? Third, how did contemporary press coverage depict and shape public discourses on the boundaries between crime and order, or between "normal" and "deviant" urban life?

The source base of the analysis is intentionally diverse. Crime journalists (e.g. Marcell Palásthy, Kornél Tábori, Gyula Turcsányi, Vilmos Tarján) and police officers (notably Ede Gellért and Dániel Schreiber) portrayed Budapest's nightlife in ways that were both documentary and dramatized. Official statistics and legislation complement these accounts, offering insights into the regulation and perception of gambling, even if they seldom capture its full extent. Thus, the sources reflect not the "reality" of gambling but contemporary constructions of it—constructions that nonetheless reveal key aspects of urban society.

The paper is structured into three main sections. The opening section situates gambling within a broader international context and examines its social functions, focusing on the participation and motivations of different social groups as well as the predominant forms of gambling in the period. The second section explores the relationship between illegal gambling and crime in interwar Budapest, paying particular attention to the legal framework, preventive measures, and the institutional practices employed by the capital's law enforcement authorities to curb the spread of gambling, especially its illicit forms.[4] Finally, the third section turns to contemporary press representations, analysing how gambling was discussed, framed, and narrated in public discourse. Overall I argue that illegal gambling was a striking manifestation of the economic crisis of the era, but at the same time it was a reflection of the social changes and tensions associated with modernization, and may even have been a catalyst for them.

[4] Due to considerations of scope, the paper deliberately excludes the economic and legal history of state-controlled gambling—such as lotteries, betting, and horse racing—as well as medical or psychological interpretations of addiction.

The social role of gambling

Gambling can be defined as a social phenomenon, in which individual risk-taking is intertwined with community experiences, hope, and, in some cases, the illusion of social advancement. Consequently, its function is threefold: cultural, economic and symbolic. The characteristics of this phenomenon are determined by a multitude of factors within every social and political environment, including traditions, power relations, and—perhaps most obviously—norms and moral frameworks. Consequently, the essence of gambling for research purposes frequently extends beyond the game itself, as it can also serve as a social mirror that unveils specific characteristics of a given community's mentality.[5]

The social role of gambling has been characterized by duality in almost every era. While on the one hand there was the danger of fraud, addiction, moral decay, and crime, on the other hand there were economic benefits, tax revenue, entertainment, and the possibility of institutional regulation. This duality was already evident in ancient Rome, where Roman law prohibited games played for money, allowing them only in one case, during the Saturnalia festival.[6] In 14th-century France, legislation proscribed gambling with a view to preserving social order, whilst simultaneously permitting it in certain forms, especially when it generated revenue for cities or royal courts. In Italy, from the 16th century onwards, casinos operating under princely license served the entertainment of the aristocracy and were also taxed. The authorities' primary motivations for addressing gambling were to maintain public order and prevent fraud. However, in times of war or financial hardship, a pragmatic approach to these activities was adopted, with gambling often serving as a source of tax revenue or funding for support purposes.[7]

Illegal forms of gambling, such as those taking place in public spaces or at fairgrounds, and covert card games, have been frequently associated with criminal organizations of varying

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5 Kálmán Korchmáros, *A hazárdjátékok elmélete és gyakorlata* (Budapest: Forum, 1930), 5–7.

6 Dániel Schreiber, *A játékkaszinók szélhámosai* (Budapest: Centrum Kiadóvállalat, 1934), 11.

7 Toine Spapens, "Illegal Gambling," in *The Oxford Handbook of Organized Crime*, ed. Letizia Paoli (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 404–407.—A similar principle was applied in Budapest during this period. Entertainment tax was levied on the general public, with the revenue being used primarily for poverty relief purposes. The pertinent regulations encompassed a diverse array of entertainment establishments, encompassing theatres, cinemas, cafés, and casinos. According to some sources, in 1925, 11% of the capital's entertainment tax revenue was derived from gambling in casinos. It should be noted, however, that this figure only included legal gambling. Rezső Homolyai, *Városi önkormányzat. A városigazgatási politika vázlata* (Budapest: Budapest Székesfőváros Statisztikai Hivatala, 1943), 180; Mihály Pásztor, *Budapest zsebe* (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1926), 241–242; Tivadar Surányi-Unger, *Budapest szerepe Magyarország gazdasági életében 1925–1934* (Budapest: Budapest Székesfőváros Statisztikai Hivatala, 1936), 160–163; Ervin Pálosi, *Budapest kriminalitása és moralitása az 1909–1925. években* (Budapest: Budapest Székesfőváros Statisztikai Hivatala, 1927), 101–107.

dimensions. These entities have been known to generate revenue through the facilitation of such illicit activities. During the 18th and 19th centuries, with the advent of urbanization and social mobility, gambling became widespread, especially among the working and lower middle classes. It is evident that by this juncture, the initial organized criminal entities had come into existence, with a deliberate focus on illicit activities such as illegal betting (notably on horse racing), slot machines, and card rooms. Consequently, these forms of gambling presented a significant law enforcement challenge on a global scale during the 20th century. The discourse in favor of criminalization persisted, with gambling being perpetuated as a symbol of social deviance, corruption, and the efficacy of state power. This historical process clearly demonstrates that gambling was not only a legal or economic issue, but also a social challenge that operated at the intersection of state regulation, public morality, and crime.[8]

The proliferation of gambling has also given rise to novel institutional frameworks, as clandestine gambling dens and semi-legal casinos have emerged, thus giving rise to new forms of employment. In the Hungarian capital, for instance, there existed various types of gambling establishment workers, including "*pinkabérlők*" (card sharps)[9], "*krupiék*" (croupiers)[10], "*játékmesterek*" (game masters)[11], and "*zsetonosok*" (chip dealers).[12] These individuals were accompanied by new types of criminals, such as casino swindlers, who professionally exploited the lack of regulation and social control in the world of gambling. Thus, in addition to its role as a form of entertainment or risk-taking, gambling has also led to the creation of a new social and economic environment characterized by specific actors, values, and norms.[13]

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8 Heather Shore, "A Brief History of the Underworld and Organized Crime, c. 1750–1950," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Crime and Criminal Justice*, eds. Paul Knepper and Anja Johansen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 170–191; Clive Emsley, *Crime and Society in Twentieth-Century England* (London–New York: Routledge, 2011), 87–108; Peter Ferentzy and Nigel E. Turner, "Gambling and Organized Crime—A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Gambling Issues* 23. (2009): 119–123.

9 The so-called "*pinkabérlők*" were the club's game organisers, who were essentially entrepreneurs responsible for running the gaming operations. The so-called "*pinka*" was a diminutive drawer or cassette with a slot in the card table, into which the share of the winnings was inserted in the form of cash or chips. This income was the property of the entrepreneur who maintained the club; the staff were only permitted to retain the gratuities they received from the players, which were distributed amongst themselves at the conclusion of the game. Gyula Turcsányi ed., *A modern bűnözés*, Vol. 2 (Budapest: Rozsnyai, 1929), 148–150.

10 The croupiers were the supervisors of the gaming table, serving the banker and the players. The task of the bookmakers was to oversee the management of these wagers. In the event that the bank was victorious, the bookmakers were responsible for collecting the wagers; conversely, if the bank was unsuccessful, the bookmakers were accountable for disbursing the winnings to the winning parties. Ibid. 149.

11 The game masters led the game in prominent clubs. Ibid. 149.

12 The responsibility for financial management of the game was typically assumed by the dealers, who frequently originated from the waiter staff. Nevertheless, it was not infrequent for former high rollers to undertake this role, seeking to secure their livelihood or regain the financial losses they had suffered at cards. Ibid. 148–149.

13 Schreiber, *A játékkaszinók*, 10.

A salient social characteristic of the period following World War I was the intensification of economic inequalities, which, according to contemporaries, was closely linked to the further spread of intellectual forms of crime.[14] The war and the political and economic crises that ensued engendered social conditions that facilitated the rapid and substantial accumulation of wealth by certain groups, often through opaque, ethically questionable, or outright illegal means. This change resulted in a transformation of society's perception of wealth. Historically, the accumulation of wealth was regarded as a consequence of diligent effort and moral rectitude. However, the emergence of the post-war "nouveau riche" elicited feelings of resentment and even disdain among many individuals. The possibility of attaining wealth engendered a social environment in which an increasing number of individuals perceived the aspiration to accumulate wealth as legitimate, irrespective of the methods employed to accomplish this objective. The ability to capitalize expeditiously on economic opportunities, engage in speculation, and circumvent established regulations became hallmarks of the pursuit of social mobility. In this context, criminal activities were employed as a means to achieve desired outcomes.[15]

Besides, the existential and mental upheavals of the war and the revolutionary period that followed contributed to a heightened demand on a collective level for entertainment and relaxation. Contemporary interpretations posit that this phenomenon was not only a general characteristic of wartime societies, but was also influenced by specific internal factors in Hungary. For instance, journalist Imre Nyigri posited that the proliferation of gambling could be attributed to the abrupt and remarkable surge in the demand for entertainment and escapism among the male demographic returning from active service. This phenomenon was conceptualized as a social effect of these men's "nervous tension". However, he also emphasized that the desire to escape from livelihood problems and robot-like work, that is, the need for a kind of complete relaxation, was often disproportionate to people's actual financial possibilities.[16]

However, other sources emphasized that, in addition to the post-war influx of refugees, a significant number of performers also arrived in Budapest, where they initiated new business ventures to ensure their survival. These performers established cabarets, variety shows, and sideshow performances, through which they could attain rapid success. These ventures were frequently the result of the efforts of "newly rich" financiers who had accumulated significant wealth during the post-war economic circumstance. The expansion of the entertainment

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14 For further insight into the issue of the dissemination of intellectual crime, please refer to the following sources: Turcsányi, *A modern bűnözés*, 63–146; Roland Perényi, "Az intellektuális bűnözés feltalálása. Fehérgalléros kriminalitás Budapesten a 20. század elején," *Aetas* 38, no. 2 (2023): 80–97.

15 *Jelentés a Budapesti Magyar Királyi Állami Rendőrség 1918–1920. évi működéséről* (Budapest: Radó Izor Nyomdai Műintézete, 1921), 157.

16 Zoltán Borbély and Rezső Kapy eds., *A 60 éves magyar rendőrség 1881–1941* (Budapest: Halász Könyvkiadó, 1942), 579.

industry was driven not only by demand but also by new social groups wishing to display their status and prestige through entertainment. Within this milieu, gambling proved to be particularly compatible with the allure of swift gratification and the prospect of immediate financial enrichment.[17]

The social and criminological significance of gambling is confirmed not only by the situation in Hungary, but also by international examples. The criminal organizations known as *Ringvereine*, which operated in Berlin during the Weimar and Nazi eras, are a pertinent example of the legal and social duality that surrounded illegal gambling. These groups formally operated as clubs or social associations, and their members were often former convicts or marginalized individuals. The construction of a facade of social acceptance was achieved through the establishment of precise internal regulations, etiquette, insignia, and collective mourning rituals. The ceremonial operation conducted within the official framework rendered it challenging for the authorities to initiate action, as the clubs could not be unequivocally regarded as criminal organizations from a legal perspective. In addition to the facilitation of illegal gambling, the Ringvereine was engaged in the organization of prostitution, extortion, protection rackets, and the institutional coordination of burglaries and thefts. This dual structure served two functions: firstly, it enabled the concealment of their activities; secondly, it facilitated the institutional operation of crime. The Ringvereine are a pertinent example of how organized crime can simultaneously integrate into the periphery of society and into legitimate organizational forms.[18]

It is evident that the practice of gambling has evolved into a significant social concern, manifesting not only in major German cities but also in England. A prime example of this phenomenon is provided by Salford in the 1930s, a period which clearly demonstrates how gambling became intertwined with economic vulnerability and social disintegration. While the majority of workers did not engage in regular gambling, a proportion of men did risk their weekly earnings, with consequences including financial ruin, family crises and community tensions. The authorities encountered significant challenges in taking action against this practice, as illegal street betting frequently occurred in locations that were challenging to regulate. Moreover, local communities often offered protection to the organizers of these activities. The limitations of legal measures were reinforced by cultural factors. Despite the fact that it was widely condemned, gambling persisted in its role as an exciting form of leisure within working-class communities. The example of Salford highlights that gambling was not

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17 *Jelentés a Budapesti Magyar Királyi Állami Rendőrség 1921. évi működéséről* (Budapest: Radó Izor Nyomdai Műintézete, 1922), 117.

18 Christian Goeschel, "The Criminal Underworld in Weimar and Nazi Berlin," *History Workshop Journal* 75. (2013): 64–74.

exclusively linked to criminal groups, but became a means of alleviating social crises and a hope for quick riches. As demonstrated by the Ringvereine, during the period in which the city of Berlin was under the control of the National Socialists, gambling was employed as a means of legitimizing criminal organizations. In contrast, in Salford, gambling could be considered more indicative of social hopelessness. However, in both cases, it can be interpreted as a symptom of the disruption of social order, a phenomenon that is well illustrated by the impotence of law enforcement.[19]

In this broader European context, Budapest between the two world wars also exhibited a distinctive pattern: namely, that illegal gambling flourished here too. However, in the Hungarian capital, this phenomenon was accompanied by an extremely diverse repertoire, about which Police Chief Dániel Schreiber provided detailed information in his book *A játékkaszinók szélhámosai (The Swindlers of the Casinos)*, published in 1934. In a separate chapter, he expounds on the nature of games, i.e. the extent to which they rely on luck and the extent to which they permit skill or knowledge, which in turn determines their social perception and their classification as legal or illegal.[20]

As indicated by the extant criminological literature of the period, the defining characteristic of games of chance was that how the player could influence on the outcome of the game. Such games are characterized by their rapid pace, which often results in the determination of profit or loss within a brief interval. The role of the player is frequently confined to the placement of a bet. This category included classic casino games such as "baccarat" and "chemin de fer"[21], as well as the so-called "nasi-vasi"[22], "trente et quarante"[23], and roulette. It is a commonly held view that such games were typically categorized as table games, insofar as they were played on a table of considerable size with multiple players competing against a banker. Casino games (baccarat, chemin, trente et quarante) were played either with cards or spinning devices

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19 Andrew Davies, "The Police and the People: Gambling in Salford, 1900–1939," *The Historical Journal* 34, no. 1 (1991): 114.

20 Schreiber, *A játékkaszinók*, 23–26.

21 Pásztor, *Budapest zsebe*, 264. The card games referenced in the source text were among the most popular of the era. In "baccarat", a designated banker plays against the other players, who place their bets against the bank. The objective of the game is to obtain a combination of two or three cards that add up to as close to nine as possible. It is important to note that tens and face cards are worth zero points, aces are worth one point, and all other cards are worth their face value. "Chemin de fer" is a variant of "baccarat", with the key distinction that the right to deal is shared among the players, and the participants also enjoy greater freedom in the rules for drawing the third card. Kálnoki, *A bacc-asztal*, 8–25; Ödön Récsei, "A kártyás, sőt hamiskártyás Budapest," in *Az Esti Kurir naptára 1929* (Budapest: Esti Kurir, 1929), 135–137; Korchmáros, *A hazárdjátékok*, 36–60.

22 This is a game of Russian origin that is played with Hungarian cards. *Tolnai Új Világlexikona*, vol. 12 (Budapest: Tolnai Nyomdai Műintézet, 1928), 290.

23 This is a card game that is played with a standard pack of 52 cards, with each player receiving an identical number of cards at the start of the game. Korchmáros, *A hazárdjátékok*, 33–36.

(roulette). These events were typically characterized by their clandestine nature, taking place in venues that were either closed or operating in a semi-legal or illegal context. These included "underground" private residences, and clandestinely operated club rooms.[24]

The majority of the popular legal games of the time were predicated on knowledge and skill; however, when financial reward was involved, they could readily be classified as illicit. The fundamental distinction pertained to the extent of the "luck factor": that is, the proportion to which the outcome of a game was determined by the cards dealt rather than the skill of the player. In card games, for instance, the greater the influence of chance, the more it was regarded as a game of chance. Consequently, the authorities prosecuted not only classic casino games, but also other games if they were played for money.[25]

It is also pertinent to briefly mention the tactics, techniques, and systematic cheating methods employed by the players to influence the outcome of the game, in other words, how "luck was corrected" at the green tables in Budapest. The domain of casinos, for instance, functions in accordance with its own internal logic, wherein not only do players compete against the house, but they also engage in direct competition with one another. It is evident that, on the basis of the available evidence, casino swindlers were divided into three primary categories during this specific historical period. The initial group comprised individuals who were integrated into the institution itself and assumed managerial or administrative roles. It was demonstrated that the subjects had the capability to manipulate the game through the utilization of confidential information, thereby deceiving not only the players but also other employees. The second group consisted of employees, including croupiers and chip dealers, who played a pivotal role in the facilitation of the game. It has been documented that these individuals frequently misused their position to either steal or exert undue influence over the outcome of the game. It is evident that a pattern of collaboration with other players emerged, resulting in acts of deception directed towards the casino. The third group consists of players who either attempted to deceive themselves or colluded with other players and employees to "blow up" the casino, in the gambling industry's vernacular, i.e. cause substantial losses to the house. Consequently, within the context of gambling, which is inherently illegal, participants frequently transgressed the established regulations of the game.[26]

Card cheating was one of the most prevalent and sophisticated forms of gambling fraud of the era. This particular type of fraud necessitated a confident and cultured demeanor,

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24 Schreiber, *A játékkaszinók*, 26–27.

25 "A m. kir. belügyminister 1901. évi 64.573. számú körrendelete valamennyi törvényhatósághoz, a hangversenyek, mutatványok stb. engedélyezése tárgyában," in *Magyarországi Rendeletek Tára 1901* (Budapest: Magyar Királyi Belügyministerium, 1901), 491–492.

26 Schreiber, *A játékkaszinók*, 28–29; Turcsányi, *A modern bűnözés*, 158–159.

accompanied by a charming and trustworthy facade, on the part of the player.[27] However, it should be noted that in many cases, this calm demeanor was accompanied by superstitious beliefs.[28] The objective of the card cheat was to avoid arousing suspicion among his playing partners, and thus each move had to appear natural. Dexterity was also a significant factor, given that cheating frequently entailed the surreptitious removal, replacement, or manipulation of cards. These techniques demanded a certain degree of cold-bloodedness, as well as routine and well-groomed hands, since in many cases the cards had to be identified by touch. It is evident that many of these individuals did not operate in isolation; rather, they were typically members of a well-structured and coordinated team, where each player had a specific role to play. The individual referred to as the "barker" was tasked with identifying and persuading potential victims, who were then introduced to a game that was presented as a form of entertainment. However, the true nature of the game was to deceive the participants and steal their possessions. The individual referred to as the "playing partner," who was also a member of the team, assisted the card cheat in winning during the game by subtly influencing the course of play. The role of the "signal man" was of particular significance, as he was positioned in a manner that enabled him to observe the opponents' cards. Subsequently, he communicated this information to the card cheat through a series of pre-established non-verbal signals, including adjustments in the position of his cigarette in his mouth. These methods of communication facilitated expeditious decision-making that remained imperceptible to external observers.[29]

The practice of card cheating did not cease with the employment of marked cards or the deliberate deception of players; rather, an entire secret communication system was developed to manipulate luck. Players frequently employed signals that were imperceptible or unintelligible to external observers. One such technique, among the more traditional methods, was known as "foot Morse code". In this particular instance, the act of cheating was predicated on the movements of the players beneath the table. The accomplice employed subtle kicks as a means of signaling which card their partner required. The exterior appearance was deceptive; from a distance, the scene appeared to be an intimate and playful environment. However, in reality, it functioned as a sophisticated means of communication to influence the game.[30]

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27 Ede Gellért, *Budapest bűnözői. Egy pesti detektív naplójából* (Budapest: M. Kir. Államrendőrség Detektívtestülete Nyugdíjpótló és Segélyező Egyesülete, 1925), 183.

28 "Vigyázat: hamiskártyás!" *Tolnai Világlapja*, January 8, 1930, 35.—The individuals engaging in fraudulent activities believed that carrying a bat's wing or heart would offer protection from being apprehended. "Babonás gonosztevők," *Tolnai Világlapja*, January 22, 1936, 41.

29 Gellért, *Budapest bűnözői*, 183; Vilmos Tarján, *Riporteri titkaimat nem viszem a sírba* (Budapest: Magánkiadás, 1943), 98; Turcsányi, *A modern bűnözés*, 155–156; Récsei, "A kártyás," 134–135; Vilmos Zolnay, "A hamiskártyások nyelve," *Magyar Nyelvőr* 62, no. 1–2 (1933): 17–22, 50–53, 82–85.

30 "Vigyázat: hamiskártyás!" *Tolnai Világlapja*, January 8, 1930, 36.

One of the sophisticated tool employed by those who cheated was the conscious use of facial expressions. The fundamental premise of the method entailed the attribution of pre-coded meanings to facial movements. To illustrate, a smile was indicative of a need for a king, while biting the lips was suggestive of face cards and puffing out the cheeks indicated number cards. These movements were discernible to an experienced partner, but to the untrained eye, they appeared to be casual facial expressions or accidental reactions. The efficacy of the method derived from the fact that the signals appeared to be manifestations of natural human behaviour. It has been demonstrated that expressions of facial emotion, such as smiling, grimacing or nodding, did not arouse suspicion, but instead conveyed crucial tactical information to individuals who were already familiar with the relevant protocols.[31]

The ingenuity of card cheats extended to the use of technical devices. A contemporary newspaper reported in early 1930 that an impoverished man of aristocratic descent had been exposed at a prestigious card club in Budapest after enjoying a long streak of luck as the banker, i.e. the dealer. The players initially attributed his continuous winnings to blind luck, but eventually an observant companion noticed the technical basis of the cheating. The banker's strategy entailed the placement of a gold cigarette case, characterized by its notably glossy surface, in close proximity to the box containing the cards. The subject was able to observe the cards he had previously distributed on the surface of the case, a skill that enabled him to make optimal decisions when it was his turn to draw. This straightforward yet efficacious technique guaranteed success.[32] This case exemplifies the manner in which deception can be concealed by means of a sophisticated facade and ingenious technical manipulation. The social status, outward elegance, and the etiquette of the game often served to conceal the underlying fraud; indeed, the surprise stemmed precisely from the fact that such a "gentleman" had resorted to such a device.

Individuals engaging in fraudulent activities involving playing cards frequently utilize decks that have been pre-manipulated, colloquially referred to as "marked decks". The distinguishing characteristics of these decks were achieved through the implementation of various techniques. In some instances, the cards were marked with minute punctures, which were perceptible only to individuals with highly sensitive fingertips. There were multiple methods of marking the cards. In instances where the staff were complicit, the marking was occasionally carried out in situ. However, on other occasions, the cardsharp would bring their own pre-prepared deck and smuggle it into the game at an opportune moment. The subtlety and concealment of the manipulation were found to be instrumental in the perpetration of the fraud. It is evident that

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31 Ibid.

32 "A hamiskártyás arany cigarettatárcája," *Pesti Hirlap*, January 10, 1930, 25.

the implementation of well-prepared tricks, coupled with the presentation of theatrical yet natural behaviour, frequently impeded the victims' ability to perceive the unfolding events in a timely manner.

Furthermore, casino employees, most notably croupiers, were also afforded the opportunity to interfere with the course of the game. One of the most prevalent forms of interference was the theft of chips. Croupiers, who were responsible for handling the chips and overseeing the game, developed particularly sophisticated methods to achieve this. In many ways, the act of stealing chips proved to be a more advantageous practice for them than cheating with cards, as it appeared to carry less risk. Furthermore, the winnings did not have to be shared with other players or the banker. For instance, during the process of stacking the chips, the subjects utilized the muscles in their palms to elevate the uppermost chips, which they subsequently placed in their pockets or concealed within a slit in the cloth covering the table. This cloth was then inserted into the shoe. The sophistication of the methods employed often meant that neither the players nor the casino management were able to identify the shortage immediately.[33]

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[33] Schreiber, *A játékkaszinók*, 83–95.

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