

Review Article : Minority Cultures in Hungary

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Studies in Roma (Gypsy) Ethnography, No. 2.
Zsuzsanna Bódi, Ed. 1994.

Din Tradițiile Populare ale Romanilor din Ungaria,
No. 9, Alexandru Hotopan Ed., 1994.

Beiträge zur Volkskunde der Ungarndeutschen, No.
11, K. Manherz Ed. 1994.

Národopis Slovákov V Madarsku, No. 11, A.
Divicanová and O. Krupa Eds., 1995.

Etnografija Hrvata U Madarskoj, D. Frankovic Ed.,
No. 1. (1994) and No. 2 (1995).

The Hungarian Ethnographic Society, a prestigious organisation with an over one hundred year history, has embarked upon a monumental undertaking: to document, preserve and analyse the changing traditional world of Hungary's nationalities. This task is being supervised by the Editor-in-Chief, Ernő Eperjessy, an ethnographer of considerable reputation for being the spokesman of interethnic life and culture in Hungary. It is a commendable job and he has done an excellent service not only in political correctness in being the editor of this series, but also as the editor who oversees the actual material being presented. The volumes are full of minute details of traditional life and long-forgotten practices; maps, pictures and musical texts often illustrate the point made. The books are handsomely designed and carefully edited.

The latest addition to this growing scholarly volume are the five books under review here which deserve to be known outside the confines of the Hungarian state. All the monographs under review are carefully edited, taking into consideration specifics of minority languages, e.g. diacritical marks. Scholarly in tone and depth, all chapters include foreign summaries and many are supplemented with maps, diagrams, musical selections and black-and-white photos. The main language in each is the language of the minority in question with occasional German and English contributions.

Perhaps one of the most exciting volumes is "Studies in Roma Ethnography," a volume following the successful already sold out first volume. Many of the chapters are written in Romany which is itself a great achievement, even though one may argue that such a practice only serves intellectual pursuits and does not necessarily benefit Gypsy populations at large.

Edited by Zsuzsanna Bódi, this volume is drawn from papers presented at the First International Conference on Gypsy Ethnography held in Budapest in 1993. The collection deserves special attention not only of Romanologists but those ethnographers, ethnomusicologists, folklorists, linguists and cultural anthropologists who are interested in larger issues of interethnic relations, identity and cultural borrowing.

The chapters by the Hungarian P. Szuhay and his Czech colleagues E. Davidová and I. Láznicková, for example, illustrate the problems of placing Roma artefacts in museums. Trying to visualize Roma traditional ways of life -- whether of the blacksmiths or tub-makers -- and the questions of museum exhibits which purport to represent them are important and deserve to be discussed in greater detail. Whether the attempts in Budapest and Brno, the latter the proposed site for an independent Roma Museum, will be successful will be eagerly waited by the international scholarly community. The question of funding is, of course, crucial. International help may pave the way for such museums.

The historical chapters of D. Kendrick and Z. Zsupos provide interesting insights into less known aspects of Romany past. Kendrick's study addresses the sad period of the Roma holocaust. He argues that the total number of Roma executed in nazi camps cannot be higher than 250,000. Yet, there are many unknown facts about Gypsy arrests, collaboration, and forced labor camps in the west as well as the east. Zsupos focuses on eighteenth-century sources to trace the settlements and migration of Gypsy tradesmen and craftsmen. By citing early documents from Transylvania we learn about an important name-changing institution which forced thousands of

Gypsies to change their names, and, thus, we may suppose, their identities as well.

In several chapters we learn useful details about the Romany language (M. Kakuk, J. Saip, A. Lewkowicz), its diversity, structure and loan-words; others discuss folkloric and traditional aspects of Romany culture (Zs. Bódi, G. Balázs, J. Faragó, V. Görög). These latter are perhaps the most well known to scholars of Romany culture: singing, dancing, and traditional crafts. Th. Acton and B. Mihok both discuss the difficulties Gypsies face when trying to adapt to the majority culture and the ways in which members of dominant culture treat Gypsies. Clearly, this volume represents a major step in Romany studies, an area of investigation which by its very nature must work across boundaries, a phrase which could equally be used for the Romany subjects as well.

"Din Tradițiile Populare ale Romanilor din Ungaria" (Ethnography of Romanians in Hungary), is the 9th in the specific series dealing with Romanians in Hungary, a group representing a few thousands citizen. This slim volume contains articles on traditional aspects of Romanian culture in the communities of Chitighaz (Hungarian Kétegyház) and other less well-known Romanian settlements. Mostly focusing on folkloric elements -- ballads, songs, buildings, costumes, and dancing -- the authors (M. Bucin, A. Hotopan, E. Martin, A. Hotopan) are all Romanians themselves, all involved with trying to preserve, if not recreate Romanian village culture in Hungary. Issues of identity and assimilation are at the heart of such undertakings. Especially interesting are their attempts which aim at understanding cultural heritage common to Hungarians and Romanians alike, as opposed to simply seeking specific "ethnic" traits of one group or another without an understanding of cultural sharing, co-existence and dependence.

Voluminous are the monographs printed in the series dealing with Germans living in Hungary ("Beiträge zur Volkskunde der Ungarndeutschen"). Volume 11 brings together studies on German peasant house-building (E. Hajdú), naming practices (J. Pintér), bilingualism as expressed in ethnocentric practices (M. Erb), religious life (K. Wild), German

pilgrimages (S. Pfiszterer), and folk healing (E. Brettner-Szántó). It should be mentioned here that in Hungary the German-speaking "Sváb" (as they are called by Hungarians) culture is perhaps one of the better known and documented minority cultures. One reason for this is the fact that the Germans themselves have been acutely aware of their minority status, privileges and peripheralization (especially by the Stalinist regimes right after World War II). This forced many German intellectuals to turn inward and search out, preserve and document those aspects of their culture which remained intact. Needless to say the German community in Hungary is flourishing even though forced repatriation, emigration and assimilation has taken its toll: although their number has been steadily decreasing, during the 1995 local elections Germans were able to set up thirty-eight local government on an ethnic basis nationally.

Less successful as a political force, but perhaps even more successful than the German minority is the cultural revival with which Slovaks living in Hungary have approached their own culture. The eleventh volume "Ethnography of the Slovaks in Hungary" (Národopis Slovákov V Maďarsku) is a storehouse of information on Slovak ethnography and folklore. This particular collection traces problems concerning Slovak identity (A. Divicanová), urbanization and assimilation (J. Örsi). The other chapters are more traditional: logging as an occupation among Slovaks (T. Petercsák), settlement patterns (I. Gráfik, J. Ando), life histories (O. Krupa, S. Lami), and folk medical practices (M. Ziláková). The volume closes with an homage to Stefanovi Lami, a Hungarian-Slovak ethnographer, who celebrated his seventieth birthday in 1995. Lami is well-known not only in Hungary but also in neighbouring Slovakia for his excellent research monographs and published studies on Slovak culture in Hungary. With his adamant meticulousness he paved the way for the scholarly tradition of studying minority Slovak culture. His achievement is a testimony to the viability of Slovak culture as well as to the practice of living both as a minority member and a scholar.

Volumes 1 and 2 in the "Ethnography of Croats in Hungary" are gems of ethnographic and folkloristic information for students of Croatian culture. In Volume 1 most chapters deal with traditional life

from the vantage point of (mostly) native scholars. From S. Horváth's study we learn of religious-magical customs of the Croatians who speak the "kaj" dialect: in specific the "nedelica" or "New Moon Sunday" magical worship cycle. R. Begovac, E. Szojka and A. Vizin deal with two lesser known aspects of traditions: Begovac highlights changing aspects of Croatian weddings from her own field experiences; Szojka and Vizin discuss the Whitsuntide Queen custom among the "Bunevac" of the city of Baja, an article with many archival photos. Other chapters deal with gold-digging along the Mura and Drava rivers (E. László), biblical themes in Croatian peasant oral literature (D. Frankovic), children's socialization (Z. Fehér), and calling as a signalling device among villagers.

Volume 2, also edited by D. Frankovic, deals solely with folk ballads. It attempts to give a comprehensive picture of folk ballads of Croatians living in Hungary, a task not easily achieved. Long in the making, this collection treats folk ballads not according to standard divisions used in South Slavic folkloristics - i.e. heroic songs, laments, women's songs etc. -- but categorizes them according to themes. This practice makes it rather easy to identify ballads according to fantastic songs, maidenhood, blessing songs, hopeful songs, soldiers' lifeways songs, and outlaw songs. Perhaps one hiatus is the missing musical texts, which one often finds in other collections. However, such printing would have made the volume too costly for this series. Also the Croatian texts make the volume useful only for Croatian specialists who speak the diverse Croatian dialects. Perhaps another volume could present both the music and translations for wider scholarly availability.

All in all, we can say with certainty that these volumes represent a growing library of minority literature in Hungary. In fact, the real success of these books beyond their stated aims of preserving and documenting disappearing folk traditions, is that they open a new avenue of dissemination of heretofore little known aspects of traditions for majority and minority cultures alike. Furthermore, I wish to stress that the minority cultures in question are able to utilize these source materials in their own relationship with their respective motherlands whether Slovakia, Romania, Croatia and Germany.

One only hopes that the other minority cultures will receive the same attention from ethnographers and folklore specialists in Hungary as well as the other East Central European states.

The volumes or the whole series may be purchased from the Hungarian Ethnographic Society:

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