

Obituary

Linda Dégh (1918-2014)

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A Legend in her Own Time

Linda Dégh, Professor Emerita, Folklore & Ethnomusicology Department, Indiana University, passed away August 19, 2014 at the age of 96. I was one of her Folklore Institute students in the 1970s and one of the colleagues she mentored for forty years after that who found her a rigorous, complicated, difficult but, ultimately, inspiring presence. It is not for nothing that Libby Tucker and I privately referred to her as our LCP, our little chicken paprikash, one of Hungary's more spicy dishes, when we worked with her on a special issue on emerging legends in contemporary society of the *Journal of American Folklore* published in 2005.

Linda Dégh always surprised me. In one of the first classes I had with her, possibly an introductory graduate course in the fall of 1971 or the winter of 1972, she expected her students to stand up when she walked into the room. When one student received 100% on that first midterm exam, she asked other students to stand up and applaud his accomplishments. Having received a 46% on that same exam, I recognized her high expectations for all of us, even though she later modulated these European academic traditions brought from Hungary only a few years earlier when Richard Dorson had invited her to teach at the Institute in 1965 and she had stayed. I can also attest to the fact that she assigned readings in English, German, French, Russian, Finnish and Hungarian and more in her folk narrative classes in those early years, expecting her American students to be as multilingual as her European ones. (I heard rumors years later that she was reduced to passing around foreign language books to her students, perhaps hoping that holding the texts would be enough to magically infuse the holders with the information contained within them.)

Yet Libby Tucker noted in her obituary article, forthcoming in the *Journal of American Folklore*, that Linda Dégh loved parties, and was often the last person to leave festive gatherings. I also remember the many parties she and her husband and scholarly partner, Andrew Vázsonyi, hosted over the years in their Bloomington, Indiana home (since willed to Indiana University to help support an endowed chair in Folklore Studies there). At one of their parties in particular, maybe in the mid-1970s, she was describing to partygoers how hard it was to do fieldwork if one was doing it right. She stated that a field researcher should be exhausted at the end of the day because actively listening and recording legend tellers in context was hard work. To illustrate her point, she lay down on the coffee table in their living room, kicked off her sandals and spread her arms wide in relaxation, much to the amazement of her students.

I dwell on the juxtaposition between academic rigor (standing up) and ethnographic openness (lying down) because I think Linda Dégh's theoretical contributions to folk narrative study contain just these surprising but generative contrasts. Her former students and colleagues may have any number of Dégh or Dégh and Vázsonyi titles that they have found productive in their own research. For me, it is hands down their 1973 "Dialectics of the Legend," expanded in her 2001 *Legend and Belief: Dialectics of a Folklore Genre*. She writes in the latter book that the legend is "an ideology-sensitive genre—the genre that allows, indeed coerces people to think, to philosophize, to contemplate, to argue, and debate" (313). Not only has everything I've written in subsequent years been undergirded by this concept that legends are fleshed-out debates on propositions about reality, but my own sense of reality, probably far too relative from her point of view, has been inflected by this approach.

Dialectics were particularly marked in an encounter I had with her somewhat later in my graduate career, maybe in 1975 or 1976. She came up to me one day when we were both by chance in the department offices on Fess St. in Bloomington, and asked me how I was. I was petrified because I had an incomplete in one of her classes, something that most of her students tried to avoid. Graduate students had all discussed the dreaded moments in her office when she pulled out detailed written critiques of our research papers, seemingly as long as the original papers themselves. In fact, legend variants spread that all of us had cried in her office at one point or another—even Carl Lindahl! With these scenarios in mind, I started telling her what I was doing to complete the unfinished paper. She held up her hand to stop me and said, "No, I meant are you in love or anything? Everyone

should be married at least once.” Needless to say, she surprised me yet again.

Linda Dégh’s relationships with students, especially with her female students, were complicated and contradictory, a situation that Sabina Magliocco also noted in her remarks at the American Folklore Society meetings in Santa Fe in November, 2014. On the one hand, our general explanatory legend—and was this wish fulfillment?—was that she was harder on those students who she thought had the most potential so were worth her “tough love” approach. There was also the sense, in those years of first-wave feminism, that she had broken through the glass ceiling herself and expected other women scholars to do the same, and that love relationships, marriage, children were hindrances to that goal.

On the other hand, she herself was happily married to Dr. Vázsonyi, and both were amazingly productive scholars. Furthermore, her statement, “Everyone should be married at least once,” confirmed for me the legends swirling around the Institute that she had been married a number of times before. The late Bill McNeil summed it up when he said, “It wasn’t a Budapest season without a Dégh wedding!” Whether he said this with tongue-in-cheek or not, I cannot say. Nor can I say precisely what her question to me meant, other than showing me balancing life and scholarship is a constant juggling act.

I am clearer about the meanings in this last exchange in which she surprised me yet again. Cristina Bacchilega and Don Haase, my colleague at Wayne State University in Detroit, were co-chairing a panel on the growing field of international literary fairytale studies at the 2003 American Folklore Society meetings in Albuquerque, and had kindly asked me to be a discussant. I remember that part of my presentation championed legend studies and ethnographic approaches to narrative as a true Dégh disciple. Linda Dégh, a member of the audience, stood up—a frightening moment for many a conference presenter—and directed her remarks to fairytale scholar, Jack Zipes, also on the panel. She said, “Jack, I am so glad you’re doing this work on fairytales; I’m thinking of returning to the genre myself.” What?

Upon reflection, I recognize that we legend lovers may have reified generic differences—Max Lüthi’s famous metaphorical distinction between the fairytale as castle and the legend as cave operating—while Linda Dégh herself has seen folk narratives’ interconnections, intertextuality and fluidity as well as their differences. Witness her recognition of what Lauri Honko has called “the coordination of narrative genres,” including the legend’s connection to fairytale, myth and joke in *Legend and Belief* (80). At any rate, as Libby Tucker has showed us, in the last weeks of Linda Dégh’s life her thoughts turned

toward her European Märchen scholarship AND her American legendry work. Perhaps her lasting legacy to us will be her love of and commitment to the global range of folk narrative in all its manifestations.

References

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