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**A PEASANT WOMAN PROPHET'S
INFLUENCE ON SUB-CARPATHIAN
HUNGARIANS**

I.

Introduction

First of all I would like to say many thanks to the editors for giving me an opportunity to publish a short review of my recent work concerning a peculiar form of the religious folk tradition in the Sub-Carpathian area.

Here I cannot say too much about the history and methodology of the investigation of folk religion in detail, but briefly I can say: it is a rather new trend of Hungarian folkloristics. This is because at the moment we know little about the Protestant folk traditions, but a little bit more about the Catholic ones. However, religious belief is one of the most important parts of the vernacular folk tradition. It shows the worldview, the ethic norms and rules, and the mentality of the (so called) ordinary people. On the other hand, the Church has a guardian role among the Hungarian national minorities everywhere and folk religion is the last resort of their vernacular culture as well. My case-study aims to show — as a paradigm — how and why a devoted Calvinist peasant woman became a prophet for the Hungarians living beyond the recent borders of Hungary, in Sub-Carpathia.

I think you should know, in order to understand my study and the religious phenomenon analyzed, the brief history and a rough sketch of Sub-Carpathia. The little Hungarian village (named Tiszaágtelek), where the woman prophet was born

and lived, proved a bad place for its inhabitants. It was an integral part of Hungary before World War I but following the Trianon Peace-treaty it belonged to Czechoslovakia from May 1919 until March 1939. (As a result of the Trianon Peace-treaty Hungary lost 2/3rds of its former territory.)

Sub-Carpathia — and other Hungarian settlements — were annexed to Hungary again between 1939 and October 1944, but according to the Soviet-Czechoslovak agreement after World War II, Sub-Carpathia became a part of Ukraine for a while, then in 1945 July it was annexed to the Soviet Union. Since 1 December 1991 Ukraine has been an independent state again, with about 155.000 Hungarians living in the Sub-Carpathian area. Hungarians comprise the biggest minority of that territory.

(There is a well-known and characteristic anecdote about an 80 year-old man, that he had lived in five different states in his life, although he had never gone away from his village.)

II.

1. Research history

A few years ago I found — by chance — a peculiar manuscript written in 1938 by a young peasant woman named Mrs. Mariska Borku. The thin notebook contains religious text — namely, 167 words each marked with a number — written in verse or cadenced prose under the title "Made Testament" (Lettszövetség) and a short prose-text too, under the title "The Word is meant for all". Also a letter was enclosed with the notebook, which was written by the peasant woman prophet to the Calvinist minister of the nearest Hungarian village, Nagydobrony. Since the texts are very beautiful and the phenomenon seems to be unique from a folkloristic point of view, I was curious to know more about the author. Over the last three years I have had an opportunity to carry out field-work in Sub-Carpathia three times. I met and interviewed her

disciples, relatives and her enemies too, (mostly they are pastors); and managed to learn the following¹.

2. Personality of the woman prophet

Mrs. Mariska Borku was a meek, kind, sensible and wise peasant woman. Her parents moved from Mándok to Tiszaágtelek in the first decade of this century. She was born there in 1910. Her father died in World War I, and her mother raised three children alone, inculcating a devout Calvinist spirit. Mariska Borku finished 6 classes of the elementary school and married very young, at the age of 16. Her husband was a well-to-do farmer, but owing to calamities the family was reduced to poverty. They had two daughters who still live today in the same village. When I asked the elder one about her mother's religious manuscript and activity she told me, that her mother's first vision was in October 1936, after suffering various tribulations. In her vision she was chosen for her mission by the Lord; this was to write down and preach the heavenly message, and to become a prophet. She refused this mission twice in her miraculous dream, but on the third occasion she accepted it. The daughter, Mrs. Irén Badó, remembered mother's experience very movingly: "In my dream a shepherd comes up to me — a sheepskin coat on his shoulders, a shepherd crook in his hand — and he says, 'Come with me and tend your flock.' And I tell him, 'I cannot go I have two children', and he says, 'I will go and take care of your sheep' and leaves. I fall asleep again, and he returns and calls me again, 'Come and tend your flock'. Then I cry bitterly and say, 'Please believe me, I would go willingly but I have two children' and he answers, 'When we sit down to eat, we shall feed your children, too; wherever we go we are going to take your children with us'. And then I say 'I'll go'. But she had this vision after a very serious blow and she thought that after the great earthly troubles Lord Jesus was going to summon her away and she was going to leave us. But the will of God was different, as she came to understand it later." Usually the words were dictated to her during the night

by the Holy Spirit or Jesus Christ. She learned and wrote, and preached from the Easter of 1937 until a year before her death. Over a period of 40 years she was confirmed as a chosen prophet several times by the Holy Spirit in visions and dreams, and in revelations.

Her role was that of an intermediary between Heaven and the Hungarians living in Sub-Carpathia. At first neither her husband, nor her closest relations wanted to approve of her mission; they also took her to the doctor to check that she had not become "deranged". However, after two warning apparitions to her husband he was reconciled to his wife's calling.²

3. Her religious activity and influence

The Czech-regime did not forbid Mariska Borku to preach regularly. Every Friday a great number of people from three countries — Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the villages of Sub-Carpathia came by waggon or on foot to listen to her. They were seeking spiritual comfort. However the Calvinist ecclesiastical authorities pestered her, in spite of the fact that she and her believers ("lambs" or "brothers and sisters in the Lord" as she called them) were the most loyal, true members of the Calvinist Church and of their local congregation as well. Mariska Borku wrote down and sent her first Words to the local pastor, later the Calvinist minister of the nearest Hungarian village (Nagydobrony) to prove that she had been called, and she preached the same as the Gospels of the Bible and nothing else. However the Calvinist pastors refused even the writings sent to them, and did not accept her mission. (That was the first manuscript and letter which I found in the archive of the Hungarian Ethnographical Museum.)

In the "Hungarian period" (from 1939 to 1944) her public services were forbidden by the authorities, and when her village was annexed to the Soviet-Ukraine (after 1945) all religious activities were forbidden. In spite of prohibition her "flock" did not dissolve, and her disciples kept on visiting her in secret asking for spiritual comfort and newer revelations

and Words from the Holy Spirit.

During my fieldwork I was surprised to see that the so called "notebooks of Words" were preserved in a great number of families and they are still read along with the Bible at private services that is, in the non-official congregations, or alone at home. These Words according to those that believe them are said to be the third part of the Holy Bible. This was called the "Made Testament" by the woman prophet. Let me quote one verse explaining this folk theology:

"God says: in the Old Testament I am the Father,
In the New Testament I appear as the Son,
And in the Made Testament as the Saviour
I teach and speak by the Holy Spirit."

These notebooks were copied afresh from generation to generation, every time completing them with newer Words. In October 1992 I received one for copying from an old woman from the village of Dercen. I think it is the most complete, authentic manuscript and it contains 780 words. Mrs. Mariska Borku's disciples not only read them, but know and quote many of them by heart.

When I asked the meaning of several obscure Words and terms unknown to me, my interpreters (mostly women) told me, that Mariska Borku had never interpreted or explained the given Words or her visions. She said, that a time would come, when the meaning of all these would be revealed. In Dercen I met twice a sixty-year old crippled spinster, Ida Balla, who is said to be appointed to explain the meanings of the Made Testament and the visions of the women prophet. She is a well-known religious leader of the local congregation members who usually meet on Sunday afternoons in a private house for praying, singing psalms and hymns, reading and explaining the Bible or the Made Testament. As far as I see, Ida Balla has taken over the role of Mariska Borku as intermediary and interpreter.

I have recorded a great number of folklore accounts — similar legends and beliefs — about the woman prophet's

personality and activity. My informants talked about her intuition, about their conversions, and about her powers of healing through prayer. (As a matter of fact, they considered it a miracle too that I had started to research Mariska Borku's activity, and here I can tell you more about it.)

In the course of my personal interviews, it also turned out that the woman prophet had a talent for poetry. It is also believed that she had been given her songs from the Heaven, and several of them are still known and sung in the congregations of Nagydobrony and Dercen. What is more, one of them is usually sung in the church of Nagydobrony, when the Holy Communion is administered. ("The Lord of Heaven arranged a supper....")

My next difficult task will be to find the genuine sources of her poems and visions, especially when we consider that almost all of my helpers (they are ordinary peasant women, mostly widows) can compose marvellous prayers or poems. Consequently, Mariska Borku's poetic gift is not as unusual in that folkloric culture as I thought before.

III. Results and conclusions

1.

I compared her personality, activity, and social function to a Catholic peasant woman prophet — almost overlapping in time — analysed by an psychologist and a folklorist³. It revealed several common features of women of visions.

These are as follows:

- They are dominant personalities within their own family or closest community.
- They have a conviction that they have been chosen by the Lord to represent the interest of their community.
- They undertake a mediating role between Heaven and Earth, which is completely different from the normal way of peasant women. However, they do not step out of their social limits. That means they work as hard as the other women in the house and on the fields as well.

- Their visions, dreams, and words reflect truly and directly the social — cultural circumstances and show indirectly the current political situation.
- Their preachings express that they have a mission to change the given situation. (Mariska Borku put it down this way: believe me, the Holy Spirit is speaking through me. I call upon you to repent and to return to the Words of the Bible. Please love each other because this is the only way of creating Heaven on Earth. Who does not do so, will perish.)
- The peasant prophet is not only homo religious but also homo tradens. The peasant mysticism can be seized at the moment of its occurrence through their example.

Of course there are several individual, peculiar features of Mariska Borku's preaching and personality too, that I cannot explain in detail here. Briefly, I can say that one of the most conspicuous features of her Words is that they are full of visions with motives, figures and symbols that can be traced back to Catholic iconography and imagination in spite of the fact she was a devoted Calvinist.

2.

Finally I would like to draw some general conclusions from the material analysed so far. (It must be emphasized though, that this research has not been completed yet.)

- a. Mrs. Mariska Borku was accepted as a prophet by her closest environment without reservation, because she was authentic. She was an ordinary peasant woman, who suffered a lot; someone who was familiar, easy to understand. For this reason she was more popular than the Calvinist pastors considered alien because of they represented the elite culture and the officially accepted Calvinism.
- b. The written and oral traditions concerning the woman prophet made it clear that the folk protestantism is different from the theology of the Calvinist Church in many respects:
 - it is more oecumenical in its approach and manners
 - it interprets the Holy Bible in a special way
 - it has more elements of mysticism
 - it is more intimate and emotional
- c. The Made Testament and the preachings of Mrs. Mariska Borku helped the Hungarians living in Sub-Carpathia to stick together and keep up, in spite of the political and cultural suppression of the changing regimes in the past 80 years. Her activity marks those social tasks and expectations which the Calvinist Church and

ministers did not want or did not dare to fulfil.

- d. At the beginning of the research my preconception was that this religious phenomenon was part of a survival strategy of national minority living amongst a larger nationality, who form the ruling government. However I began to see that it in fact was a survival strategy for the adverse circumstances of the traditional peasant life and culture in general, and only the fact of being a national minority is incidental.

References

1. I have collected all the information concerning the woman prophet together with Ambrus Molnár, a Calvinist minister. He is the leader of an association formed by pastors and folklorists for 12 years ago with the aim of studying the different phenomena of the Calvinist folk tradition. The results of our work are published in the five volumes of a series named Vallási néprajz (Religious Folk Tradition 1985–).
2. My helpers told me unanimously and in a spirited manner how the Blessed Virgin Mary (as a beautiful young woman with golden hair, holding a baby in her arms) appeared before her husband, the Calvinist Ferenc Badó asking him to say the Lord's Prayer with her. On another occasion he was threatened by a Voice in the field that he would not get into Heaven, only his wife would.
3. Ferenc Jádi – Gábor Tüskés: A népi vallásosság pszichopatológiája. Egy hasznosi parasztasszony látomásai. (The psychopathology of the religious folk tradition. The visions of a peasant woman from Hasznos.) In: "Mert ezt Isten hagyta..." ed. Gábor Tüskés, Budapest 1986, 516–556.