

The Folk Traditions of Rural Hungary A Photographic Record

Veronika Gervers-Molnár

Elindultam világ útján: magyar népszokások [I Set Out on the Highway of the World: Hungarian Folk Customs]. By Péter Korniss. With a preface by Sándor Csoóri, and ethnographical notes by Ferenc Novák. Budapest: Corvina (1975). ISBN 963 13 1051 5.

Hungarian folk culture, customs, and art have been studied extensively by scholars since the mid-nineteenth century, and have been a major subject taught in the departments of ethnography at several Hungarian universities. The richness of this culture has inspired writers, musicians, dancers and other artists as well as enthusiastic amateurs, who all found in it a Source, a 'Fountain of Life'. On the other hand, the material culture has been carefully collected by museums, and the folklore preserved in writing and on tapes. Against this background, Korniss' volume stands out as a new and possibly last effective attempt to save the essence of Hungarian rural life and the reality of folk customs.

Korniss, a photographer of exceptional talent with a particular interest in human subjects, introduces the "reader" of his book to a selection of traditional customs, still alive in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in eleven photographic essays of over a hundred pictures. Some of these essays are connected to the great religious festivities of the year, Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, which recall the theatrical plays of the Middle Ages as well as certain elements of a much earlier, pre-Christian past. Other customs, which to a great extent survived in children's games, are purely pagan in character. In a few essays, the emphasis is on such major events in a human's life as marriage and death; while elsewhere the secular festivities of rural life are depicted, as the harvest of the grapes, the 'dance house', or the ceremonial dressing of a young girl for Sunday.

Illustration on opposite page: Shepherd from Szék [Sic]. Kolozs County [Jud. Cluj], Transylvania, Romania. 1967.



After a plain title page, each essay is presented to us without words. Everything is concentrated into series of black and white photographs, which have and need no captions. Korniss' pictures have an incredible capacity to depict the events as well as the sentiments of all participants. Though they are still photographs, they contain all the movements of the happenings. The viewer senses the slowness or quickness of the dance at the 'dance house', and can hear the rhythm of the music. One feels the splash from the full buckets of water with which young men drench village girls on the morning of Easter Monday, a custom which preserves the rites of an ancient fertility cult to celebrate the coming of spring.

We are also introduced to innumerable faces of old and young among the many different types of Hungarians. Each of these faces is caught in a special enduring moment, and each expresses the lively, human background in which these beautiful, old customs have survived for centuries, if not for millenia. In a 'dance house' of Szék village in Transylvania, we feel the excitement and anticipation of girls and young men, their happiness at being together and of dancing, the origin or constancy of a romance, the sadness or uncertainty of some, and the half-formed desires and wishes towards the unknown. We see the paid musicians playing, apparently unconcerned, in a corner of the room; a lonely man dancing a solo; and those shining eyes which discover each other at the petroleum light in the semi-dark house.

In another essay, we sense the deep feeling of sadness and mourning over the dead, and the bareness of the cemeteries. In the small Transdanubian village of Csököly, we see a group of old women dressed in white linen garments. The tradition of white mourning, which has also survived in parts of nearby northern Yugoslavia, is well known from ethnographical studies. But Korniss' pictures are the first to show the Csököly women in their somewhat unusual white mourning outfit, not as a curiosity, but as an expression of the tragic dignity of mourning and remembrance. Looking at the old women praying together at home, or going through the village towards the cemetery, one cannot help but recall Dürer's vivid description of an Antwerp procession in 1520, in which widows walked together in white garments:

A very large company of widows also took part in this procession. They support themselves with their own hands and observe a special rule.

Illustration on opposite page: Women mourning in white. Csököly, Somogy County, Hungary. 1970.



They were all dressed from head to foot in white linen garments, made expressly for the occasion, very sorrowful to see. Among them I saw some very stately persons.

Indeed, the origins of the white mourning outfit of Csököly go back to a medieval western European tradition.

In contrast to the Csököly custom, the funeral of a young man from Rimóc is shown in the almost total blackness of the night. Alongside his open coffin, mounted at home, black mourners pray and sing their monotonous chants while slowly counting the beads of their rosaries. In their black head-kerchiefs pulled over their faces, and with their hands — rough from work — clasped in prayer, these women are the motionless guardians of the dead, since the body may never be left alone before interment. All this is unforgettable for, quite apart from the funeral, the figures in the photographs become symbols of death and sadness.

The customs and events which Korniss portrays in his book have been photographed by innumerable photographers, ethnographers, and amateurs since the early days of the camera. Many such pictures have been published in both popular and scholarly works, or were exhibited, and made into postcards. Korniss, however, is the first and only photographer to succeed in catching the very essence of Hungarian country life, and to depict it with the reality of which only the camera is capable. Yet there is more to these pictures than photographic equipment and skill. Korniss works at the highest level of artistic sensitivity and with great technical know-how. Instead of forming a new and particular photographic style, he allows the liveliness of his subjects to overcome “composition”, “construction”, cut-outs and enlarged details, and the use of different lenses for various effects. Indeed, while he has obviously used all the possibilities of his camera and of his profession, we are not aware of the “photographic” side of his pictures, but rather identify ourselves with the people in them.

Individual depictions of special moments have been done by many photographers throughout the world past and present. Their “results” can often be compared to the sensitivity and skill of Korniss. But instead of catching the beauty or interest of an occasional moment, Korniss devoted himself to the depiction of a series of individual themes within a single setting. The result is a continuous photographic story of Life through the traditional customs of villages in Hungary and Transylvania.

Illustration on opposite page: The rites of Easter Monday. Acsa, Pest County, Hungary. 1970.



Because of the economic and social changes of this century, and particularly the drastic changes of the last few decades, the life style and ancient customs of the past are on their way out in Hungary, as almost everywhere else in the world. The abandonment of villages by the young in search of the financial and material advantages of the cities and industrialization, and the speed of transportation and communication are cutting the life line of old traditions. These traditions are already almost extinct in most places where "culture" has been exchanged for "civilization". In fact it is surprising that Korniss was able to find so many lively "fossils" of the past. But all these glimpses of rural life are on the wane. Some activities, still common only a decade ago, have now disappeared. Many of the photographs in the volume could not be taken again.

The photographic record, which Korniss provides, is of invaluable significance in exhibiting the human aspects and realities of traditions, which heretofore were only preserved through the frequently unimaginative, generalizing nature of ethnographical studies. Korniss' approach with the camera recalls the work of Béla Bartók on Hungarian folk music. Without Bartók and his followers, the many-sided musical culture of a nation on the borders of East and West would not have survived. Furthermore, Bartók could never have composed his own works without first having carefully studied folk music and being imbued with its great artistic imprint. Without Korniss' photographs, we would certainly be much the poorer also. With the passing of those generations which experienced these traditional customs, we would only be aware of them through scholarship. That, however, could hardly give the rich spontaneity, the happiness and sadness behind the traditions, which his photographs preserve in an artistic manner.

One can but hope that Korniss will publish many more volumes in the future from the thousands of pictures he has taken. It is a mission which should be and which is appreciated by the general public as well as by artists, ethnographers and historians. It is hardly surprising that in little over a year, more than 20,000 copies of this unique book were sold in Hungary alone. Its message, nevertheless, speaks not only to Hungarians but to the world, and his pictures can be understood in their human content without any special knowledge of the customs which they depict.

Illustration on opposite page: Old People's Day. Mezőszilas, Somogy County, Hungary. 1960's.



It should be added that for the historian and ethnographer, a valuable summary of each custom is given in an appendix, in which the names of the villages and the year when the photographs were taken is carefully noted. A poetic preface by Csoóri introduces the reader to the uniqueness of these photographs, and to the real significance of Korniss' approach and art.

Some of the photographs reproduced here are from the book, while others are in the possession of the reviewer.

Illustration on opposite page: Girl from Kazár. Nógrád County, Hungary. 1969.

Illustration on the back of this page: Early morning at Szék [Sic]. Kolozs County [Jud. Cluj], Transylvania, Romania. 1960's.



Book Reviews

A középkori Magyarország rotundái [The Rotundas of Medieval Hungary]. By Vera Gervers-Molnár. Művészettörténeti Füzetek [Publications of History of Art], No. 4. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1972. Pp. 95.

Among the publications of art history, sponsored by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Professor Gervers-Molnár's study about the round churches of medieval Hungary is the fruit of ten years of research on a heretofore little explored territory of early Romanesque architecture. While the work deals primarily with the round churches of Hungary, it also offers, in twenty-five pages, a brief but comprehensive account on the origins and development of this particular architectural type and its most important examples in East Central Europe, notably in Dalmatia, Moravia, Bohemia and Poland.

The *rotundas* or centrally planned round churches represent a specific group of the early Romanesque churches in Central and Eastern Europe. The origin of this group, according to the author, can be traced back to one single prototype: Charlemagne's palace chapel at Aachen, consecrated by Pope Leo III in 805, which formed part of the imperial palace-complex. While the palace bore reminiscences of the first Christian emperor, Constantine the Great, and his Sacred Palace in Constantinople, the imperial chapel and later burial place of Charlemagne soon became a symbol of the new empire of the West, and presumably it was modelled after the *Chrysotriclinos* or Golden throne-chamber of the imperial palace of Byzantium. Both, the palace and chapel, served ideologically to stress the equality of Charlemagne's imperial authority with that of the emperors of Byzantium. From a technical point of view, however, the direct prototype of the Aachen chapel was the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna, erected in the sixth century during the reign of Justinian I, and itself probably following Byzantine models. Thus, in the view of Professor Gervers-Molnár, the Carolingian palace and chapel of Aachen are spiritually and from a technical point of view linked to the Byzantine tradition. While her theory emphasizes the influence of the Aachen chapel (and indirectly Byzantium) in the devel-