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tation of the birth of Christ in which the dolls were replaced by living characters. At the beginning, the protagonists of the plays brought to life the texts of the gospel of the day, that is, they made the selected biblical scene comprehensible and expressive for the laity as well. The performers were, at first, priests and other clergymen. Later, students and laymen took their role and the Latin language was gradually succeeded by versions in the mother tongue.

The custom, which had evolved in Italy, was established also among the Germanic peoples of Europe in the 9th–10th centuries. Nevertheless, the pope banished it from the churches at the beginning of the 13th century because of the excessive presence of profane elements in the plays, which were often considered sacrilegious in the eyes of the ecclesiastic leaders. Therefore, the ancient version of nativity plays, which scarcely resembled today's plays, ended up on the street, in front of the audience of the market-places. The contents and variants traceable in the current versions developed by the 18th century. The stage of the plays remained the street, the audience the crowd of the markets, but the crèche was taken back to its due place into the church at the end of the performances where it was waiting for the coming of the next Christmas.

This custom has become a tradition living even today in parts of Transcarpathia as well. It is practiced by the Roman Catholic Hungarians of Gyertyánliget (Kobiletska Polyana, Máramaros/Marmarosh county) and, among others, the Calvinists of Csetfalva (Chetove, Bereg county). In this latter case with the special feature that the place of the crèche of three towers, characteristic of the area of the Upper Tisza, was established on the second level of their famous wooden bell-tower, close to the bells.

The dramatic folk customs connected to the celebrations of Christmas can be grouped according to the traditions closely related to religion and the denominational distribution of the ethnic Hungarian population in the Transcarpathia of the present days. The Calvinists who make up some 70% of the Hungarians preserved the simple and puppet-dancing versions of the pastorale type nativity plays. In settlements of mixed population, these are referred to as the 'Hungarian nativity play' and thus, differentiated from the similar nativity play or the star-spinning play of the Three Magi of the Uniates. The Catholic communities have fashioned more or less this same custom to their own liking, extended with the scene when Joseph and Mary are looking for a place to stay.

The nativity play rendered more colourful by puppeteers is the only folk custom, which provides a framework for Hungarian folk puppet-shows.¹ It is recorded by ethnography as a tradition, which has been getting closer and closer to extinction for a long time. Altogether a few dozen varieties of it have been recorded in four larger and smaller regions: in Zala and Somogy Counties, in the surroundings of Esztergom, and the Upper Tisza region, and Marosvásárhely (Targu Mures). Examining the data of the Upper Tisza region, it is conspicuous that the experts indicate the data only of Szatmár and Ugocsa Counties.² They present the archives compiled by the researchers of the

¹ Viski, Károly, *Drámai hagyományok [Dramatic traditions]*. In: *A magyarság néprajza* III. p. 339.

² Szacsavay, Éva, *Bábtáncoltató betlehemezés Magyarországon és Közép-Kelet-Európában [Puppet-dancing nativity plays in Hungary and Central and East Europe]*. Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1987. p. 21.

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Ethnographic Society in 1943–44, when the area became accessible to them again after the re-annexation.³ As they did not visit Bereg then, this country remained an undiscovered area in this respect.

Thanks to the attention of local collectors, primarily enthusiastic teachers, new facts and figures have turned up in the past 8–10 years. It can be assumed with good reason that the memories of the puppeteers' nativity play can be collected and revived also in the villages of Ugocsa and Bereg if the recollections of the communities are examined with due expertise, care, and last but not least, patience. It is exactly this that makes us believe that even Árpád Berczik, the noted researcher of nativity plays, regretted it too early and unfoundedly when he talked about the disappearing traces of the puppeteers' nativity plays.⁴

This attitude of commiserating resignation and acquiescence of the predecessors drove Éva Szacsvey, a representative of contemporary ethnography, to carry out the most complete survey possible comprising the entire Hungarian language area and the puppet-dancing nativity play tradition. Today's researcher, who glanced to Transcarpathia too, could refer only to the data of archives back in 1987 in lack of firsthand, personal experiences. However, she did not mention the text of Zoltán Sólyom written in 1914.⁵ Although it is true that the one-time student of Sárospatak mentioned neither the circumstances of the recording nor the type of the play, it is also true that the screenplay dictated by the only informant, Sándor Papp, did allude to the turning of the puppets. This reference is enough for laying down a further, pointedly important fact: it extends the 'habitat' of the examined play type in the region from Szatmár and Ugocsa Counties also to Bereg.

However, beyond adding a sign which can be marked on the map, it deserves attention that the text of Mezővár is much more than a fact of folklore history: it is a living tradition even if its awakening from the several-decade-long slumber came about in 1988. Indeed, it did come about in a natural and authentic environment, performed by the most authentic characters, the shepherds themselves. Not zealous teachers and primary school pupils performed it but those brought it to life, who inherited the role from their ancestors together with their costume, staff, purse, crèche, and the puppets. The crèche itself, due to its deteriorating materials, has to be restored and decorated often but this would be required by the dignity of the celebration anyway.

The audience of the puppeteer's nativity play has to pay attention to two performances at the same time: to the acting of the angel and the shepherds, and the role of the puppets on the minute stage formed in the interior of the crèche. The course of the two performances is not the same in the preparatory parts (the meeting of the shepherds, the announcement of the birth, the dance and the dream of the shepherds). The puppeteer makes the puppets play what the living actors talk about or happens with

³ Fancsika (Ugocsa) Collected by: Till, Mária, 1943 (EA-4567), Tiszaszászfalu (Ugocsa) Collected by: Katona, Ferenc, 1943 (EA-4590), Csepe (Ugocsa) Collected by: Till, Mária and Rhédey, Piroska (EA-4553)

⁴ Berczik, Árpád, *Betlehemes játékok* [Nativity plays]. Budapest, 1941. p. 14.

⁵ Mezővár (Bereg) Collected by: Sólyom, Zoltán, 1914. (EA-1968)

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them. This duality can be understood also in a way that the living shepherds personify the puppets of the crèche. Thus, these puppets are not mute as in case of certain Transdanubian varieties, on the contrary: when the action at the stage reaches its climax, we can hear only the voices only of the puppets because there are no living actors on the scene playing the role of the infanticidal Herod, the Death, the Devil, or the alms-collecting Pesta. Their voice comes from the puppeteer who is crouching behind the crèche, and in a tone, which suits the character of the given protagonist. After that the head of the Herod puppet, which can be tipped over and is fastened to the shoulder with a string, has been chopped off by Death, the Devil turns up with rattles in its neck to clear the stage of both of them. At the same time, this is the final scene of the puppet-show and when the shepherds proclaim the birth of the Messiah with their next song, a woman-figured puppet appears with a broom in her hand. She is the Sweeping Lady, who carries out sweeping movements at the slow rhythm of the song, and creates tranquillity and peace at the scene of the fight. For the joint singing of the farewell formula the puppeteer rises too and the old shepherds take off their masks.

As in case of the 'Hungarian nativity plays' in general, not the puppet-show is the focus of the attention in the puppeteer's varieties either but the abandoning, amusing joking of the shepherds. Why did the puppets survive in the smaller part of the nativity plays then? Many have been searching and are still searching for the satisfactory answer for this question.

According to one of the possible answers, the audience must have liked this type more than the versions lacking the puppets.⁶ This is plausible but Károly Viski found during his investigations below the surface, around the roots, that those, who had preserved these traditions held fast to the memory of the earlier mystery play, for the 'puppet-show was an instrument of the demonstration of the mystery and it continues to display its ancient function even in its stunt fragments of today'.⁷

The nativity play of Mezővár can present the most important structural elements of the Hungarian 'betlehemes' tradition. When we compare the scripts of the aforementioned facts of the archives (EA-1968) with those of the 1988 performance and the ones recorded after that, it can be found out that much of them conformed to the closer geographic surroundings, the taste, that is, to the local customs of the village. Old man I was tending his flock around the banks of the Borzs when he was a 'youngster-form lad'. When he is asked about the whereabouts of Old man II, he says that 'He is kissing an old buck at Árokhát'. But also the name of a part of the village, Nagypalaj, which became well-known due to the last floods on the Tisza, was mentioned.

It is worth paying attention to the Latin, although incorrect, language of the songs that indicate the one-time Catholic origin or the mixing with the Catholic tradition of the play. An angel utters the following: 'Triumfus, legisenderatus, / Natus eser, batorum rerus, / Registores pastores, / Registores, tutores, / Interes, interes.' The context proves that

⁶ Szacsuvay, Éva, *op. cit.* p. 41.

⁷ Viski, Károly, *op. cit.* p. 342.

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the try to demonstrate the knowledge of singing in Latin is not supposed to be a parody, as it shows up also in certain varieties in Ugocsa as well.⁸

We have to touch on the final part of the play too, because it is so unique that we have not seen it in any other version. In reality, it does not even belong to the structural elements of the nativity plays, as it is a part of a rhymed-musical congratulatory for name days. The performers meet the requirements of propriety when they congratulate the persons called István/Stephen and János/John who celebrate their name day at Christmas and in case the master of the house is a István or János who is surely proud of his name. In order to clarify the origin of this custom, it is not necessary to dig deep down in the archives, for it has a clear-cut explanation here in Bereg, that is, in Sásoroszi. This rhymed-musical form of name day congratulatory is called here 'muzsákolás'. The men, performing the 'muzsákolás' visit their fellows and chums called by noted names (Sándor/Alexander, József/Joseph, László/Ladislau, András/Andrew, István/Stephen, János/John) accompanied by musicians, and they address the celebrated person from in front of the door or from under the window singing: 'The muses have come to congratulate you on your name day!' The performers of the nativity plays in Vár revive only a shorter part of this jolly student custom and when it is over, they all sing the farewell lines: 'Come, come on, good host / let us go on our way! / To your house and yourself / the blessing of God flow!'

Sándor, the eldest member of the Bródi family which preserves this custom, is over 60 years old. He and his wife take care of the crèche. Also his companions who play the role of the other two old men are old like him. Will there be enough self-assertion and will in the younger members of the little company to go on when they fall out? We have to be confident and help them to go on.

The foundation of the Hungarian Cultural Federation in Transcarpathia (KMKSZ, 1989) was a crucial turning point with respect to our tradition preserving and exploring activity, even if the new minority interest-safeguarding organisation—in lack of major antecedents and adequate professional experience—could not produce a cultural program similar to that of the CSEMADOK (Hungarian Cultural Union in Slovakia). However, the idea of the 'Betlehemes Meeting of Transcarpathia' which has been announced and organized every year by the KMKSZ since 1994, came in the luckiest hour for two reasons. First, it not only legalized the presentation of nativity play performing groups in front of a wider audience but second, it provided significant moral and financial support and made the most outstanding plays known to the audience of Hungarian nativity play meetings and the interested experts.

Beyond all this, we can bring up as the most important fruit of the regular meetings of Bányú (Batove) that we can amuse ourselves watching the most characteristic and spectacular varieties of Christmas folk customs at the same time according to the denominational distribution of the Hungarian population of Transcarpathia. We might

⁸ "Acilus-bacilus, kikolbász-bekolbász, / a Pista kétszáz literes gyomrába belemász [Acilus-bacillus, sausage in sausage out, / sneaks into the stomach of Pista which can hold two hundred litres]." Tiszabökény (Ugocsa) Collected by: Geszti, Zsófia and Pákay, Viktória, 2000. 01. 17. Manuscript.

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see nativity play performers and the Three Magi walking with the star but it is impossible to overvalue the fact that it was here where we could experience for the first time the Herod play of the scattered Roman Catholic community of Gyertyánliget.

Neither the structure nor the content of the play is exceptional, but instead the acting of the adult performers of fatally mixed identity (Swabian–Hungarian–Ruthenian): their solemnity and propriety with which they turn the occasion into a feast; their costumes selected with care, almost with the intention of biblical authenticity; their identification with the role, the profound, sincere devotion transforming their face; their struggle with the pitfalls of Hungarian language which makes the audience feel as if choking with emotions; and at last, their crèche which might be more than a hundred years old and can be considered a significant asset of cultural history...

As the recording of the games and the melodies of the songs are drawing to an end, the possibilities of a new collection of popular poetry are being delineated. See, we have kept them and now, we give the nativity plays missing since Trianon back to the universal Hungarian culture. This much we can do, this depends on us.