

Transylvanian Dancing in the Final Hour
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Dear Friends of the Fulbright Program!

It is greatly to your credit as adventurous Fulbrighters that you have come to a presentation with the title, “Transylvanian Dancing in the Final Hour”. For one thing, “Transylvanian Dancing” sounds rather esoteric. And talking about the “final hour” of anything sounds less than upbeat, if not downright gloomy. To be sure, we are here to talk about the end of a way of life. But we’ll also talk about the beginning of another.

Transylvania is the region of present-day Romania bounded by the sweeping arc of the Carpathian Mountains. Over several centuries, the Hungarians, Romanians, Gypsies, Saxons, Jews and other peoples of Transylvania developed particularly rich village traditions, living side by side.

I am delighted by the opportunity to talk to you about village traditions that I have grown to cherish. I approach this task with the proselytizing zeal of a convert. I am neither Romanian nor Hungarian. Nor, for that matter, Gypsy nor Saxon. When I began to study Transylvanian dancing in the early 1980s, the only distinct advantage I enjoyed was an acceptably robust mustache which, sad to say, has grayed with the passing of years.

In the early 1980s, the study of Hungarian and Transylvanian dancing was on the threshold of becoming an international phenomenon. American dancers gathered in the summer on the east and west coasts for week-long workshops taught by the best among Hungary’s first generation of dancers of the so-called *táncház* or ‘dance-house’

movement. The *táncház* movement brings village dancing to urban dancers—both as a strictly social dance activity and as the foundation for ensemble performance.

I would like to organize my remarks around three topics: First, the *táncház* or ‘dance-house’ movement; second, the role of improvisation in Hungarian and Transylvanian peasant dancing; and, third, the status of village traditions today.

I. The *táncház* Movement

Reminiscences, centering on the beginning of the *táncház* movement in the early 1970s, show it to have been, like so many a youth movement, a counter-cultural alternative to the established order. In an era of international communism, the *táncház* movement was a way of being essentially Hungarian. At the same time, participants assumed habits of dress and appearance that made them look much like the hippie generation in North America and Western Europe. They contemplated going “back to nature”. Certainly, the dance culture of the peasants was one way of returning to origins.

The immediate appeal of village dancing must also have had much to do with its being an intensely social experience. Men’s dances are competitive in spirit. The dances for couples make for close contact between partners. The male leads richly figured dances with the sort of dynamic, aggressive partnering that is familiar to Americans from our various swing dance traditions. The cycle of dances from a given village may easily last over half an hour, proceeding from slow tempos to very quick tempos. The time between dance cycles is for drinking, singing and all other forms of conviviality.

Yet it was not an easy matter to turn Hungarian dancing into something of a youth movement. For one thing, virtuoso traditions require long study, and that presupposes strong commitment. For another thing, it was hard to gain access to source materials.

The realm of Hungarian cultures divides itself into the Hungarians living *within* Hungary's borders and the ethnic Hungarians living *beyond* the borders, chiefly in present-day Slovakia, Romania, Serbia and Croatia. The dismemberment of historical Hungary is a legacy of World War I and the Treaty of Trianon. Bearing in mind that one generalizes at considerable peril, it is probably safe to say that the village dance traditions of Hungary had largely vanished by the 1970s and needed to be revived from archival materials. The traditions of areas beyond Hungary's borders needed to be studied and preserved, but they were very difficult of access, in large measure because neighboring countries were inclined to isolate and oppress their Hungarian minorities.

In an earlier era, Bartók and Kodály had pioneered the collection of audio materials in the villages. In mid-century, legendary collectors like György Martin brought field recordings and film to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Another pivotal figure, Sándor Tímár, was instrumental in establishing the *táncház* movement. And the *táncház* movement, in turn, supplied a cohort of young, dedicated dancers and musicians who were inspired to undertake cloak-and-dagger missions into the villages of neighboring counties to continue learning the traditions. In the first wave, archival film and living informants were the source material for the dance-house. In the second wave, the first dance-house dancers themselves began to teach new generations in Hungary and abroad.

In the *táncház* movement, the traditions of Transylvania have been accorded a special role. The Hungarian minority there is relatively large and is spread over several folk cultural regions. Within those folk cultural regions, each village has—or, at one time, had—its own dance and music dialect. This adds up to a great number of individual

traditions—each of which is, or at least one time was, highly complex with a very large inventory of possible dance figures.

Scholars explain the wealth and persistence of traditions in Transylvania by pointing out that Romania remained more agrarian, less urbanized, more isolated than, say, Hungary. Transylvanian culture remained relatively unaffected by the Turkish conquest of Hungary and the Balkans. Romanians, Hungarians, Gypsies, Saxons and Jews lived in mixed villages or in close proximity. Although each ethnic group maintained its own dance and music traditions, it is evident that they influenced one another profoundly as they evolved side by side.

The process of researching the many individual village traditions began even before the *táncház* movement and seems to have proceeded ever more intensely over the past two decades. In the first phases of the *táncház* movement, teachers tended to synthesize related village dances into a sort of “generic” regional dance. In other cases, they chose one particular village’s tradition as the ideal representative of a regional type. In subsequent phases, however, there emerged a tenacious commitment to research and teach the traditions of as many individual villages as possible. The sheer wealth of material appears to be adequate for lifetimes of documentation and study.

II. Improvisation in Transylvanian Dancing

Inasmuch as Transylvanian village traditions usually have a large inventory of dance figures, much depends on how those figures are put to use. An essential feature of the dancing is its highly “improvisational” quality. Hungarian and Transylvanian village dancing does not have, so to speak, a fixed “text”. There is no prescribed sequence of figures. In men’s dancing, a man dances his own figures in his own preferred order, fitting his choices at least somewhat to the spirit and the impulse of the moment. When

couples dance, they likewise assemble their own individual dance in keeping with the village's tradition.

Three aspects of improvisation deserve special discussion. First, improvisation is, so to speak, the fundamental mode of creativity and performance in traditional cultures where all artistic forms are based in variations within a tradition's stylistic inventory. An embroidered peasant blouse or jacket, for instance, will not be identical to any other. But it will clearly bear the stylistic imprint of place and time. A pair of Levi's 501 jeans, by contrast, is a "text". It is always put together in exactly the same way. Levi's jeans may smack of the American West, but they are thoroughly international at the same time. Westerners may look like rugged individuals, but each piece of clothing they wear exists in countless identical versions. Villagers in traditional dress may appear to be wearing a sort of uniform, but, on closer inspection, each garment is unique.

Second, improvisation is a received skill, passed down from one generation of practitioners to another. Traditional musicians learn "by ear". Post-traditional musicians learn from sheet music. Like musicians, dancers are able to improvise *within* a tradition because they have assimilated both the "grammar" and the "vocabulary" of the dance, that is, both the units of expression and the rules for organizing them.

Third, the survival of a high degree of improvisation is rare in modern times. Improvisation became impoverished in Western European regional ethnic dancing relatively early on. The Southern German *Ländler* dance forms, for instance, appear to have been improvised when settlers took them to Transylvania in the 18th Century where they retained their free character. But those dances soon took on a fixed form in a fixed sequence of figures in Bavaria and Austria.

Hungary and, especially, Transylvania offer not only a singular richness of dance and music traditions. They also provide insight into how improvisation once functioned in European dancing as it has until fairly recently in other traditional art forms.

III. The Status of Village Traditions Today

What is left of the old village traditions today? The impulse to explore this question is all the stronger because Transylvanian traditions are the focus of special interest beyond Transylvania. This outside interest is due partly to the special character of the dance and music, partly due to the circumstance that some Hungarians have come to see Transylvanian Hungarians as bearing a Hungarian identity more ancient, more authentic, more essential than their own.

Much of what I have said so far might suggest that it would be worthwhile to study Transylvanian dance even if Transylvania were nothing but an ever-receding will-o'-the-wisp. Since there is a real Transylvania, it makes sense to ask about the status of dance in the villages today. It is doubly interesting to pose this question, because the Transylvanian traditions enjoy a special status beyond Transylvania, due partly to the character of the dancing, partly due to the special status of Transylvania itself.

Many students of Hungarian dancing seem to have a temperamental preference for Transylvanian dancing. Dances from Hungary proper are generally less ancient, more Westernized than are Transylvanian ones. If dances from Hungary require a lot of jumping and leaping about, Transylvanian dancing seems to flow more elegantly and to allow more intimacy in partnering. If Transylvanian music sometimes has a more melancholy tone, it may also strike the listener as more compelling, more passionate.

Students of dancing can visit some Transylvanian villages where there is still at least a remnant of a village band and where elder dance informants can still show their

dance. These musicians and dancers often suffered under the repressive strategies of the Romanian government in the years leading up to 1989. During the totalitarian regime, the interest in Hungarians beyond Hungary's borders was tied to concerns for human rights. And many urban Hungarians also came to see in the survivals of Transylvanian Hungarian dance and music a sort of confirmation or validation of their own cultural identities.

The last fifty years have brought changes to life in rural Romania which are analogous to those which occurred significantly earlier in most other areas of Europe: A transition from traditional village culture toward a post-traditional culture with more "Westernized" features. Among the ethnically Hungarian villagers of Transylvania, various political, economic and social forces have tended to retard this process even further. The end of the long era of totalitarianism over a decade ago has occasioned new challenges and opportunities for the Hungarian minority in the villages.

The fate of the traditions of the Hungarian villagers in Transylvania is inseparable from their status as an ethnic minority in Romania. The pressures on minorities within Romania, even after the change of 1989, tend somewhat to discourage identification with the minority culture but also, in many ways, to reinforce identification. Adherence to traditions in music and dance was, in many a case, an assertion of identity and an act of defiance which was often punished. On the other hand, some Hungarians are said to have tried to avoid oppression by becoming relatively "assimilated", even by becoming "more Romanian than the Romanians".

Hungarians, Romanians and others are always conscious of social and ethnic tension. This has created a complex framework of identity and change as people in the villages struggle with political tension, with economic challenge, and with the other

anxieties attendant to life in a changing world. Villagers seek to establish themselves within the evolving political and economic realities. Hungarians, in particular, seek to express a sense of identity which they have long been obliged to suppress.

Determining which Transylvanians are Hungarians is not altogether unproblematic. On the first order, Hungarians are people whose first language is Hungarian. But this definition would include many individuals who identify themselves as Gypsies and/or are so seen by other Hungarian speakers. And social factors like mixed marriages and employment choices may ultimately facilitate or cause a shift of identity. Another facet of Hungarian identity is determined by religious confession; another still, by a shared cultural heritage. In terms of Transylvanian village life, this shared cultural heritage resides principally in the traditions of any given community.

How can any given village tradition be regarded as “Hungarian” in view of the fact that any given dance cycle is unique to a particular village? What allows us to identify infinitely varying forms as “Hungarian”? For purposes of sustaining a Hungarian identity, it does not matter that those traditions vary from village to village and from region to region. What matters is that they are perceived as belonging to the Hungarian community and not, say, to Romanians or Gypsies. It is my impression, moreover, that the Hungarians in any given village are happy to claim that their dance and music is more genuinely Hungarian than that of neighboring villages. The dancing of the Hungarians in the neighboring villages is, they often confide, “really Romanian”.

Indeed, among those village traditions in which Hungarians invest their sense of identity, dance and music seem to be the most vital. Up until the change of governments in Romania in 1989, the Ceausescu regime employed many strategies to isolate ethnic Hungarians in their villages and to thwart the study of their village traditions. Access to

ethnically Hungarian villages was generally forbidden to outsiders. Research into the dance and music traditions of this region was carried on largely as an act of defiance through surreptitious excursions into the villages. Many village musicians were forbidden to play their music ever again. The use of the Hungarian language was suppressed in education, in the press and in other forms of community and public life.

After 1989, Transylvanian villages were opened to visitors from Europe, Asia and the Americas who are devoted to the study of Transylvanian music and dance traditions. At least in this special sense, the dispersion of Transylvanian dancing has run full circle. Individual villages host week-long dance and music “camps”, usually taught by professional dance teachers with the participation of village musicians and dance informants. A critical challenge is posed by the circumstance that the older generations of village musicians and dancers have dwindled close to vanishing, just as the intense activity of outsiders has helped to redirect the interest of villagers and their urban neighbors toward their own local traditions. A great many villages now have “dance ensembles”—Gypsy, Hungarian and/or Romanian. It is clear that the revived dance forms are a mark of village identity and ethnic pride.

The last manifestations of the “living” music and dance culture are in their “final hour” (an expression which I first heard from a Hungarian researcher in 1987). In some places, the oldest surviving “traditional” musicians and dancers are still participating in the transfer of their art forms to a young generation. The dance is no longer deeply imbedded in the life of the entire community. Weddings, for example, are celebrated to electronic “disco” music. The resurgence within the younger generation occurs chiefly in the context of village dance ensembles. In this sense, the culture has become a “post-

traditional” one, in which traditions are honored by conscious efforts at conservation and revival.

The dance and music traditions have to some extent by-passed the middle generations. Dancers and musicians in the oldest and youngest generations are, in many cases, the principal focus of interest, for at least some of the youngest are inspired to learn the forms from their surviving elders. Moreover, the state of things for dancers and musicians is by no means the same. There are a large number of village dance groups, but since there are relatively few young village musicians, there is grave concern about a loss of continuity in the music forms. The traditional peasant culture is waning to the vanishing point even as it is being discovered and conserved by schooled musicians and dancers and by an international urban following.

Allow me to show three short video clips that illustrate better than words the critical transition from traditional culture to post-traditional. The living traditions are truly in their final hour, and we are living in the moment after the glory. Yet many of the dance and music forms have entered a new mode of transmission and existence. Some of the elder dance informants have bad hips or knees and suffer considerable pain. You may notice more than a certain stiffness. But you will see that energy and joy radiates from their faces.

1. The first clip is from Csíkszentdomokos in 1995. At the center of attention are two sets of grandparents with their grandsons. I think you’ll pick them out. The grandsons had become dancers in a semi-professional ensemble in Csíkszereda.

2. The second clip shows another senior dance informant, demonstrating the couples’ dance from Marossárpatak at a dance camp in Vajdaszentivány in 2000. His

demonstration partner is a woman from Hungary. When the fast music starts, he explodes. You'll notice how he walks when the music stops.

3. The third clip shows a Romanian father, whose wife happens to be Hungarian, dancing with his young daughter at dance camp dance-house in Vajdaszentivány in 2000. This father-daughter moment is particularly beautiful, but one which I judge to be all too rare. Occasionally visible at the left of the frame, by the way, is the elder dance informant of Vajdaszentivány, dancing with a young Hungarian-American woman. The fiddle player and the cimbalom player are village musicians.

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[After fielding a few questions, Wayne Kraft and his wife, Ildikó Kalapács, gave a short demonstration of dancing from three favorite traditions—the Romanian slow turning dance from Bonchida, the Hungarian quick turning dance from Vajdaszentivány, and the Hungarian fast couples dance from Méra. More discussion followed. Wayne Kraft prepared the following reflection on the Fulbright experience, but did not include it at the conference.]

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Afterword on the Impact of the Fulbright Experience

Allow me to add a little epilogue, for I understand that I may say a few words about the impact of my Fulbright experience on my work in dance. My own serious study of Transylvanian dance began in 1982 in the Mendocino Woodlands at the first Barátság camp. I filled in the time between annual Hungarian dance workshops by taking university classes in ballet, modern dance and jazz.

By 1985, I had secured a Fulbright language study grant to take an intensive first-year course in Hungarian at Portland State University. I went to Budapest with a

Fulbright Research Grant for 1986-87. I was placed in the former Gutenberg Ensemble under László Diószegi. I met my wife, Ildikó Kalapács, in the ensemble.

We returned to the United States where she spent the first year learning English. In 1988 we founded the Erdély Ensemble which allowed us to continue our own study of Hungarian and Transylvanian dance while teaching and choreographing for the ensemble. After the opening of Transylvania, we were able to travel to villages in 1993, 1995 and 2000. We have taken many photographs in our trips to Transylvania and made video field recordings with the goal of producing a documentary video which will interpret the status of Hungarian village life in Transylvania in the time of a pivotal transition.

More so than any brief summary can reflect, my Fulbright opportunity came to determine my intellectual interests and development, my creative and academic work, and, of course, my teaching over the past decade and a half. I have become an “adoptive” Hungarian and have made Transylvanian dance the heart of my own sense of identity. Adopting an alien identity in this way may seem like a very strange thing to do. I make this confession to you thinking that it is a tribute to the transforming power of the Fulbright experience taken together with the exquisitely lovely dance and music traditions of Transylvania.

Since I have made some reference to my Fulbright placement with the Gutenberg Ensemble and to my own work with the Erdély Ensemble, I should hasten to add that the real ecstasy of Hungarian dance is not won in stage performance. Village dancing is social dancing. It needs musicians and fellow dancers and the atmosphere of the village ‘dance-house’. The deepest joy and the finest moments in dancing come late in the evening, perhaps after an utterly exhausting day. The moment and the mood are right, the music is right, the partner is right—and the rapture of the dance knows no bounds.