

IV. Ethnology and Folklore

History deals either with decisive events and personalities, or with general trends, in the "life" of a nation. The songs people hum, or the fish they prepare for their meal, are trivial elements of collective life, from a historical point of view. Yet history cannot ignore the study of such trivialities. Neither is history a discipline only — it is also a method of studying processes. Both music and cooking are legitimate fields of investigation, and both have their own history.

The inquiry into everyday life is determined by the fact that Hungary has been a predominantly agricultural country where rural forms of dwelling, life style, beliefs and customs prevailed. Only now that the future of humanity's consumable resources has increasingly come into question, does the wisdom of having a self-sufficient agricultural economy appear in a new light. Since the 18th century, approximately, optimistic modernizers and other ideologues of "progress" have tended to call the priority of satisfying hunger and thirst a conservative, outdated principle, opposing to it a faith in industry, commerce, and urbanization.

As we shall see, the economic aspects of Hungary's dominant form of production were also often debated by the nation's outstanding thinkers. The values and the form of life that rural settlement and production created, disintegrated only very recently. Just a few decades ago ethnologists were able to observe ancient customs and artistic phenomena in their actively practised, although perhaps modified, form. Ottó Herman's ancestors, as his name suggests, were German. It does not make sense to draw nationalistic conclusions from Hungarian family names since, as has been pointed out, disloyalty to one's ancestry was never among the criteria of becoming a patriotic Hungarian. With his German name, Herman became a pioneer of Hungarian ethnology — an eager patriot who wanted to enrich his nation by studying the traditions of its peoples. His excerpted writings about Hungary's various fish and, even more, their use for his countrymen, prove the extensions of the discipline that he practised into diverse fields, such as language, history, book

publishing, and, of course, gastronomy (which is both an art and a science). We know from the study of different cultures how deeply embedded eating rituals and taboos are in their consciousness. Herman's writings prove the same for Hungarian cuisine, which is strongly connected to the natural resources of the country.

Document 1. OTTÓ HERMAN

On Science and Hungarian Cuisine

A curious-sounding title which may make the reader smile. Yet, it can be further expanded, since it should actually read like this: "Hungarian fish in Hungarian cuisine, both discussed in relation to science." Perhaps this makes one smile as well?

It is not a joke after all, because it is both playful and serious — very much so. Tell me what you eat, and I'll conclude what kind of person you are. Show me your home and I'll see into your soul. Write a brief letter and I'll read your essence.

We learn much from Hungarian cuisine, especially from that of the past. It characterized the lifestyle of our ancestors; thus we find it edifying. It helps us draw a parallel between then and now. We learn much with regard to the economy, and quite a bit about language.

For the most part it is the latter which encourages us to look at old Hungarian cuisine, so that we learn more about fish. But simple, sober rationality also encourages us. If history taught us that fishing was first in importance among the ancient activities of the Hungarians, then it must have played a big role also in the kitchen.

With what sort of fish was old Hungarian cuisine familiar? What was it called? Do the old fish names coincide with those that fishermen use nowadays? All these questions instigate us to search for our oldest handwritten and printed cookbooks.

Something else also encourages us. That great and profound transformation which Christian religion brought about resulted in a strict adherence to the regulations of the new faith. Apart from the ceremonies, it also meant adherence to fasting, which thus made fish extremely important. Uniform religion meant that fish as a food of fasting gained importance on the table of the poorest serf just as much as in the refectory of the monasteries and at the feasts of the aristocrats, even the king.

Opportunity itself played an important role. By its mere existence, the pike-perch of Lake Balaton, the *sőreg* of the Tisza River, the giant sturgeon of the blue Danube, and the pike and carp of the swamplands, gave economic value to fish. It affected the world's greatest power: the stomach, which soon learned to discriminate among values. It distinguished the good from the bad, the tasty from the not so tasty, the bony from the boneless. Along these lines, it distinguished between the broiled and the cooked flavour, and other means of preparation.

This whole process gave birth to words which had to be added to Hungarian vocabulary. According to our knowledge, our oldest written, systematic cookbook was that of Gábor Bethlen, Prince of Transylvania.¹ While this volume was lost, during the rule of the same prince several aristocrats led magnificent households, had a court, and copiers and abstracters of his cookbook recorded the recipes. It is also certain that our oldest printed cookbooks got their material from Bethlen's written volume, because the names of the dishes and the methods of their preparation are identical.

The first source left to us is István Galgóczi's. We know his book from a handwritten copy the first part of which is incomplete. But the second part has survived, its title being *The Second Part of the Science of Cooking*. Thus, the main title may have been *The Science of Cooking*. [From this book we learn that] they prepared sausage of catfish, and doughnuts of sturgeon roe. They prepared fish the Hungarian way, as well as the German, Serbian, Wallach,² and Polish way. The cultural historical value of Galgóczi's book is beyond question. Even botanists can make use of his pilot words.

The creation of modern ethnology to which Herman contributed cannot be fully appreciated without a historical note. The national struggle for the recognition of Hungary's constitutional rights ended in 1867 when the Habsburg empire, shrunk in size and humiliated by a series of military defeats, granted this country equal rights with Austria in a dual monarchy. The unifying myths of Romanticism, among these the one of a united Hungarian folk and national tradition, lost their function. While the artificial 19th century "Hungarian song" (*magyar nóta*), widely popularized by Gypsy musicians, did not lose its appeal, it was becoming clear that, although long identified with the folk song, it was actually a different form of musical expression. After the turn of the century Béla Bartók, the internationally renowned composer, registered the return of a pre-Romantic regionalism. While composers of the Hungarian song picked

out what they thought was typically folksy in peasant music, modern collectors of folk songs reached back to the regionally specific elements of this tradition. The richness of peasant music was due to the local differences and to the variations of individual interpretation.

Besides being addressed to music theorists and composers, Bartók's writings have additional messages as well. First, he called attention to the differences among Hungary's many regions and cultures. Next, he advocated the rediscovery of the homeland and its peoples. Finally, he raised the idea of music being a code of communication. It is probably due to the isolated character of the Hungarian language that its speakers excelled internationally in some of the non-verbal systems of communication like mathematics, photography, the only partially verbal art of the cinema — and, indeed, music.

Document 2. BÉLA BARTÓK:

The Influence of Peasant Music on Modern Music

The beginning of the 20th century was a turning point in the history of modern music. The excesses of late Romanticism were becoming hard to bear for a number of composers. They started feeling that it was impossible to continue along such a path, and the only solution had to be an overall opposition to the 19th century. What provided an inestimable encouragement and strength for this resistance — shall we say regeneration — was peasant music. By this I mean what we know as peasant music in its narrowest sense. This was almost completely unknown before the early 20th century. In its formal aspects, this music is both the most perfect and the most varied. Its power of expression is amazing; nevertheless it is quite free of sentimentality or superfluous bombast. At times it is simple to the point of being primitive, yet it never becomes silly. In fact, it is impossible to imagine a more convenient point of departure for a musical renaissance. What better teacher can be found for a composer than this kind of music?

What is one of the conditions for the intensive effects of peasant music? It is that the composer should be as well acquainted with the indigenous peasant music of his country as with his mother tongue. In order to accomplish this, Hungarian composers themselves went to collect peasant music. [...] In my opinion, it is possible to experience the full intensity and impact of peasant music only by

listening to it on site, in a peasant community itself. In other words, I think it is not sufficient to study peasant music from sound archives. The essential thing is to transpose the hardly describable inner character of this music into our compositions, to fill these with the very air of peasant music and performances. It is not enough merely to inject into composed music some motifs or pseudo-motifs from peasant music. This can only lead to superficial ornamentation.

Our well-wishers twenty or twenty-five years ago often wondered how it could be that well-educated musicians who were also renowned as performing artists could undertake such a lowly task — that is, lowly in their eyes — as the study and collection of rural music on location. What a pity, they said, that there was nobody else to perform this task for us — for instance, someone who was unsuited for any other musical undertaking. In fact, many people regarded our persistence and tenacity as the obsession of madmen. These people little suspected the enormous importance that our trips to the villages held for us, making it possible that we could experience this music which set a new direction for us.

While the primarily agricultural character of the Hungarian economy prevailed into the 20th century, country life has gone through radical changes. Bartók was indeed among the last generation of intellectuals who could still witness traces of the vanishing country values, lifestyle, and folk art. More recent illusions in such directions are simply false. Yet, it does not mean that the ongoing changes would justify forgetting about Hungary's centuries old rural economic foundations. Those eminent social thinkers of the past who scrutinized these foundations left an amazing treasure-house of ideas to us — ideas that were creative contributions also to the economic theory of their times, and, in the light of modern trends, need reconsideration for their non-waning value.