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IVÁNC: A QUIET BORDER VILLAGE OF HUNGARY

Introduction

A plan of conducting fieldwork developed in the last week of August 2018 by an independent organization of students from diverse disciplines of social sciences. Their main interest was to understand what are the characteristics of life in villages located in Western Hungary, near the Austrian border. While they were visiting local folks, conducting unstructured interviews, I captured details of daily lives by taking pictures of people, their surroundings, and everyday practices.

Some of those pictures, their descriptions and possible interpretations, along with my occurring thoughts during the experience, will be presented in this essay.

From the intimate clothes

One underwear, a pair of socks. The tranquility of the summer in an unknown village next to the border of Austria. Simplicity of life is exposed through clothes, a typical human remnant. In front of us we have a trace of time that says about modern life, also a universal practice: washing the garments. What could it say in particular about that village, about that family?

We are talking in the garden. We only see the outside of an old house. The wear of the clothes one, two... many times. Manliness, femaleness. The old man wears it down; the old woman: washes, hangs it, and wears it down as well. Two lives become threadbare together, sharing the vicissitudes of the time.



Photo 1. Julián Romero. Socks and underwear. Ivánc, Hungary 2018.

A photograph alone cannot say specific things if we take it out of context, but it could provide some clues that escape from the dominant discourses. For example, when I took this picture, the person these garments belong to asked me, why I take pictures of insignificant objects instead of portraying him? I could say that indirect sources also can say, often, more than the prepared, direct or conscience actions and statements.

During a sociological interview in the garden of the house of one old couple while a team of Hungarian researches was developing the conversation with the families, I was photographing facial expressions of people, and certain segments of their houses. My only way to communicate with the people was using gestures and the language of photographs.

If we add the objects not included in this frame of the picture (two shirts and a set of sheets, three towels), connected to another photo (see the next picture), showing the woman wearing an apron, also, if we bear in mind that she was the person that served some snacks and pálinka where she needed to go many times to the house to bring us pictures to show her husband in his youth, we could interpret her role in the household.

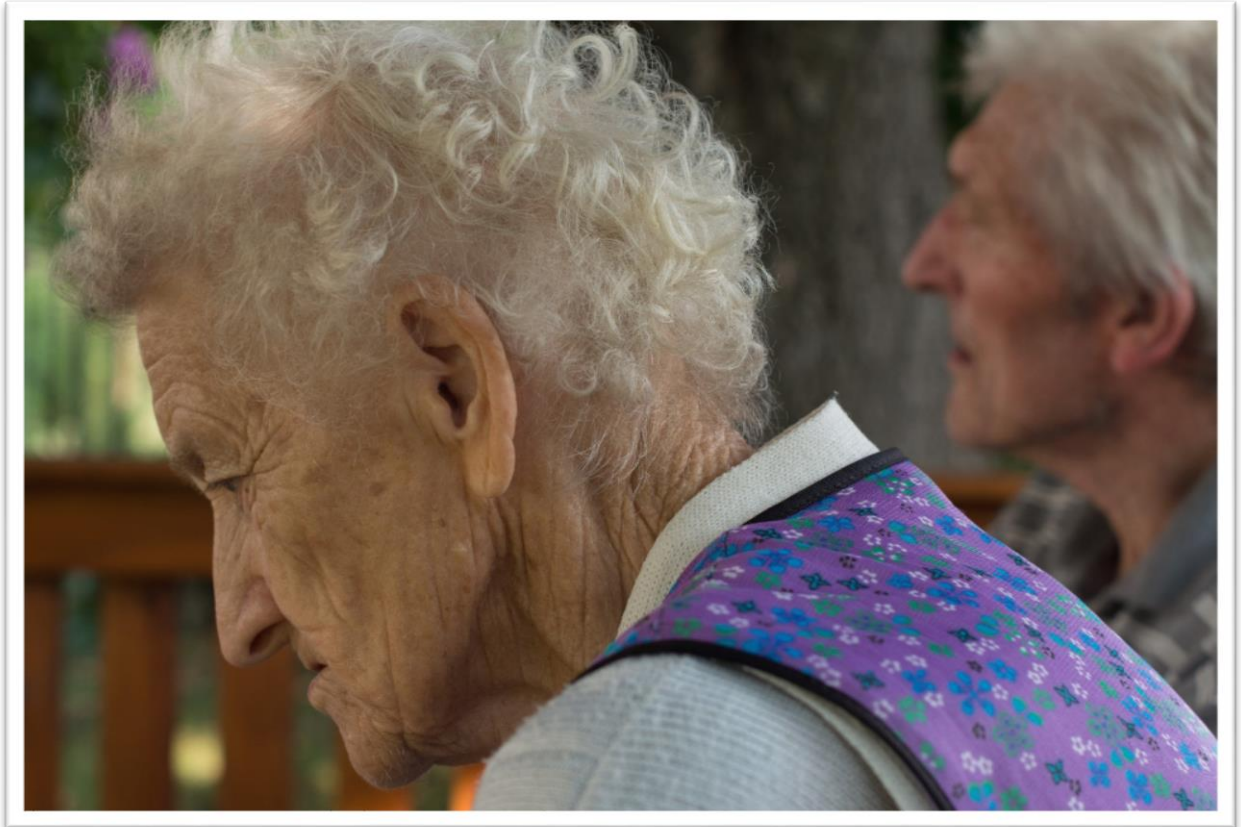


Photo 2. Julián Romero. Ivánc, Hungary 2018.

Through this series of pictures, we could gain some insight into the gender relationship, and putting it in contrast, if distribution of the responsibilities have changed, or if it is carried on in the traditional, old-fashioned manner. Through the images, we could understand the characteristics of the human relationship that is not expressed or verbalized, for example, division of work and responsibilities at home.

The museum house

Entering another house that smells of fresh grapes, fruits in fermentation and where old tools made of metal and wood are on display, we find a man doing pyrography stamping a kind of classical Disney drawings. While the interview moved towards a conversation, I looked around in his house, as a cautious cat while I took pictures.



Photo 3. Julián Romero. Sickle and brush. Ancient tools for the production of wheat. Ivánc, 2018.

The objects that are exposed in the outside walls of the house were principally old tools for agriculture. For example, in the picture above we can see two main instruments that were used in processing the wheat. The sickle has the function of cutting the branch of the wheat and then with the brush, they take of the seeds. The combination of metal and wood: protecting the hands and let them be strong with the earth.



Photo 4. Julián Romero. Old bush for taking the wheat seeds out. Ivánc, 2018.



Photo 5. Julián Romero. Old bush for taking the wheat seeds out. Ivánc, 2018.

Other characteristic of his activities is one of the most popular and traditional homemade productions: pálinka, the popular fruit spirit that, since middle ages, has become the most consumed alcohol in Hungary, being a cultural practice in all of its process.

The first steps of getting the hard liquor is selecting the fruits. The most popular one is a mix of different fruits or only plum, apricot, apple, pear and cherry. Later on, the ripened fruits are collected in a closed barrel to be mashed (photo 7); then, stirred occasionally. After four to seven weeks it is ready for the distillation process.



Photo 6. Julian Romero. Making pálinka at home. Ivánc 2018.



Photo 7. Julián Romero. Fruit mash of plum in the production of pálinka. Ivánc, 2018.

This domestic practice is part of the rural family traditions in Hungary. It also has been a controversial issue in the European Union. According to the European Commission, production of pálinka needs to be controlled following the hygienic process and health related regulations of the market. This is how pálinka became politics. “In 2010, Viktor Orban (...), championed a law allowing citizens to distill 50 liters (about 13 gallons) of their own pálinka, tax free, as long as they used approved equipment and did not sell it or give it away” (The New York Times, 2014).

In this context, the local government of Ivánc controls the production of this hard liquor centralizing the distillation in a factory to regulate the levels of alcohol but combining the traditional way to collect and mash the fruits at home. Every family goes to the distillery with their own mashed fruit, waits for the process to be completed, pays for it, and they take it home to enjoy it, as the forebears had enjoyed it as far as folks can remember back in time.

Bibliography

1. Hakim, Danny (2014): Ready to Fight for a Drink That Tastes Like a Slap in the Face. The New York Times. Online version: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/17/world/europe/budapest-fruit-flavored-hungarian-moonshine-palinka-tastes-like-rubbing-alcohol.html>

