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Study Possibilities of Present-Day Ethnic Revitalization of German Woodsmen in the Little Carpathians



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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the influence of macro-social processes and issues of assimilation, acculturation, ethnic and linguistic revitalization on the example of one particular group of German woodsmen in the social context of Western Slovakia. It attempts to analyse how historical and political changes during the 20th century influenced changes in the structure, system of values and hierarchy of ethnic group and whether that helped or prevented the assimilation of the group's members. The article also attempts to indicate the possibilities of today's ethnic and linguistic revitalization.

KEY WORDS: ethnic group, woodsmen, German colonization, identity, dialect, Little Carpathians, revitalization

Introduction

The research focused on the relations between individual groups with different ethnic, cultural and social characteristics has its justification not only in terms of content, character and direction of development of such relations but also in terms of recognition of specific patterns typical for small social groups. In a broader context, the purpose of such research

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can be interpreted as the search for premises for conflict-free coexistence of different groups in the context of the whole society. Our aim is to discuss on the example of a specific group of German woodsmen, “Huncokári“, the influence of macro-social processes and changes in the structure and hierarchy of the particular group and its system of values in the social context of Western Slovakia.

Huncokári in the Mountains of the Little Carpathians, located in Western Slovakia, are very specific and unique ethnic group in terms of archaicity of their traditional way of life in view of the material, spiritual and social culture. They form the last wave of German settlement in Slovakia.

The peculiarity of their way of living has been determined by their cultural and linguistic uniqueness (their own German dialect), geographic and social isolation (life in hamlets, endogamy) and also by specific forms of communication within and outside their group. These factors resulted in conservation and long-term preservation of several archaic elements of their traditional culture (see PRIEČKO 2003:107).

Huncokári in the Little Carpathians represent a specific form of adaptation and acculturation of a particular group in different ethnic environment. Therefore, we consider them to be an important element of Slovak and European cultural heritage. According to Šatava, any efforts to preserve and further develop small ethnic or language communities need to be seen within the context of contemporary trends; within the context of a struggle for unique element in a globalizing world. The crucial question is whether an ethnicity with language as the main symbol is something so valuable? Why should we try to set back or halt ethnic or linguistic assimilation? When can we speak about “natural will of an ethnic group to be itself” and when does an artificial construct – “ethnic engineering” start? (ŠATAVA 2013:23)

In the process of ethnic/linguistic preservation, important role is played by the actors themselves – by the interest of the members of a particular group (in this case of an ethnic minority) to remain a distinctive unit with a unique culture of its own. In such context, a theory of “ethnolinguistic vitality“ which is formed by status, demographic factors and institutional support was created (ŠATAVA 2013:27).

The discussed ethnic group has a primary interest in the preservation of its ethnic consciousness, identity, language and culture. However, its public presentation, popularization and promotion is of secondary importance; the main effort is to document the ancestors’ way of life, record testimonies of the oldest living survivors, collect material artefacts and pass this knowledge to future generations.

Previous Research

From the ethnologic, historical and linguistic viewpoint, the research focused on Huncokári can be considered a salvage research. In Slovak scientific texts (historical, ethnological or linguistic), the issue has been covered only marginally. The research is represented by no more than five scientific articles, three masters theses, a few short, popularizing articles or notes about Huncokári in ethnologic analyses of German ethnic minority in Slovakia. Therefore, there are only a few available authentic resources or scientific analyses.

As far as authentic accounts of Huncokári culture are concerned, beneficial are mainly researches of linguists Franz Beranek and Walter Kuhn from the 1920s and 1930s. Thanks to them, a number of reminiscent accounts, recordings of dialects, legends and superstitions from the village of Piesok (Pezinok district) were preserved. Original texts in both German language and Huncokári dialect are stored in a text archive of the Institute of Ethnology of Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava.

The research focused on value orientations, intra and extra-group relations and importance of work relations in the lives of Huncokári was conducted by ethnologist Gabriela Habáňová. Her field research was carried out in the 1980s and 1990s, more than forty years after their dispersal.

Zuzana Panczová in her article from 2011 brings information about Huncokári superstitious narratives. Historical aspects of their arrival and their economic situation were discussed by Martin Markus (2009). We can also learn a few elementary information about this ethnic group from the articles written by Margaréta Horváthová (2002), Ján Botík (2007), Soňa Kovačevičová (1990), Milan Olejník (1997, 1998), Dušan Kováč (1994), Ondrej Pöss (2000, 2002) and others who in their works discuss minority issues, issues of ethno-cultural processes and the questions of identity.

As far as popularizing activities are concerned, in the 1990s Slovak Television produced a 20-minute documentary about Huncokárias a part of its program was monitoring the ethnic minorities in Slovakia. The documentary has been raren several times up to this day. In 2013, the Town Museum in Pezinok organized a two-month exhibition entitled "People of the Woods" about Huncokári who originally lived in the town's vicinity.

More on the field of collecting and analysis of available materials was conducted by Huncokári themselves. They are trying to preserve as much as possible about their history, way of life, language and culture of their ancestors. Vladimír Schwandtner, an amateur enthusiast, founded a website for Huncokári descendants and general public interested in

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their culture (www.huncokar.sk), where people can find authentic narratives, descriptions of localities and news from the life of the community. He also founded *Huncokár*, a civil association. Schwandtner has collected an extensive archive of photographs (more than 20,000), recordings, narratives, family lineages and he is interested in cooperation.

Every year, the descendants of some Huncokári families meet to exchange information, present photographs and other artefacts from family archives or to complete their family lineages. The result of such meetings is three DVDs (2007, 2011 and 2013) with documentaries containing narratives of some of the oldest survivors about the lives of their ancestors. Otto Weber, a Huncokár enthusiast was the author of some of the memoirs and during his life, he collected narratives, photographs, family chronicles and family lineages.

Another result of these activities is a number of works of fiction and popular science articles about the life of Huncokári. The most famous among the general public is *Mamenka* trilogy (written by A. Bertová, 2003, 2007) which describes the fate of the Hirners, a Huncokári family against the background of the historical events of the 20th century. The most recent summarizing work is a book written by L. Táčovský in 2013.

Taking into account the results of a few 20th century researches, other available information and our own primary surveys, it is clear that in the environment of Huncokári local community/families is possible to record the last surviving evidence of their culture, either material artefacts or elements of spiritual and social culture. However, in several cases such precious material survives only as a part of individual memory of a few descendants or a part of collective memory of Huncokári community and its environment. With a decline of this group, there is a danger of total extinction of unique expressions of their culture and memories.

The Methodology of Research

Huncokári in Slovakia can be considered as an ethnic minority, ethnic group or a community. As in the past, today they have a strong consciousness of ethnic and local belonging, feeling of fellowship and at the same time otherness from neighbouring local communities. We can observe a presence of specific and unique cultural expressions in material, spiritual and social field. We consider their own dialect to be a specific and typical expression of an ethnic minority. This ethnic group is the evidence of cultural diversity and multiculturalism of ethnic and linguistic environment of Slovakia and the entire European area. Multicultural society is characterized by cultural diversity and plurality. Various cultural layers do not exist there autonomously but in mutual interaction and

communication. Within this communication, cultures influence and enrich one another, they are engaged in a cultural dialogue.

Minorities do not exist without opposition towards the majority. It is the confrontation of aims and values between the minority communities and majority society that explains the internal development and attitudes of the members of minorities. Often, emphasis is given to these differentiating elements which are perceived as important, though after objective evaluation, their importance seems to be overestimated. In any case, from within the group these elements are perceived as important and they are supported through various strategies. Within such community, significant area of research is formed by the line of social heritage, manifested in various forms of communication, speech stereotypes or gestures. Important fact is that ethnic consciousness in many cases persists even if the community is geographically distant from the central group.

To know and understand the relations it is necessary to observe the development and changes of the discussed minority within the entire of 20th century with overlaps to the 19th and 21st centuries. Such wider coverage enables the inquiry of the potential process of identity crisis associated with re-evaluation of community values, active search and perception of positives and at the same time negatives of ethnic minority; and, in the stage of stabilization, acceptance or rejection of original ethnic delineation which suits an individual, or on the other hand, limits him. We assume that such active element associated with an individual would be an appropriate indicator of the orientation and dynamic processes within the entire ethnic minority. Therefore it is significant to examine ordinary situations in the life of an individual within the entire community on which it is possible to demonstrate a wide spectrum of attitudes towards ethnic minority ranging from loyalty to displacement and negation.

Huncokári and Their Basic Cultural Characteristics in the Observed Region

During the 18th century, mountain regions of Western Slovakia (mostly the Little and White Carpathian ranges) were colonized by the settlers of German origin. Numerous wealthy landowners invited colonists from different German-speaking regions to settle on their lands under conditions that were mutually beneficial. According to Franz Beranek, the growth of this ethnic group was associated with the activities of Count Pálffy, the largest land owner of Bratislava County, who in the mid-18th century invited woodsmen with their families from Lower Austria and Styria to settle on his lands in the Little Carpathians (BERANEK 1943:19). Other sources claim different localities of woodsmen' origin

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(APATHY 1962, FOLTÝNEK 2007, KANTEK 2008). In the collective memory of their descendants, consciousness of origin from Tirol, Styria or Bavaria has been preserved.

The woodsmen, aware of their function and mission claimed that *“our grandparents came from Austria. My parents said that as well. They came to cut timber because here there were no such experts and in Austria, they had better woodsmen”* (an account of a woodsman, aged 74, from Cajla, recorded in 1992).

‘Count Pálfi summoned woodsmen from the Alps regions (Lower Austria, Styria). He let them built woodsmen huts in hamlets in the Little Carpathian woods. Individual hamlets were 3-6 kilometres distant from one another’ (WEBER 2002:1).

Huncokáriare is an evidence of ethno-cultural contacts between German and Slovak ethnicities as a result of permanent/definitive migratory movements from the Western Europe to the territory of present-day Slovakia in the 18th century. The uniqueness of this group resides in the specific way of coping with the new conditions and in the forms of identification with their own group and its cultural traditions. The largest groups of Huncokári settled in the localities around Pezinok, Modra, Častá (Červený Kameň castle), or Malacky, in lesser extent around Bratislava.

According to the information from the end of the 18th century, there were about 500 Huncokári living in Slovakia (HABÁŇOVÁ 1992:66-70) and they lived in terraced wooden houses with two to four apartments which included living room, attic room, kitchen and pantry. They lived in isolated conditions, two or three families per hamlet, with hamlets several kilometres distant from one other and from the nearest villages.

In the mid-20th century, about 1000 people considered themselves to be Huncokári. In 1928, F. Beranek estimated their population at about 800 people (BERANEK 1943:20). During Š. Apathy’s research in 1962 (1962:2-3), the descendants of Huncokári estimated their population to be about 100 families. The most recent results of the research of family genealogy of L. Táčovský (2013:128) indicate that the number could have been much higher, at least 1500 people in the mid-20th century.

Already during the interwar period, Huncokári were frequently forced (by changes in political situation, or changes in forest ownership) to move from their isolated localities to lower areas, closer to towns and villages. After World War II, a part of the population was forcibly relocated to Germany. The remaining Huncokári eventually assimilated with the majority population. The ethnic minority status was granted to Germans only in 1968 and the right to be educated in their own language only after 1989.

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Thus, the story of Huncokári in Slovakia begins from the mid-18th century. The first written record of marriage in the Častá registry is from May 6th, 1753 and in Modra from April 24th, 1763. The first baby born in the mountains is recorded in the registry on October 6th, 1740. The gap between the first new-born babies and first marriages is 10-20 years so it is possible to speculate that it was mostly young families that colonized the Little Carpathians. We can assume, however, that original German-speaking woodsmen came much earlier than the first recorded marriage because the record explicitly states their different ethnic and professional status (*Hulchokerium domindem*).

Huncokári worked as of loggers, foresters and game keepers and they used technological processes that were unknown in Slovakia at that time. The German terms for their profession *Holzhacker* and *Holzfallertak* gave birth to the term Huncokár in local dialect which can be understood as an ethnonym today. At present, the members of the group call themselves either as *Holzhacker/Holzhackeri* or as *mountain people*. They perceive the term *Huncokár/Huncokárto* to be derogatory or unsuitable but they tolerate its use by the majority. In ethnological texts we find only the term Huncokár (ŠVECOVÁ 1988, HABÁŇOVÁ 1992, ELKS 1995, BOTÍK 2007 and others), therefore we use it as well when referring to or identifying the group.

Their work and service were of a hereditary character, they were paid for it and received benefits such as timber from the woods from their landowner. Among their other privileges were rights to use house, garden, field and meadows for mowing. They could also graze their domestic animals in landowner's woods. The relative equality of professional and social status resulting from similar economic position was the basis for equal social relations within the group and as a result, it had integrative function. Any possible differences in economic situations of the individual families could be a result of their particular situation. Equality in relations was highlighted by the members of the group as a significant value of interpersonal ties and it was often compared to unequal social status of people living in villages which was based on their wealth (HABÁŇOVÁ 1992:69).

Their origin and resulting ethnic, linguistic and cultural otherness led in specific economic and social conditions to the creation of isolated and closed group with a consciousness of group fellowship, consciousness of difference from majority and its own system of values. Up to the first third of the 20th century was the existence of the group (including education of the children) associated with the mountain environment. Settlement isolation and professional exclusiveness did not provide a larger space for communication between Huncokári and village inhabitants.

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Shallowness of relations, or knowing just “from sight” which are typical for certain development stage of mutual relations led to a formation of stereotypes inspired by mainly external signs. For illustration, in the vicinity of Modra there have been idioms in use associated with transportation of loads on one’s back which was recorded in a research from the 1990s: “*You dawdle here like a Huncokár with a backpack*” or with their way of life in the mountains: “*Huncokári are as wild as game! Huncokári can talk with the deers!*”

The contacts between Huncokári and villagers were limited to secure groceries for their households at markets, in shops or from the village craftsmen or to sell their own dairy products, with an emphasis on a sale at “agreed place.” The group of people whom Huncokári met in such way was rather small. Huncokárichurch attendance was irregular because of the distance, weather and demanding terrain and, despite the same Roman Catholic faith shared with the villagers, it did not lead to closer contacts. On the contrary, as the accounts of the survivors from the first third of the 20th century claim, a separate place in the church just under the choir where Huncokári sat was an expression of their social isolation from the village society (HABÁŇOVÁ 1992:72).

In the lives of Huncokári, intergroup relations prevailed. All of the family, social, neighbour and friendly relations were tied almost exclusively to the environment of their own group and they were strengthened in a large extent by endogamous marriages. During the period of the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938), the space for mutual contacts between the villagers and Huncokári intensified with a growing number of village loggers, more frequent contacts among the young people in schools, at village dances, in grocery shops etc. In this period, tolerance for occasional breaking of endogamy occurred for the first time. The joint work of village and Huncokári woodsmen led for example to the establishment of St. Vincent’s Day as a holiday of all woodsmen. At present, this holiday is still observed in the form of Woodsmen/St. Vincent’s Ball. Similar situations also occurred in other localities along the Little Carpathians.

In everyday life, the importance of neighbours was emphasized in connection with difficult natural or climatic conditions. Huncokári could accurately tell where and how far (hour or two of walking) their closest neighbour or family lived. In the isolated environment, the importance of family ties increased for every individual and this was reflected in their mentality as well. The family was a base and a refuge for all members of the group including elderly, orphans, sick and lonely. These naturally understood social functions of the family (typical for a social organization with surviving residues of feudal relations) were accepted by the employer (HABÁŇOVÁ 1992:74). In case when these

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functions were endangered, the employer provided aid in the form of financial help, child care, education or respite from the work.

Only at the beginning of the 20th century the first cases of exogamous relationships appeared. This was the period when the contacts between Huncokári and villagers or townspeople intensified. During the period of the first Czechoslovak Republic, their traditional way of life started to be disrupted, when for example Huncokári children began attending schools in larger villages or towns, usually in weekly intervals and the entire system of the work in the woods began to change.

Regarding the fact that Huncokári settlements were dispersed and distant from towns and villages, specific ways of education for children were instituted in the form of weekly turns, with individual settlements alternating. Education was realized by a so-called mountain teacher in German language, later this role was performed by a retired game warden. Permanent German school for Huncokári children was established in 1876 in Piesok and provided schooling until 1919 (TÁČOVSKÝ 2013:62). By 1927, Huncokári children were attending a Slovak school in weekly turns.

It looked like as if the life of Huncokári became more distant from developing historical events, influences, new elements and circumstances. Despite this fact, there appeared tendencies in the first half of the 20th century in their social life which somehow signalized they were getting closer to society and this led to a disruption of internal closeness of the group. Among the important moments was the change in school policy of the first ČSR. With the introduction of compulsory 8 year schooling, children of school age from the mountains were brought to everyday contact with the social environment of towns and villages and in this way, they were somehow released from the exclusive social environment of their group. Difficulties resulting from everyday school attendance from distant hamlets gradually led to moving of Huncokári closer to villages. Under the pressure of life circumstances, they were forced to leave their distant and isolated settlements and settle in villages or in their vicinity (HABÁŇOVÁ 1992:78-80). After World War II, these schools were dissolved by a decree of the Ministry of Interior since 1950.

Conclusion: Preservation and Revitalization of Ethnic Minority – Reality or Fiction?

Until the 1980s, the research of German minority in Slovakia remained a bypassed, even a taboo topic because of political, social and historical reasons. Possibilities for the development of minority cultures in Slovakia in the last few decades has not been the same for each ethnic group living in Slovakia. Carpathian Germans were among those who did

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not have opportunity for a development of their own culture. Only the events of 1989 and the creation of Slovak Republic in 1993 brought changes, when the constitutional right of minorities living in Slovakia was granted. This included the right to develop their own culture, and to establish and preserve their educational and cultural institutions and consciousness.

The first efforts for revitalization of Huncokári were already recorded in the interwar period, in the first third of the 20th century. The background of the research of F. J. Beranek was associated with the activities of German educational associations, among them *Deutscher Kulturverband*, *Karpatenverein* or others which attempted to revitalize the national consciousness of German minority and spread the ideas of Great Germany (Großdeutschland) in Sudetenland and Carpathian areas. These activities were realized through research, scholarly articles and educational lectures focused on local history and traditional culture (PANCZOVÁ 2011:15). Beranek's works and research from Slovak environment were published between 1941-1943 (BERANEK 1943).

The first more complex ethnologic and historical contributions about the German minority in Slovakia were published at the end of the 1980s but they did not focus on Huncokári woodsmen who formed the latest wave of German settlement. As far as the field of linguistics is concerned, there is virtually no academic interest in the study of Huncokári dialect.

Ethno-linguistic revitalization efforts of the past decades has demonstrated their potential for realization. The question therefore is not whether is the halt of assimilation in current conditions possible, but whether it is viable and desirable in a particular situation of a particular group. As different researches have shown (for instance Jewish or Armenian diasporas), the vitality of small, frequently dispersed populations and communities can be in this regard unbelievably strong and long-term in present-day conditions (ŠATAVA 2013:28).

In this particular case, we assume that the efforts for revitalization do not come from the outside but from the inside of the group. Up to this day, members of the group live in the researched localities, they still have partial group consciousness, preserve some of their customs and traditional culture and Huncokári dialect is still alive. In addition to that, several material artefacts and material expressions, great amount of photographic and iconographic material, personal written accounts (almost 20,000 photographs, numerous sound recordings of interviews, personal correspondence and other materials) have been preserved

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Mapping of the population and settlement development of this group is necessary since we are not completely familiar with it up to this day. From this point of view we are interested in the life strategies of individual families or fates of “population” surpluses of the group in the 19th and 20th centuries. The demographic characteristics has been to a great extent influenced by the work conditions of woodsmen that did not create conditions for a growth of naturally growing family in one household, locality and manor. These caused a break up of families and their spreading across the territory of the group, which was accepted. This fact caused constant renewal of intergroup ties and was one of the conditions for the integrity of the group and development of its traditional culture.

There is no clear prognostic answer to the questions associated with the phenomenon of ethno-linguistic assimilation and revitalization. Similarly there is no clear border between what is “salvageable” and “expendable” (ŠATAVA 2013:29). Therefore it is a demanding and intricate topic that depends on the viewpoint and the beholder.

With a realistic view on the past and present of German minority in Slovakia is the research of culture and way of life of the German woodsmen in the Little Carpathians area necessary. In several respects, it can be considered a salvage research of a disappearing minority. The results of the research will enable Huncokári and their descendants in Slovakia to implement the above-mentioned constitutional right, reacquire and develop group consciousness and identity, and eventually even revitalize some of the cultural elements. Last but not least it is not possible to omit research-wise promising documentation value that all the acquired data and knowledge will bring.

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