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Zita Škovierová: Current Problems of Social Culture and Ethnology in Slovakia

CURRENT PROBLEMS OF SOCIAL CULTURE AND ETHNOLOGY IN SLOVAKIA

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This paper is focused on selected problems of social relations in rural communities in Slovakia at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries which became the study subject of ethnology. The political changeover in 1989 in the former Czechoslovakia was an important stimulus for change.

The first topic of social studies is the elimination of former socialist ownership and the reestablishment of private ownership of agricultural and forest land. The second topic is voluntary activity and changes to the structure of communities and associations in the rural community. There are also studies of newly established non governmental organizations which promote local culture and support developing tourism.

Key words: *ownership relationships, reprivatization, voluntary activities, associations in rural communities*

Objective of this paper is to bring a brief survey of problems, objects and methods of current Slovak ethnology in the area of social culture. This summarization (selective) is based on studies published in Slovak ethnological journals (Slovenský národopis, Etnologické rozpravy, Ethnologia Actualis Slovaca), as well as some publications and manuals, in which outcomes from scientific research projects were published in the past two decades.

Major part of the paper is dedicated to two problems dominating in the study of social culture in Slovakia, i.e. changes in private ownership of land and voluntary activities and is based also on my own research and observations in localities of Western and South Slovakia that was carried out in the past 20 years.

CHANGE OF POLITICAL SYSTEM AND ITS REFLECTION IN SLOVAK ETHNOLOGY

Political turnover in former Czechoslovakia in 1989 was an important impetus for changes in social and economic relationships. It was called “Velvet revolution” because it happened without manifestation of violence, similarly as later division of Slovak and Czech nations into independent republics in 1993. Abolishment of hegemony of up to then the only political party and democratization of the political system brought new elements to life of Slovak inhabitants in several areas. Fundamental changes resulted in:

- socio-political system (freedom of speech, abolishment of censorship in publishing, introduction of democratic principles)
- socio-economic relationships (private ownership and capitalist relations were re-established)
- in freedom of religion and assembly (see also Jakubíková, K. 2006:39)

Changes in society were reflected in ethnology in various directions. Not only were finalised synthesizing works (Ethnological atlas of Slovakia, Encyclopaedia of folk culture in Slovakia, etc.) but also the picture of society in the first half of the 20th century was completed, mainly social strata that were for ideological reasons until then forbidden to be studied and written about. They were representatives of middle class, entrepreneurs, businessmen, townsmen, as well as some ethnic minorities (Germans, Romanies, and Jews).

Ethnology began to study also Slovak society in the socialist era, in particular topics that were taboo until 1989. These were mostly manifestations of violence on culture and psychic of people, persecutions of people who were “ideologically unreliable” for the communist regime and hidden and open demonstration of protest. They were e.g. going through political changes

after World War II, opposition against collectivization and nationalization of private property and enterprises, violence against protesting people during occupation of the country by the armies of the Soviet block. Here I would like to mention that the Slovak ethnology has insufficient sources and documents for a qualified analysis and critical assessment of the way of life in socialist era until now.

Another area of interest in ethnology is research on current changes in the society (Beňušková – Ratica 2002). The following topics are studied: Ethno-social policy, confessions¹ and creation of new relationships within local communities, the influence of elites in society on economy of various social groups, new identities and their contributions, etc.

Apart from traditional research methods, ethnologists use also techniques, such as participant observation and analysis of contemporary processes. Access to foreign literature and studying abroad challenges discussions on relationships of ethnology, cultural and social anthropology (Jakubíková 2000; Elschek 2000).

There are also socio-anthropological interpretations of current phenomena in Slovakia. From the focus of research in present I would mention few:

- problems of globalisation in opposition to national cultures (Letavajová 2006);
- forming of collective identities, multiculturalism (Kiliánová – Riečanská 2000);
- conflicts of various cultures and minorities (Salner – Beňušková 1999);
- marginalised cultures (Beňová 2004);

¹ There are more ethnological study on the influence of religion upon everyday culture. The Churches that had been banned, or which perished, in 40s and 50s, (for example Jewish or Greek Catholic Church) were re-established after 1989. Their re-establishment caused multiple property-law suits with the existing owners of property namely the state, private citizens, and other permitted church communities (Beňušková 2004).

- tourism (Hladká 2005)²;
- commercialism of traditional cultures etc.³

The above mentioned topics of research show that Slovak ethnology reflects contemporary problems which influence the life of people in communities. Question for the discussions is to what extent ethnology shall contribute to the solutions the current problems.

CHANGES OF PROPERTY OWNERSHIP

Following the change of the political system, ownership relations were also changed and began to be an area of ethnological research, mainly with regard to the ownership of agricultural and forested land or other real estate. The previous socialist collective ownership was eliminated and private ownership of agricultural and forested land was re-established. Relationships among owners, users and employers have become more and more complex. Divergence of interests has brought tension and conflict into the cohabitation of people, not only within a community, but very often also among family members. The number of offspring – potential owners of inherited land - has increased. Identification of private property was demanding and complicated. Proving eligibility of patrimonial claims after 50-60 years required tremendous effort, because the necessary written documentation was very often not preserved.⁴ Administrative and legal acts were financially demanding. New economic and social conditions, as well as competition from foreign markets and enterprises brought many domestic agricultural and food cooperatives and enterprises to bankruptcy. They were unable to pay rent to the owners for the property until they used it, then broke up, went bankrupt, and the co-owners of the property did not make any profit again (Danglová 1995).

² There are more articles on topic of tourism in *Etnologické rozpravy* 2005 vol. XII.

³ For more data on perspectives of ethnological study in Slovakia see also an article Kiliánová 2005.

⁴ In the 90's there were 7.5 million private farms identified in Slovakia and each of them has had about 11 owners (Danglová 1995:491). The Slovak Republic has about 5 million inhabitants (including children).

Social differences among inhabitants have grown as a result of the impact of different incomes and the changed legal system for social and pension providing schemes. The social structure of inhabitants in localities as well as that of society has been changed: a new stratum of entrepreneurs and tradesmen has been established, while on the other hand a class of unemployed and poor people has been created (Danglová 1997; Beňová 2006)).

Descendants of former landowners were, for various reasons, unable to restore the relationship between land and farming. They mostly leave the property in the care of cooperatives, whose prosperity depends on the land quality and managerial skills of their top management (Škovierová 2002:70).

In order to better understand these changes I have to mention some facts on historic political and socio – economic events following the World War II. Forced nationalization of the private land of farmers took place in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s and 60s. Land was then associated in farmers' cooperatives and so called state farmsteads, from which the state profited during era of socialism for free (Danglová 1995). This process was accompanied by social and political persecuting of people. Some anthropologists regard collectivisation of agriculture based on the changes of ownership rights to be the most radical turn of rural societies in Central and Eastern Europe.⁵ (Danglová 2005:121)

On the other hand collectivization of farmland and the nationalization of forests initialised follow-up social and economic processes. They supported an influx of labour into industrial enterprises and increased the labour migration of inhabitants from villages to towns. Education was credited with greater value, which enabled higher job positions and caused young people to settle in towns. This resulted in aging of population in rural localities. Families became less numerous, fewer generations lived within the family, and households became individualized. This situation is valued by villagers negatively though they are proud of their educated and successful descendants.

⁵ Anthropological observations have shown that the institution of ownership is a very universal phenomenon in human communities. It occurs in nearly all cultures and influences the value system, social structure, and status of community members, models of behaviour, and other phenomena of social life (Murphy 1998:137, Hann 2000:88).

However, in the beginning, the majority of agrarian farmsteads, even whole municipalities in Slovakia, succeeded in avoiding the collectivization. Unfortunately at the moment I cannot quote the exact number of localities which did not establish collective or state farms. I presume however that their number was higher than the official statistics admitted and that this data was not widely published.⁶ As for the share they represented from the total number of inhabitants (e.g. in comparison with cooperative farmers), the number of peasants was not insignificant.

At first sight one could expect that research in non-collectivized localities would answer the question of how individual family farming would develop if a forced state fostered process of collectivization had not taken place. Research in such localities could thus become a kind of a “laboratory” for further development of individual farming in Slovakia. I can say however that stipulated hypotheses cannot be credible with regard to generally transformed socio-economic conditions. Constant confrontation with highly favoured collective farming caused very poor conditions for individual farming on the small surface area family farms. They survived mainly in localities where collectivization was impossible for various reasons: shortage of arable land, shortage of water, terrain conditions which did not allow for the use of large machines, etc. In addition, the continuation of individual farming was to a great extent influenced by the state subsidy system and by various supra local provisions which hampered the natural operation of farms.

During the first phase of collectivization in the Slovak countryside it was quite suitable, and favourable, for peasants to live in a locality where collectivization for various reasons was not implemented. Individually farming peasants and their relatives continued to work on their property.

⁶ The *Historical statistical almanac* of the Czechoslovak Republic does not provide the number of non-collectivized villages or the number of individually farming peasants. It brings only data on the structure of agricultural work of individually farming peasants from 1950-1983 according to the size of the groups – but only the percentage of shares from the total (unknown) number of works. *The Slovak Encyclopedia* however states, that out of the total number of inhabitants the share of individually farming peasants was 6.8% in 1961; 2.6% in 1970; 1.6% in 1975; 1.4% in 1977. For comparison the share of cooperative farmers out of the total number inhabitants was 13.1% in 1961; 10% in 1970; 9.8% in 1977 (*Historical statistical almanac of the CSR* 1985:713,718; *The Slovak Encyclopedia* 1981:134).

Gradually fewer and fewer children worked on the farms, going to towns to study and find jobs. In towns they usually acquired a flat, got a job, and did not come back to their locality.

The generation of peasants (farmers) who individually farmed their property in the 1940s was progressively wearing out. Their offspring welcomed the possibility to replenish the family income and had no interest in permanently working only on the farm. The peasants themselves often chose to work out of their farm, they went away from the locality and farming was left to women and children. The life of the individually farming peasant became unattractive to future generations. The relationship to land was gradually fading, even though it survived through participation in seasonal work. During the harvest, people took leave from work to help their parents together with their dependants gather hay or potatoes. Even though money for delivered and sold products (e.g. cattle) was a welcome contribution to the family budget, the new generation would find it very difficult to give up the regular financial income of other jobs in favour of the unsure income from agriculture.

It can be stated that the relationship to land and farming in small-scale farming conditions has faded, even in families who carried on farming much longer than the overall Slovak average, i.e. by the end of 70s and 80s. Denationalization of agriculture did not markedly change this trend. Neither those who were pulled from work nor the unemployed who had the opportunity to take over the land inherited from their ancestors, turned back to farming.

VOLUNTARY ACTIVITIES

The structure of communities and associations also changed with reference to the sphere of voluntary activities in the rural community. New associations, which until then either had a limited scope of activities or did not exist, have been established and recently started to develop their activities (Feglová 1999:195). These were mostly church and charity associations. In the past, inhabitants did openly admit to their religion, engage in church communities, and conduct religious activities. However, the scope of these activities was limited by the awareness that they might be sanctioned for participating in them. (This sometimes happened as a result of envious cohabitants, who reported them to administrative or political organizations who then executed political or social sanctions.) Activities in

church communities as well as religious life started to develop more freely and with extended scope after the political turnover. Some continue in their tradition. Parishes continue in maintaining the churches, their decoration, and arrangement. They still participate in prayer groups, e.g. rosary and Virgin Mary associations. So called "Pilgrimage tourism," has developed in depth (organised trips to pilgrimage centres and religious ceremonies at more distinguished localities). The Church itself, community clubs (e.g. local brass instrument music groups, fire fighting associations/brigades), as well as educational and other institutions, all participate in the preparation of local church activities, such as church dedication feasts, Eucharistic ceremonies, and the celebration of feasts dedicated to the Virgin Mary feasts, etc (Škovierová 2006:15-16; Nádaská 2006).

There was also a great deal of importance and activity by associations operating with the objective to preserve and develop the ethno cultural uniqueness of ethnic minorities in the village (e.g. Croatian, German, Jewish, Romany, etc.) (Botík 2001, Škovierová 2006:17; Salner 1995).

Until the political turnover of 1989 some ethnic and religious communities were not allowed to associate or organise openly. At the end of 20th century they welcomed the opportunity to declare their identity and develop cultural and social activities. Several of them started to cooperate with institutions operating in their native ethnic groups (e.g. German and Jewish). Others cooperated with similar organizations in other states.

Associations and activities aimed at promoting the culture of a certain locality and supporting tourism are being developed. It is beneficial mainly for villages with high unemployment rates. Many industrial and agricultural enterprises that had once employed inhabitants in the region have since closed. With the assistance of local self-government employees and other institutions, associations are looking into the opportunities in applying the geographical, cultural, and social potential of the localities. Slovakia is rich in natural beauty and geographical uniqueness. It is rich in miscellaneous living cultural traditions. These also comprise the traditions of ethnic minorities living in Slovakia.

Local inhabitants often support traditional folklore events. There are certain customs and celebrations of particular calendar feasts (dances and carnival processions through the village at Shrovetide, Easter visits connected

with pouring water, setting up Maypoles and dances, fairs, etc.) An attractive atmosphere is also maintained during various work customs and their final ceremonies (the harvest festival, picking of grapes, pressing cabbage into casks, end of sheep pasture season, etc.) Various folklore manifestations are visible, sometimes age-old customs are revitalised and demonstrated in a changed function. Their role is to increase the number of visitors to a locality or facility. They should also attract the attention of compatriots from the village, or those who moved long ago, as well as foreigners.

Inhabitants are trying to learn how to utilise the specificities of localities and regions, so that the whole locality and its inhabitants can profit economically. Often, however, they lack the skills to prepare applications for funds (the so called know-how). These processes are also developed through non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and various civil associations which are currently being established. In some places they are successful, in others they are only learning to formulate and prepare projects that can be funded by the European Union, as Slovakia is a member state (Nádaská 2006).

Recently, various environmental movements and societies have increased their activities in an effort to protect the country's natural wealth, limit its use by visitors, and preserve it for future generations. They support the preservation of local natural particularities and informing the public about environmental protection (Škovierová 2006).

The presence and activity of rural community leaders is essential with regards to the proper operation of the above associations. These individuals, who are authorities, can motivate others, get them involved, and lead a team. They work mainly as unpaid volunteers and their motivation is usually the improvement of community life, contact with people, and altruism, as well as religious belief. Although the financial value of time dedicated to voluntary activities has recently increased, participation of such personalities in localities continues and contributes to the integrity of their inhabitants.

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RECENTNI PROBLEMI SOCIJALNE KULTURE I ETNOLOGIJE U SLOVAČKOJ

Sažetak

Ovaj se članak bavi pojedinim problemima društvenih odnosa u ruralnim zajednicama u Slovačkoj na prijelazu iz 20. u 21. stoljeće, koji su postali predmetom etnoloških istraživanja. Politički prevrat iz 1989. godine u bivšoj Čehoslovačkoj bio je važan poticaj za promjene.

Nakon 1990-ih bivše je socijalističko kolektivno vlasništvo nestalo, a privatno vlasništvo nad poljoprivrednim i šumskim zemljištem, koje je do tada država besplatno eksploatirala preko nametnutih zadruga, ponovno je uspostavljeno. U razdoblju nakon političkog prevrata vlasnički, korisnički i zaposlenički odnosi lokalnog stanovništva znatno su prošireni. Sukobi interesa doveli su, međutim, do napetosti i konflikata u zajedničkom životu stanovnika, ne samo unutar jedne zajednice, već često i među članovima jedne obitelji i srodnicima. Socijalna struktura stanovništva se promijenila: s jedne strane stvoren je nov društveni sloj poduzetnika i trgovaca, a s druge strane sloj nezaposlenih i siromašnih ljudi.

I na području dobrovoljnih aktivnosti promijenila se struktura zajednica i organizacija koje su postojale u ruralnim područjima. Nova društva, koja su do tada imala vrlo uzak krug djelatnosti ili nisu uopće postojala, sada su uspostavljena (crkve i dobrotvorne organizacije, udruge koje su se posvetile razvoju i očuvanju etnokulturne jedinstvenosti etničkih manjina u ruralnim područjima, na primjer njemačke ili židovske zajednice itd.).

Druga česta tema suvremenih etnoloških istraživanja jest utjecaj religije na svakodnevnu kulturu. Crkve koje su zabranjivane ili su sasvim nestale tijekom 1940-ih i 1950-ih (na primjer židovska ili grčka katolička crkva) ponovno su uspostavljene nakon 1989. godine. Njihova ponovna uspostava rezultirala je brojnim imovinskim tužbama postojećih vlasnika njihove imovine, na primjer države, građana ili drugih crkvenih zajednica koje nisu bile zabranjivane.

Etnologija također proučava i djelatnosti novouspostavljenih nevladinih udruga u selima, među kojima su i one koje promoviraju lokalnu kulturu i podupiru razvoj turizma. To je izuzetno korisno u selima s visokom stopom nezaposlenosti što je posljedica zatvaranja industrijskih pogona i poljoprivrednih poduzeća u kojima se stanovništvo zapošljavalo. Trenutno postoje i različiti ekološki pokreti i udruge koje rade na očuvanju prirodnih bogatstava za sljedeće generacije. Sudjelovanje u navedenim, ali i ostalim dobrovoljnim aktivnostima učvršćuje osjećaj zajedništva među lokalnom populacijom.

Ključne riječi: vlasnički odnosi, reprivatizacija, dobrovoljne aktivnosti, udruge u ruralnim zajednicama

