

Cultural education of the Hutsuls. Historical and contemporary contexts

Anna Haratyk / e-mail: a.haratyk@wp.pl
Institute of Pedagogy, University of Wrocław, Poland

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The Hutsuls – an ethnic highlander group inhabiting Eastern Carpathians in the Ukraine have constantly made efforts to organise cultural education of their young generations. Throughout the ages the level of involvement of families, local communities, professional circles, and schools in culture and education has varied. Until the second half of the 20th century the duty of forming cultural identity lay with families, as well as local communities and professional circles. The work of schools was made difficult by ideological and political factors. It was only in the 1990s that schools have become free to engage in the development of regional education. The curricula related to the Hutsul culture on the preschool level, as well as all the other levels of education, can serve as an example of the efforts that Hutsuls have made to preserve their culture and ethnic identity and to promote the traditions that they have shaped through the ages in their country as well as abroad.

Key words: *cultural education; ethnic group; ethnic identity; Hutsuls*

The Hutsuls are one of the ethnic groups inhabiting the Carpathians. They inhabit their eastern part, which currently belongs to the Ukraine. In this picturesque region, marked by lines of brooks, rivers, mountain ranges and which is covered with forests they have created an enormously rich culture. And despite the fact that the Hutsuls just like all the other groups of Carpathian highlanders are the descendants of Wallachian shepherds who have inhabited the Carpathians since the 15th century their culture has developed numerous distinct traits.

It is not only ethnicity, but also nationality that shape the culture of a region, and, as it is commonly known, the Hutsul lands and their inhabitants were frequently required to change their nationality throughout the ages¹. Being a part of a particular state is also one of the fundamental elements influencing the cultural education of an ethnic

¹ The Eastern Carpathians used to be a part of Hungary, Poland, Moldova, Austria and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Czechoslovakia, Romania, the USSR.

group. Changing borders often lead to changes in culture and the education that includes it. It can be stated that despite these changes in nationality the characteristic location of the Hutsul region lead to a certain isolation in which their culture could be created, to a large extent, away from outside influences. Families and villages were the cradles of culture. In the rather primal conditions the culture developed without written sources, which limited its opportunity to spread outside the original region.

When analysing the process of how a culture is passed down to subsequent generations one ought to first and foremost take into account the environments that take part in education. Such environments include, i.a., families, local and professional communities, schools, cultural and educational organisations, etc. What is of crucial importance to cultural transfer is also whether an ethnic group inhabits its indigenous territory, or whether it inhabits an “alien” one (e.g. because of migration or forced resettlement).

The basic and the primal environments responsible for cultural education were and should still be families and local communities. Families, especially in rural areas, until the turn of the 20th century served the role of the fundamental community in which the transfer of tradition, customs, ideas, knowledge, and ways of thinking took place. Thus, they constituted the most important unit in the social structure that made the preservation of ethnic culture possible².

Children’s first encounter with the traditions, rituals, and norms of social life took place in a family environment, that is why the non-formal duty to introduce children to culture lay with the parents and the grandparents, with the members of the nuclear and the extended family. Fathers, as heads of household, were responsible for all the family members’ abiding of the customary law. That is why it was their duty to pass the law down to their children³. They were also required to uphold the traditions and rituals accompanying, e.g., religious celebrations, work, and farm and household chores. In their efforts they were supported by mothers, who were responsible for the household, household customs, rules, and norms. Even though in the households the women/mothers had many duties, it was the men who dominated the social life, rich in traditions and customs, and that is why it was their

² Чмелик, Л. (1999). *Мала українська селянська сім’я другої половини ХІХ – початку ХХ ст. (Структура і функції)*. Львів, pp. 138–139.

³ Гошко, Ю. (1999). *Звичаєве право населення українських Карпат та Прикарпаття ХІV–ХІХ ст.* Львів, p. 262, pp. 230–231.

responsibility to pass the culture down to boys. However, because of the natural order of things it was the mothers who introduced the youngest to the world of the culture of the household and the family. Fathers were busy working on the farm or elsewhere to provide for their wives and children, that is why their opportunities to participate directly in upbringing were limited. What constituted another problem was the specificity of the work that the Hutsuls were typically engaged in. They would deal with shepherding as well as logging and rafting, which is why they were often away from home. These professions were also a part of the lifestyle and the culture of this ethnic group, that is why that fact that men would be temporarily not present at home became one of their elements; an element to which children and other family members had to get used to.

The families were supported by the local communities that functioned according to the norms and traditions instilled in children by their parents and relatives. In the case of the Hutsuls the family was certainly of primary importance because of, among others, the large distances between households. The distances between neighbours were so vast that they resulted in minor cultural differences, e.g., in speech (“in each cottage a different tongue”), singing, playing musical instruments, etc⁴. Apart from families, the cultural development of boys was significantly influenced by the professional group of shepherds. A substantial part of the adult male population used to deal with shepherding, and minors would often help out in the works on the meadows. Shepherding was associated with a richness of rituals, so boys not only learned their future job, but also traditions and customs. Among the shepherds a flock master called “baca” or “watah” played the role of an educator. He became the guardian for adult shepherds as well as their young (often very young) helpers. Taking great care to make sure that they followed customs and rituals he used to shape the shepherd culture and to instil it in all those working on the meadows. The rules that the shepherds had to abide often had to be followed by other inhabitants of the villages, as well, which not only proves that the influence of the “watahs” was substantial, but also that the men educated by the “watahs” passed their knowledge on to their families at home.

It was much later that cultural education was shaped by other professional groups, such as lumberjacks and “kermyczans” (raftsmen). That was because these occupations were particularly dangerous and they required physical strength, agility, and maturity.

⁴ Witwicki, S. (1863). *Rys historyczny o Huculach*. Lwów, p. 98.

Children, when taking part in various celebrations, rituals, and holidays, learned traditions and thus shaped in a natural way their cultural identity. Schooling in Eastern Carpathians was underdeveloped until nearly the second half of the 20th century, which resulted in families and the local communities playing the key roles in cultural education of the Hutsuls. The existing schools were often far away from where children lived and they only provided elementary level education and that without any regard to the cultural character of the region, which is why they did not have an opportunity to become involved in the regional culture and in shaping ethnic identity. Taking into account that until the second half of the 20th century most of the inhabitants of the Hutsul region were illiterate, oral tradition became natural in the immediate family environments, neighbourhoods, and professional circles.

Until 1939 there was only one secondary school in the Hutsul region – it was a gymnasium in Vyzhnytsia – and it had no part in shaping ethnic identity, because it was attended by few Hutsuls. Most of the students came from the śniatyński and the horodenkowski regions. What was another problem in spreading the regional culture in schools was that the different parts of the Hutsul lands were inhabited by different nationalities, among others, Poles (the Halicka part), Romanians and Germans (Buchenland), Hungarians (Subcarpathia), and Jews⁵. Each of these nations was better educated than the Hutsuls and that is why they established schools in which their national languages were used in class, rather than Ukrainian. As a result, it was their own national cultures that they promoted, not the Hutsul culture. The lack of educated individuals of Hutsul ethnicity led to the fact that the schools were ran by “alien” staff who did not know the cultural character of the region, and who were loyal to the contemporary governments⁶.

The first serious attempts to teach in Ukrainian were made after 1918, but the aim of the education was to shape Ukrainian identity, rather than the Hutsul one. This was caused by a short-lived attempt made by Ukrainians to establish their own independent state. The only element that connected education with the Hutsul culture was the directive to design and build schools in the Hutsul style⁷.

⁵ Курищук, В. – Пелипейко, І. (2001). *Освіта на Гуцульщині. Історія Гуцульщини*, vol. VI, Львів, p. 221.

⁶ *Товариство Взаїмна Поміч Українського Вчительства 1905–1930 (1932)*. Львів, p. 15.

⁷ Курищук, В. – Пелипейко, І., op. cit., p. 222.

The situation of the schooling system was to change after the Second World War, when a new political and administrative order was established in Europe. There was now hope that schools may become an environment shaping national, regional, ethnic, and cultural identities. Unfortunately, the Ukraine and with it the Eastern Carpathians were under the Soviet rule. Throughout a few post-war decades the schools in the Hutsul regions promoted the “only true” Soviet ideology, diminishing the importance of ethnic culture. All expressions of cultural identity that were not connected with the culture of the USSR were not accepted, which is why the Hutsuls, with their individuality, their strong sense of cultural identity, and even of national identity, so to say (they would call the region where they lived “the Hutsul Country”), were looked down on by the authorities. The Soviet administration took steps to marginalise the Hutsul culture.

The USSR government had a particularly destructive influence on the Hutsul culture. The Hutsul were forced to participate in collective farming and they were resettled, which is why their villages became depopulated. It should, however, be clearly stated that all the actions of Soviet authorities were to no avail, because the Hutsul highlanders, people of strong personality and powerful will, kept their traditions, customs, and lifestyle of old, and they preserved all the elements of the material and spiritual culture of their ancestors.

Even though the soviet authorities allowed schools to use Ukrainian throughout the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, and there were many individuals of Hutsul ancestry among the teaching staff, the dominating ideology limited the opportunities of regional education to develop. To reinforce Soviet order and culture the authorities sent people from the furthest regions of the USSR to work in schools in the Hutsul region. The Hutsul traditions were altogether alien to them. Teachers used to fear and loathe being sent into the “wild” and unfamiliar mountains (the fear was fuelled by official propaganda). If the teachers fulfilled their duties perfectly (in the eyes of the highlanders), if they worked hard and treated the children well, they were soon accepted by the local population. However, they did not contribute to the development of the regional education, because they themselves had to learn the very basics of the culture within which they would start the new stage of their lives. Unfortunately, the teachers who were “sent into exile” to “the Hutsul Country” accepted the local culture and integrated with the indigenous people. Many of the staff were formed by the ideology of the communist authorities and they would fully devote themselves to educate the children and the youth in the Marxist-Leninist spirit. They would instil in

their students the idea that the USSR was the one and only perfect country⁸. In accordance with these notions, the children were forbidden to follow regional and religious traditions, the local authorities were undermined, and attempts were made to eliminate local patriotism and substitute it with the idea of the one great motherland. Cultural and ideological education organised by the families and the local communities on the one hand, and the education at school on the other, were entirely contradictory. This situation made it necessary for the Hutsul community to keep their ideas secret, and, to a certain extent, to keep secret their own culture.

In the 1940s and the 1950s the students were not only forced to take part in ideological initiatives that were contrary to their traditions, but also the parents who tried to teach their children some rules and norms contrary to communist values were persecuted⁹. Although many teachers distanced themselves from regulations of the authorities, these conditions nevertheless made it difficult to develop regional cultural education in schools. The first step that was taken at the beginning of the 1990s was to cleanse the teaching staff of communist party members and the curricula of communist ideas. In spite of numerous problems, typically of economic nature (the lack of funds to build schools – many construction projects were halted – and to pay teachers' salaries), the Hutsuls used their chance to help regional education develop. That is why now the educational and cultural efforts of families and local communities are supported by pre-school and school institutions. The model examples are the kindergarten "Hucufeczka" in Ivano-Frankivsk and 3rd Stage Secondary School in Yavoriv. Both these institutions organise education on the basis of original curricula rooted in the Hutsul culture.

The kindergarten has been established in the 1970s by the initiative of Tamara Hrycaj and although it is located in an urban area, among post-soviet blocks of flats, its interior resembles that of a Hutsul house. The rooms in the kindergarten are almost fully equipped in the Hutsul style. The furniture is made according to the designs found in the highlanders' cottages and sheds, and children become familiar with the functioning of a traditional household, of shepherding, and of lumbering.

The didactic and educational work is conducted in accordance with the original curriculum developed by Tamara Hrycaj, Lubomira Kałuska, and Ludmiła Czmetyk. It is on this basis that children broaden their knowledge of the region, they learn of the culture, the living conditions,

⁸ Ibidem, p. 223.

⁹ „Освітняський вісник” (1995), pp. 2–4.

traditional regional occupations, the regional craftsmanship and artistic handiwork, elements of material and spiritual culture, and form bonds with their small motherland¹⁰. In the forms of fun and the games the children are provided with knowledge about the history of the region, the natural environment of the Carpathians, dialects, customary law, tales and legends, traditions and customs, etc. The kindergarteners practice folk art by learning to dance and sing, to play musical instruments, to make simple decorations and do simple handiwork (e.g. painted Easter Eggs, decorations on pottery, weaving, embroidery, making decorations from beads and leather). In their leisure time they can play with dolls in traditional Hutsul outfits, utensils used in the households, and wooden tools and utensils made by Hutsul craftsmen as well as the members of the kindergarten staff. The children, then, use hand-made utensils and toys: sculptured, sown, embroidered, or made of clay, cheese, and straw, etc.

The kindergarteners are also provided with food that helps them become accustomed with the culture of the region. On the menu one can find traditional Hutsul dishes, among others: pierogi, banosz (hominy), vegetable salads, borscht, cheesecake, cabbage rolls, fruit cream, etc¹¹.

All the kindergarten facilities are somehow connected with the region: the changing rooms, the classrooms, and the bedrooms. There are children-sized replicas of chests, cradles, furniture, wells, horse carriages, etc., and the kindergarten groups have regional names, such as “Pisanka”, “Hucułka”, “Wyszywanka” (“Easter Egg”, “The Little Hutsul”, “Embroidery”).

In comparison with the previous decades, the participation of the contemporary Hutsul schools in cultural education has also increased substantially. A number of initiatives have been undertaken in cooperation with the local communities and the families. Hutsul educational activists have made a successful attempt to establish regional schooling and to prepare the teaching staff to work with original and experimental curricula.

Thanks to the initiative of Petro Łosiuk – headmaster in a secondary school in Yavoriv – the local schools have become an environment that supports families and local communities in cultural education. A number of Hutsul activists led by P. Łosiuk have started the Hutsul Educational Council [HEC], which focuses on developing curricula and teaching

¹⁰ Калуска, Л. – Чмелик, Л. – Грицай, Т. *Програма ознайомлення дітей старшого дошкільного віку з Гуцульщиною*. Івано-Франківськ, undated typescript, pp. 1–3.

¹¹ Interview with Tamara Hrycaj, Ivano-Frankivsk, 31. 08. 2006.

standards concurrent with the character of the region. With the HEC a research laboratory named "Hutsul ethnopedagogics and Hutsul studies" has been established. The centre supervises regional education and publishes books in the "Hutsul school library" series. These publications are used by teachers in the didactic process.

Fundamental to the didactic and educational work of the region is the idea of the "Hutsul studies", that is, knowledge about the Hutsul region, including problems of folklore, dialects, history, nature, economy, folk art, customs and traditions, social relations, living conditions, as well as material and spiritual culture¹². Elements of Hutsul studies have been included in the curricula of nearly all the school subjects, e.g. Ukrainian, history, geography, biology, music, art, physical education, IT, etc.

What has become the basis of regional education in schools is first and foremost the decision of the HEC activists to introduce the subject named "Hutsul studies" in all the schools of the Hutsul region. Its curriculum named **"Орієнтовна програма з гуцульщинознавства для загальноосвітніх шкіл, гімназій, ліцеїв та вищих навчальних закладів"** (Core curriculum in Hutsul studies for lyceums, gymnasiums, and universities) gives the teachers the opportunity to introduce their own original curricula. Taking into account the fact that the Hutsuls are also Ukrainians, the curricula of the Hutsul studies has been included in the idea of the Ukrainian national school.

The implementation of the curriculum is made easier for the students and the teachers by course books such as: **"Плай"** (1996, a collection of works of literature about the Hutsul region, with its history, culture, and nature), **"Флояра"** (1999, a collection of the works of regional oral tradition), **"Хрестоматія з гуцульщинознавства"** ("Chrestomathy of Hutsul studies", 2001, a collection of fundamental information about the region), **"Гуцульщинознавство в українській національній школі"** ("Hutsul studies in the Ukrainian national school", 2001, includes papers in many disciplines), **"Мій рідний край"** ("My motherland"), **"Гуцульська різьба та інкрустація"** ("Hutsul sculptures and incrustations"), etc.

It has been stated that the fundamentals of Hutsul pedagogy come from the great grandparents, grandparents, fathers, mothers, families, local communities, the mother tongue, mountains, meadows, forests, rivers and brooks, the bright sky and the sun, the heart, the spirit, and the human sensitivity, the brigand tradition, and devotion to the small motherland¹³. The regional cultural education can be called ethnopedagogy. Rooting education in the tradition of the local

¹² Лосюк, П. (2001). *Гуцульщинознавство в українській національній школі*. Косів, р. 8.

communities does not imply the backwardness of the schools, because the latter are open to the needs of the students and to all the innovations of modern technology. The Hutsul studies curriculum can also be implemented in many different ways, among others in the form of a separate schools subject, extra or facultative classes, or during the regular classes of other subjects as part of the standard education process¹⁴. There are three variants of the curriculum: “Systematic course in Hutsul studies” (typically for classes of older children, from lyceums and universities), “Hutsul studies in the process of teaching different subjects”, and “Literature of the small motherland”. It needs to be emphasised that the full implementation of the curriculum requires certain facilities such as rooms for dance classes, workshops for classes in handiwork and art, soil for gardening, and even barns for farm animals.

The activists of the Hutsul Education Council have emphasised the enormous influence of folk art on the forming of the attitudes towards the region. That is why educational institutions implementing the ideas of Hutsul studies have been supplied with works of Hutsul handicraft, e.g., wooden sculptures, tapestry, ližniks (wool blankets), embroidered towels, pottery. Regional rooms are also set up in schools. These are often historical and ethnographic museums of particular villages and towns, and a lot of effort is put into development of children’s artistic skills in the didactic process. Education in regional art is supported by two colleges of fine and applied arts in Vyzhnytsia and Kosiv. Students of these schools have the opportunity to learn traditional methods of manufacturing and decorating of the objects that Hutsuls worked with and which they used to decorate the space they inhabited.

The staff of the institutions organising Hutsul regional education cooperate with their students’ families in order to support the educational influence and promote the love for the region and its culture among adults¹⁵. The school teachers in the Hutsul region, apart from their didactic work, are also engaged in research, art, and social actions. They are authors of numerous scientific papers, they create Hutsul works of art and they are amateurs of the activities of the population of mountain villages.

The educational work of the families, the society, and the schools is contemporarily supported by cultural and tourist centres, art schools, and

¹³ Ibidem, p. 20.

¹⁴ *Орієнтовна програма з гуцульщинознавства для загальноосвітніх шкіл, гімназій, ліцеїв та вищих навчальних закладів* (1999), p. 3–4.

¹⁵ Лосюк, П. *Гуцульщинознавство ...*, op. cit., p. 37.

folk music bands that promote the regional culture not only among the youngest generations of the Hutsul lands.

The necessity to organise cultural education that shapes ethnic identity has also occurred among Hutsul immigrant communities in Canada (many Hutsuls migrated because of economic reasons in, e.g., the 19th century). When one migrates to a culturally different country it is difficult to expect much of the education provided by local schools (unless it is possible to set up a school for a group of immigrants). Educational work must thus be done by family environments and cultural and educational organisations outside the school system. In order to preserve their identity in a country of a different culture the Hutsul diaspora have intensified their cultural education within families and in cultural associations and organisations (e.g. in folk music bands), and they have organised education in their native language.

Regardless of the time, the place, the political situation, and the ideologies imposed by governments the Hutsuls, like all highlanders, of whom O. Kolberg wrote that they are “slow” to accept anything that is contrary to the traditions that they follow in spite of persuasions to abandon their customs¹⁶, and regardless of all the difficulties that they had to face, they have been successful in preserving their ethnic culture. Ambitious and honourable, they have never surrendered to the pressure of people and governments that have tried to impose their will upon them and undermine the importance of their culture. They have taken care to develop ethnic education of children and youth in the age of globalisation and the attempts made by the Ukraine to become a part of multicultural Europe.

¹⁶ Kolberg, O. (1970). *Dzieła wszystkie. Ruś Karpacka*, pt. I, vol. 54. Warszawa, pp. 47–48.