

# New Perspectives for Living Traditions: Intangible Cultural Heritage in North-East Hungary

ARNOLD TÓTH\* 

Herman Ottó Museum, Miskolc, Hungary

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## ABSTRACT

The UNESCO World Heritage Convention (1972) was originally focused on nature conservation and built heritage. The immaterial aspect of the worldwide heritage discourse arrived at a turning point in 2003, when the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage was adopted. The definition of the intangible cultural heritage provides essential frames for a wide range of interpretations. The UNESCO concept focuses on inclusive, representative and community-based traditions which are contemporary and living at the same time. In this sense, the intangible cultural heritage conception is based on the fundamental dichotomy of tradition and modernity. For the communities concerned, a new perspective for living traditions is the process from tradition to heritage. There are four essential features of this process: participation, consciousness, organization and valorization. They can make a difference between tradition and heritage. The Hungarian model for the implementation of the UNESCO Convention is based on a bottom-up system, where the heritage bearers themselves initiate the nomination process for the National Inventory. It is based on their strong commitment to their heritage and it relies on their involvement and participation. In this paper, three case studies from North-East Hungary (Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County) represent different ways of “creating a heritage.” The various patterns are closely related to the ideas of identity, community cohesion, tourism, local economy and the preservation of living traditions.

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## KEYWORDS

intangible cultural heritage, identity, local communities, participation

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\* Corresponding author. E-mail: totharnold.miskolc@gmail.com

## THEORETICAL FRAMES – FROM TRADITION TO HERITAGE

In the 1990s, a worldwide immaterial turn of the heritage discourse occurred. As a starting point, the UNESCO World Heritage Convention (1972) was originally focused on nature conservation and material cultural properties, such as built heritage, historical monuments and archaeological sites. At the very beginning of the implementation of the international convention, the aspect of the preservation of non-material (intangible) cultural phenomena arose (KESZEI 2003). Various interpretations of the notion “cultural heritage” initiated a discourse about the basic problems and conceptual frames of intangible heritage, like folklore, language, handicrafts, religion, beliefs or national and ethnic history (SONKOLY 2000:58–59). The theoretical turn from the tangible heritage concept to the intangible one was a long process (HOPPÁL – CSONKA-TAKÁCS 1999; SOÓS 2010:6). The Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage was adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO in Paris relatively late, in 2003.

For the purposes of the convention, the UNESCO general conference determined a definition. Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) means “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” (CSONKA-TAKÁCS 2010:8).

The definition provides the essential framework for a wide range of interpretations. As a legal and pragmatic document, the convention includes characteristic examples to appoint the typical manifestations of intangible cultural heritage:

- (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of intangible cultural heritage;
- (b) performing arts;
- (c) social practices, rituals and festive events;
- (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;
- (e) traditional craftsmanship (CSONKA-TAKÁCS 2010:8).

The UNESCO concept of Intangible Cultural Heritage focuses on inclusive, representative and community-based traditions which are contemporary and living at the same time. The definition covers not only “inherited traditions from the past but also contemporary rural and urban practices in which diverse cultural groups take part” (UNESCO 2011). The “contemporary and living” features have an outstanding importance: various traditional elements of culture are regarded as heritage only if the living practice of the contemporary communities can be documented. The living heritage is more or less inclusive, but always “has been passed from one generation to another, has evolved in response to their environments and contributes to giving us a sense of identity and continuity, providing a link from our past, through the present, and into our future” (UNESCO 2011). It contributes to social cohesion, and helps individuals feel part of one or different communities and part of society at large. Intangible Cultural Heritage is representative: it is “not merely valued as a cultural good on a comparative basis for its exclusivity or its exceptional value. It thrives on its basis in communities and depends on those whose knowledge of traditions, skills and customs are passed on to the rest of the community or to other communities, from generation to generation” (UNESCO 2011). The most important characteristic is the community-based feature. Any cultural phenomenon can only be heritage “when it is recognized as such by the communities, groups or individuals that create,

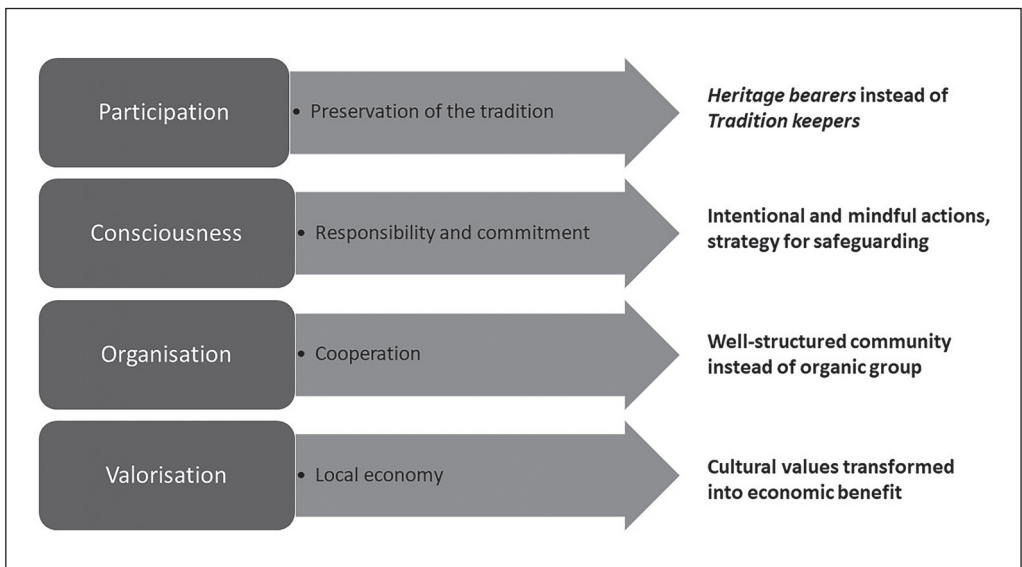


maintain and transmit it – without their recognition, nobody else can decide for them that a given expression or practice is their heritage” (UNESCO 2011; SOÓS 2008:38; JACOBS 2016).

The concept of intangible cultural heritage is based on the fundamental dichotomy of tradition and modernity. The transition of the traditional cultural frames transforms the attitudes of the communities concerned. A possible way of preserving local, ethnic and traditional culture is the process from tradition to heritage. Intentional caring for one’s traditions means a conscious decision to face the challenges of nationalism, globalism and multiculturalism (SUKALA 1999; HOPPÁL 2008).

What distinguishes the difference between tradition and heritage? There are some characteristic features of the intangible cultural heritage concept (Fig. 1). The first is *participation*: the members of the community are involved and personally concerned in the preservation of the tradition. The “preservation practices” turn into “safeguarding strategies” while the “tradition keepers” transform to “heritage bearers” – and the intangible heritage establishes powerful frames for local, regional, ethnic, lingual, etc. identities.

The second feature is *consciousness*: in opposition to the “tradition keepers,” the “heritage bearers” do their activities intentionally and mindfully; they feel responsible for their heritage; they are highly committed to their common values and develop a strategy for safeguarding their heritage. The third feature is *organization*: while tradition is supposed to be organic, heritage is an artificially organized social category. The heritage bearing community is presumably a well-structured social group which is ready for cooperation with the members of their community or any officials and other actors. The most important distinction is the fourth feature, *valorization*: heritage is involved in the local economy wherein the values of a safeguarded cultural



**Fig. 1.** From tradition to heritage. Essential characteristics of creating a heritage. (Figure by the author, based on ILLÉS 2018)



phenomenon can be transformed into economic benefit, e. g. handicraft products, festivals, touristic brands, gastronomy (ILLÉS 2018:109–110).

Hungary joined the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006. Since then, over the last fifteen years, the heritage conception has been a new perspective for living traditions. Many communities have successfully transformed their tradition into heritage as shown by the forthcoming examples. Even so, the majority of living traditions failed on their way to the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Since 2009, in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County (North-East Hungary), only three of the possible 10–15 communities were able to fulfill the requirements of the nomination process, to develop safeguarding strategies and to activate themselves for common goals (Fig. 2). All others had irresolvable difficulties: lack of consciousness, lack of commitment, or lack of collaboration.

## APPLIED METHODS – NATIONAL INVENTORIES, NETWORKING

The concept of *Creative Heritage* in Hungary is closely related to the theoretical and applied aspects of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention. The introduction process of the Convention in Hungary in the period from 2003 to 2006 was relatively fast. As a first step of the implementation, the institutional frameworks were established, starting in 2008. “The Intangible



**Fig. 2.** Elements of the National inventory of intangible cultural heritage in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county. (Map by Zoltán Nagy)



Cultural Heritage Expert Committee of the Hungarian National Commission for UNESCO is an advisory body to the minister responsible for cultural heritage. It has 22 permanent voting members and seven permanent members with the right of consultation. The members are delegated by institutions, organizations and ministries relevant to intangible heritage” (SZKÖ 2021a). Since 2009, the main operational body has been the Directorate of Intangible Cultural Heritage, an organizational unit of the Hungarian Open Air Museum in Szentendre. “In accordance with the aims of UNESCO, the States Parties shall identify intangible cultural heritage elements within their territories and draw up inventories.” In 2009 two lists were established “in service of safeguarding Hungary’s intangible cultural heritage, the National Inventory and the National Register of the Best Safeguarding Practices” (SZKÖ 2021b).

The National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage has 42 elements, alongside the nine elements of the National Register of the Best Safeguarding Practices in 2021. “In Hungary, the guiding principle for the implementation of the UNESCO ICH is that the nomination for the National Inventory and for the National Register of the Best Safeguarding Practices must be initiated by the relevant communities themselves. Communities must also play a primary role in preparing the bulk of documentation as well as in developing and implementing effective measures for protecting the element” (SZKÖ 2021c). The Hungarian model for the implementation of the UNESCO Convention is based on a bottom-up system, where the heritage bearers themselves initiate the nomination process for the National Inventory. It is based on their strong commitment to their heritage and it relies on their involvement and participation. During this bottom-up nomination process and after registration in the National Inventory, the community’s selected tradition transforms into heritage. Research on this process raises many questions about the dual concept of tradition and heritage, while attitudes and pragmatic solutions in the relevant communities are also changing radically.

For these purposes, it was important from the very beginning to build a strong network around the topic. As a bottom-up system was set up for developing the national inventories, an important question arose at the outset: how to reach the bearers themselves? A nation-wide networking system was developed, including regional experts (museum professionals, ethnographers and folklorists) called *county rapporteurs*, whose role is to provide direct aid to the relevant communities.

In each county (there are 19 counties in Hungarian public administration), an expert from among the regional museum’s staff is entrusted with the tasks of coordinating and facilitating promotion and awareness-raising, giving professional guidance to the given communities. These tasks include providing information to communities, offering direct aid in the nomination process, linking the communities with experts and organizing local forums and meetings.

In addition to the county rapporteurs, a second network was established right from the start. The *Circle of Consciously Safeguarding Communities* [Tudatos Örökségvédő Közösségek Köre “TÖKK”] is for the communities registered in the National Inventory. They have meetings each year at the Withsun Festival, which is an international heritage event of the Open Air Museum in Szentendre. The aim of the circle is to build connections between the various communities concerned, which are typically small and come from different localities all around Hungary. Communities have an opportunity to exchange experience and information on good practices in safeguarding. These Withsun Festival sessions also address thematic issues. For example, one session was dedicated to the legal aspects of intangible cultural heritage. Over the last decade, an unexpected result has been that communities mutually invite one another to their events.



In doing so, they began to develop their own network, aimed at learning from each other's methods, safeguarding strategies and practical forms of heritage protection (SZKÖ 2021d; CSONKA-TAKÁCS 2017:123–124).

## CASE STUDIES

The process of *heritage creation* outlined above will be explained here by three case studies from North-East Hungary, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County. All three of them are inscribed heritage elements on the National Inventory, each case representing different and typical patterns of heritage creation.

### The Matyó heritage – the living traditions of embroidery, costume, and folklore

In the South-Borsod *Bükkalja* region, the residents of three localities (Mezőkövesd, Tard, Szentistván) identify themselves as *Matyó*<sup>1</sup> people, and incorporate several elements of their *Matyó heritage* (folk art, religious traditions, folk customs and rituals, traditional handicrafts and trades, folk dance, songs and music, poetry, and a language dialect) in their daily lives and celebrations (Fig. 3).

The unique folk art of the Matyó people developed as a result of their traditional folk culture, social structure and way of life, deeply rooted in a fervent Catholicism. The ethnic group was formed at the turn of the 18–19th centuries. Strong demographic growth in the 18th century and the agricultural boom of the early 19th century played a fundamental role in shaping this distinctive ethnic group. The large market town of Mezőkövesd and its two neighboring villages had close economic and cultural contacts with settlements in the surrounding Borsod regions (VISZÓCZKY – VIGA 2006:2). At the time of the formulation of the Hungarian national cultural identity (at the turn of the 19th–20th centuries), Matyó folk art gained a widespread popularity as an emblematic expression of “Hungarian-ness” (FÜGEDI 2001:46–86). Hungarian popular culture and the image of folklore, along with the world of peasant craft-products, have been strongly determined by the Matyó ethnic group, which became famous during the Millennium celebrations of the Hungarian State in 1896. Matyó folklore – among some other ethnic and geographic groups – “has created the image of Hungarian peasant culture, values and beauties. This image has influenced scientific research, efforts in favor of national art and the aspect of general taste, the domestic industry and, through linked transmissions, trade and tourism as well” (FÜGEDI 2001:105).

The *Matyó* culture is not a static heritage, but one that is in a constant flux, ever recreated in content by the community that lives it, and this vibrancy reinforces a sense of identity in successive generations. Today, the local community is very complex. Everyone who lives in the town of Mezőkövesd (17,000 inhabitants) and the neighboring two villages, has to shape his or her attitudes toward heritage. Of course, there are many groups of specialists, who are the

<sup>1</sup>The *Matyó* ethnonym emerged in the early 19th century as an insulting nickname for the Roman Catholic minority, used by the Protestant majority in the Bükkalja region. During the 20th century, the *Matyó* nickname transformed into a self-identifying denomination of the three mentioned localities. The local folklore explains its origin by the personal name *Mátyás/Matthias*, according to the tradition that the residents of Mezőkövesd were the people of King Matthias Corvinus (1443–1490).







**Fig. 3.** *Matyó* wedding as a tourist attraction in Mezőkövesd. Tourism is an effective way of valorizing heritage. ([http://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/index0.php?name=0\\_matyo\\_viselet](http://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/index0.php?name=0_matyo_viselet)) (accessed May 7, 2021).

heritage bearers: members of the folk dance group, folk artisans and handicraft masters, or members of the Roman Catholic Church community. It can be argued that the majority of the local population is connected to, but not really involved in safeguarding the heritage (FÜGEDI 1997:161–168).

The heritage safeguarding strategy emphasizes the role of primary schools and art education. Numerous elements of the heritage have become incorporated in local education programs, for example the museum education activities of the Matyó Museum. The idea aims at folk art as the basis of creating and reinforcing local identity. Nevertheless, the local community refers to the safeguarding as the task of professionals and specialists (BERECZ 2006; 2018).

At the same time, Matyó folk art is a renowned touristic brand throughout Hungary and even abroad. The city of Mezőkövesd established its touristic strategy on the Matyó heritage. The roots of these phenomena trace back to the 1930s, when the frameworks of tourism were established and the commercialization of tradition intensified (FÜGEDI 1997:127). Two outstanding tourist destinations are the “Matyó Folklore Festival” each summer (MATYÓFOLK 2021a), and the historic town-center, called “Hadas” district, with open handicraft ateliers, shops and community venues (MATYÓFOLK 2021b).



Valorization of the Matyó heritage is based on the trade of handicraft artworks as a part of the local economy and a reliable strategy for living. Contemporary Matyó folk art follows traditional patterns, but strong innovations have also been initiated in the fields of fashion and design, based on the heritage concept of the tradition. Nevertheless, this raises many problematic questions regarding the authentic, genuine, or organic development of the tradition (MATYÓ-FOLK 2021c).

### The “Miller’s wafer” tradition of Borsodnádásd

The second example is significantly different from the first one. The *Barkóság* is a region on the northern edge of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County, where the peripheral geographic location determines the socio-cultural environment. The region is named after the *Barkó* ethnic group that inhabits it. Their ethnonym originates from the late 18th century. The Reformation in the 16th and 17th centuries did not affect the *Barkó* people, who remained Catholic. During the latter half of the 19th century, a significant metallurgical industry was established around the localities Ózd and Borsodnádásd, causing a radical change in lifestyles and culture (PALÁDI-KOVÁCS 1982:187–188). The industry collapsed in the 1990s following the political transition in Hungary, and so the region had to seek new patterns to develop survival strategies. Intangible cultural heritage has been one of these strategies, even though mainstream tourism has no impact on the *Barkóság* region at all.

Making *miller’s wafers* [molnárkalács] is a vibrant local gastronomic and religious tradition in the region, especially in the town of *Borsodnádásd* (3,000 inhabitants). The origins of the sweet wafer derive from the holy Eucharistic wafer in Roman Catholic liturgy. “The miller’s wafer was originally a customary treat during the Lenten season, Easter and Christmas celebrations, in traditional spinning rooms and at weddings. The tradition was passed on from one generation to the next within the family units” (SZKŐ 2021e; BÓDI 1985) (Figs. 4-9).

The wafers are made with special utensils; two purpose-designed circular cooking irons. Due to the establishment of the nearby Metal Factory (1864), Borsodnádásd became the center of



**Fig. 4.** Miller’s wafer cooking iron from the early 19th century. Herman Ottó Museum, Miskolc, HOM NT 89.35.8. (Photo by Viktória Mészáros)



**Fig. 5.** Miller’s wafer cooking iron from the early 19th century. Herman Ottó Museum, Miskolc, HOM NT 89.35.8. (Photo by Viktória Mészáros)







**Fig. 6.** Engraved ornaments on a miller's wafer cooking iron from the late 19th century: Hungarian coat of arms, Agnus Dei. Herman Ottó Museum, Miskolc, HOM NT 82.28.1. (Photo by Viktória Mészáros)



**Fig. 7.** Engraved ornaments on a miller's wafer cooking iron from the late 19th century: Hungarian coat of arms, Agnus Dei. Herman Ottó Museum, Miskolc, HOM NT 82.28.1. (Photo by Viktória Mészáros)

wafer-iron making. Although the miller's wafer is well-known throughout North-East Hungary, the semi-industrial production of wafer-irons exceptionally reinforced the tradition in Borsodnádásd. It became a basic element of local identity, and various decorations for the cooking irons are a part of family traditions. The wafer irons are decorated with symbols, folk art and religious motifs or inscriptions, and no two are alike. The local history museum has a rich collection of these wafer irons, the majority of which are published or displayed in a permanent exhibition (SÁGI 2008).

Over the last decade, the town municipality and local communities have recognized the cohesive influence of this tradition, organizing wafer-making demonstrations and festivals to safeguard and perpetuate their folk heritage. The heritage bearers are small communities: multigenerational families, circles of friends, local associations, schoolmates and neighborhoods. They are not specialists, but ordinary people strongly committed to and involved in the safeguarding of this heritage. Wafer-making has been integrated in local school education, and





**Fig. 8.** Making a miller's wafer with a cooking iron in Borsodnádásd at the Miller's Wafer Festival. ([http://szellemikulturalisrokseg.hu/index0.php?name=0\\_molnarkalacs](http://szellemikulturalisrokseg.hu/index0.php?name=0_molnarkalacs)) (accessed May 7, 2021)



**Fig. 9.** Miller's wafer as a product of the local food industry, 2016. (<https://www.borsodnadasd.hu/hirek/archivhitek/1070-20160615dobozoskalacs>) (accessed May 7, 2021)

many demonstrative promotions aimed at strengthening local identity by preserving the tradition have been carried out (SÁGI 2018:135–148).

Thanks to these efforts, an increasing number of young people are becoming active participants and bearers of the heritage. There is a growing commitment among younger generations, and changing attitudes towards local traditions have proven to be invaluable since the miller's wafer has been registered in the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The most visible manifestation of this heritage is the Miller's Wafer Festival held each summer since 2008. The safeguarding strategies proved successful as the number of baking



groups doubled in a decade. In 2008, there were seven participating groups while in 2019 this number was fourteen – all of them comprised of locals, members of formal societies or informal family groups or circles of friends (ARKHELY 2020). The festival was originally a meeting point for the local community, but in the last few years its function has expanded as a tourist attraction (KATONA 2016:15–32).

The local municipality has also recognized the economic possibilities of heritage. In 2015, a small local food manufactory (the Miller's Wafer House) was established for the mass production of the miller's wafer. The mechanized baking system was calibrated for 8,000 wafers per day; the wafers are decorated with an inscription of the town's name (BOON 2015). At first, the products were sold in neighboring localities, but the marketing slightly gradually expanded to the national level, so now the wafer is available in some supermarkets as well. This is a typical pattern for the valorization of heritage, wherein a tradition is absorbed in the local economy, and it is extremely important in a region like Borsod, where the unemployment rate has always been relatively high (ARKHELY 2020).

### The student traditions of Selmec – survival of the traditions of the Mining and Forestry Academy of Selmecbánya (Banská Štiavnica, Slovakia)

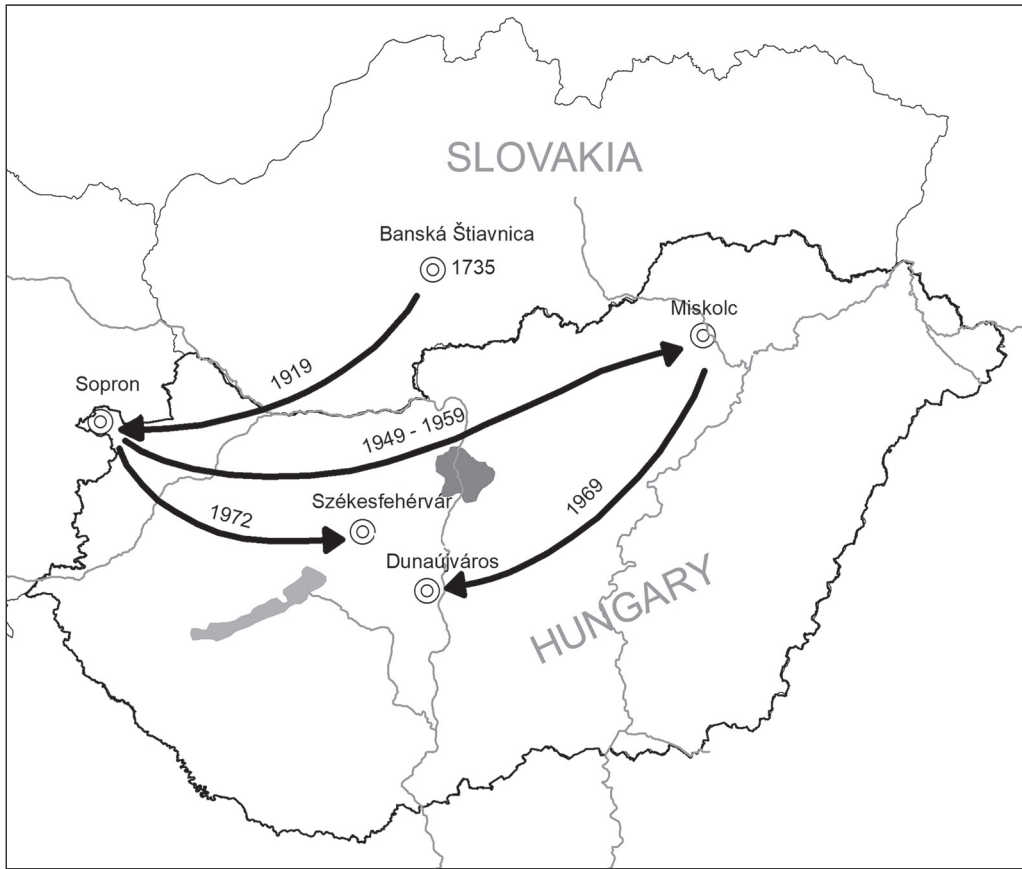
The heritage concerned in the third case study is related to several geographical locations throughout Hungary and even in Slovakia. The student traditions of the Selmec Academy are not rural, but typical of European customs among the higher social classes, intelligentsia, nobility, bourgeoisie and urban communities. The origin of this heritage is derived from the students and their self-organization at the Mining and Forestry Academy in the town of *Selmecbánya*, today *Banská Štiavnica*, Slovakia (founded in 1735). Following World War I, the institution moved to *Sopron* in 1919 due to the newly established state boundaries. In 1949, the academy split up and was reorganized: higher education in the field of forestry remained in Sopron while mining and metallurgy moved to the newly founded Technical University of Heavy Industry in *Miskolc*. Later, two more cities were involved; some departments were located in *Dunaújváros* (1969) and in *Székesfehérvár* (1972). At first glance, these five cities are the homelands of the student traditions, and yet numerous other individuals, professional organizations and civil societies, communities and friendly associations are also heritage bearers throughout Hungary (ZSÁMBOKI – TAR 1985).

During the relocation of the institution, the original tradition derived from the 18th century has not only survived but has also expanded with new local elements. The heritage strengthens by binding with universities designated as *alma mater* through the revival and transmission of positive old patterns, customs, behavior and traditional human values. It also enhances an inward connection between upperclassmen and their younger fellows (Figs 10-11).

The most important bearers of the heritage are undergraduates at the educational institutions mentioned above, who are held together by the *Valéta Committees*. Simultaneously, some students are also members of various student organizations (societies, friendly circles, table companions, youth circles and associations). These small communities are the primary fields of the living tradition.

The essential parts of this heritage consist of numerous elements. The most impressive are uniforms with symbolic outfits, badges and insignia (SZEMÁN 2008). Along with the three





**Fig. 10.** Migration of the Selmec Mining and Forestry Academy in the 18–20th centuries. (Map by Zoltán Nagy)

original uniforms (miners, metallurgists, foresters) new ones have been developed as university education expanded in past decades (engineers, and even the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Arts have their own uniforms at Miskolc University). The five academic years are framed by a detailed system of celebrations and customs, including initiation rites, fraternities with strict rules and ceremonial community events. Singing is a determinant factor of the heritage as it expresses the coherence of the student communities. Student songs are collected in song-books, and all events are always accompanied by the bursts of singing (SZEMEREY 1985). During the academic year, there is a strictly regulated personal connection between upperclassmen (*Firma*) and their younger fellows (*balek*). This connection is the primary channel for the transmission of the tradition as elder students feel responsible for teaching members of the younger generation. The most visible and public elements of heritage are graduation rites and ceremonies, the custom of *valétálás* (goodbye ceremony), with a torchlit procession, and the *valéta* ball, with the traditional songs.







**Fig. 11.** Student traditions of Selmec – *Szalamander* (torchlit procession, graduation rite) in Miskolc, 2019. (Photo by Ákos Juhász)

Beyond external formalities, internal content is much more important. The main features of the so-called “Moral of Selmec” are happiness, friendship, patriotism and a sense of vocation. There is an essential difference between the Selmec heritage and the two previously described. The Matyó heritage and the miller’s wafer tradition are connected to exact localities and well-defined local groups. Here, the individual plays only a secondary role since the heritage bearers are members of a local community and the individual’s relation to the heritage can be a part of one’s socialization. On the contrary, the Selmec heritage is connected to a special age group and is relevant only during the five academic years of one’s university studies. There are some symbolic material objects (like the signet ring called *valéta gyűrű* or the memorial beer mug called *szakestély korsó*) which express the individual’s identity well after graduating from the university. Heritage bearers are not only recent students, but everyone who has ever graduated from these universities, and so it can be said that the Selmec heritage connects thousands of people and dozens of generations throughout Hungary (BARTHA – OROSZI 2009).

## CONCLUSION

Briefly summarized, the case studies presented here constitute three different patterns for creating a heritage from a living tradition. *Matyó* folk art is an example of heritage developed



as a touristic brand and as a characteristic feature of Hungarian identity. The miller's wafer tradition in *Borsodnádásd* is a typical case of the valorization of heritage and means a possible break-out point for the local economy. The *Selmec* student traditions are a good example of a heritage which makes connections between people who create not only a real, but a virtual community as well. In all three cases, the transformation process from a tradition to a heritage is determined by the nomination criteria of the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The National Inventory of the ICH provides a new perspective for these communities to strengthen their consciousness and their commitment to safeguarding their heritage.

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**Arnold Tóth (PhD)**, is a museum expert, ethnographer and historian at the Herman Ottó Museum in Miskolc, Hungary. His main fields of research are folklore, popular literacy, and manuscripts and memoirs in the 19–20th centuries. He wrote his PhD thesis on 19th century manuscript usher books (wedding poetry). His works as a historian are connected to written recollections of personal history, life history, ethnic and local identity. He has international experience and publications on the interdisciplinary field of museology as well. In addition to his research and museum profession, since 2011 he has been a county rapporteur of the Directorate of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

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