

Dissertation summary

**REFLECTION OF PEASANT LIFE IN THE TANGIBLE
CULTURE OF UGOCSA HUNGARIANS**

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I. The aim of the thesis and circumscription of the theme

The aim of my dissertation was to document the lifestyle of local people led in the first half of the 20th century, based on the examples of some representative settlements of Ugocsa Hungarians and their traditional tangible culture, as well as prove its *peasant* nature. To put it more exactly, the territory researched by me does not comprise the whole of the historical Ugocsa county, but only that part which today belongs to Ukraine, Transcarpathia's Vinohradiv (Nagyszőlős) district. I tried to compare and contrast the results of previous research (mainly unpublished so far) and my own research work done on the field thus exploring the changes in life form and tangible culture, and the relationships between them, respectively, in the last phase of *peasantry* taken in the traditional sense. I searched for the answers to more questions. For instance, how do social and political changes affect the life of a settlement or a family, and the material world, respectively? How typical are certain objects of particular ethnic and social groups, and small areas, respectively, and how does this tangible knowledge reflect interethnic relationships? How did the tangible means of the peasant world alter as a result of political changes and what new objects took their place? Why was this process completed earlier in some settlements than in others? What has remained of this traditional material world today?

Stepping into the third millennium, the relatively segregated Transcarpathian Hungarian community cannot avoid the influence of *acculturation*, either. The rapidly dying tangible culture of this fragile, perhaps the most endangered Hungarian minority, however, has not been sufficiently traced and documented yet, so in my opinion, the time of descriptive ethnography has not yet expired in this region. However, in this peripheral region that belonged to numerous states depending on the political situation, the economic transformation did not take place so rapidly as in other Hungarian-populated areas lying further in the west. Therefore, there are relatively many original, archaic tangible objects that make the research possible and extremely timely. It can be stated that despite the significant changes in the last century, folk culture is still present in Transcarpathia, so there is still much to research. In essence, this was the initial hypothesis of my research topic, and with my dissertation I tried to justify this concept. I believe that by means of analysis of the objects, ethnographers can contribute to reconstructing the traditional way of life of the rural inhabitants making up the major part of the Transcarpathian Hungarians. In my opinion, the first step is to document the everyday life of *peasants* in the first half of the 20th century, followed by the description of relations and conditions of the *kolkhoz system* and those of the decades after the change of

regime, which can be called *post-peasant*; nevertheless, the chronological delineation of my research topic only covers the earlier era.

If we think of the people, we imagine rural peasants doing agriculture and keeping animals, who have shaped their simple, puritanical, hard, work-centred and yet complex world for centuries, which was characterized by the pursuit of *autarchy*, usability, rationality, and in which land was the supreme value. This traditional peasant world, however, was approaching its end already in the first half of the 20th century; the creation of cooperatives in the second half of the 20th century (which phenomenon is known as *collectivization of farms* in the region I have been researching, in Transcarpathia) meant the end of this peasant period. Today, the lifestyle of agrarian communities that is close to nature, strict, but ensuring the conditions for survival, is completely upset. In the meantime, we feel a growing lack of the power that has determined the peasant's life over generations, directed his actions, and shaped his character and way of thinking – the tradition. It is something that teaches to deal with difficulties, provides shelter to all nations, and helps avoid assimilation. This is particularly valid and current for the Transcarpathian part of the Hungarian nation living in a minority situation, whose survival depends on their ability to maintain their language and culture in the future, and admittance of their own values in an environment that is not friendly to minorities. Instead of regretting the disappearance of peasant world, we must undertake searching for and interpreting the memories of this traditional way of life and preserving them for our descendants. This was my main objective when starting to write my dissertation. Prior to this, as a pedagogue, I have dealt with the gathering of old objects for decades, from which we set up a school museum in Salánk. I watched with concern, how the material attributes of the old world became worthless, and I tried to do something to prevent this. Based on the still available objects, in my work I have attempted to reconstruct the peasant form of life, which is an important part of the history and culture of Transcarpathian Hungarians, and which can in its fragments be traceable today. It is no coincidence that in many village yards and households there are still a number of objects that have long been out of use, but as memories of the past, they are close to the hearts of today's people. Similarly, the traditional peasant value system has survived in the researched area, which is also based on work, family, religion, dignity, respect of the 'middle', the power of customs and traditions, unity with nature and other 'conservative' norms that again start to be re-evaluated today and which still largely determines the mentality of people living here.

II. Description of the applied methods

The bulk of my research work serving the basis of my thesis that is mainly of descriptive nature was made up of empirical methods, personal observations conducted on the field, photo documentation, drawing certain objects, work processes, decorative patterns, and interviews conducted with local residents, respectively, besides processing archive sources and the academic literature. Hopefully, I managed to reconstruct the architecture, the farming, the wear and the other facets of the tangible culture of the research era, from which certain social-historical additions are inseparable.

I have attempted to understand and by this, to introduce the whole historical Ugocsa with a methodologically local, 'Shalanky/Salánk-centred' investigation, a kind of random-like micro analysis. Furthermore, I tried to describe the economic, social and cultural processes concerning the Transcarpathian Hungarians, and their impact on the local communities and certain families and people. In my opinion, despite the relatively 'shallow immersion', the selected sampling allowed some general conclusions to be drawn, which, in spite of local characteristics and differences, apply to all the Transcarpathian Hungarians. Extending this methodological experiment to other regions (Bereg, Ung, and Máramaros) might provide a way to a more general depiction of this topic. Although the sub-regions of the area corresponding to the territory of the present Transcarpathian region (also called the North-eastern Upper land or the Upper Tisza region) and their population have been integrated by history and the common fate, the Hungarians of the historical counties have numerous peculiarities besides the common features. My assumption is that the people of the Ung county, the Palóc, the people of Máramaros, the Szeklers, the people of Bereg, Ugocsa and Szatmár counties sometimes have more similarities than the listed Transcarpathian areas. The reply to this question is given by further research, and the still missing historical processing of sub-regions of present-day Transcarpathia.

In my research work, which was largely based on the processing of primary resources, I considered the seemingly insignificant objects (tile debris, pieces of iron, etc.) as a resource beside buildings, dressing items and tools. I tried to investigate the objects and the phenomena over language borders, in their inter-ethnic relations. In the ethnically-colourful Transcarpathia, the Hungarian folk culture cannot be studied separately from the cultures of other nations living here because we speak about customs that are in many respects commonly known throughout Europe. In addition, I tried to create an image of the former environmental conditions based on certain objects. Thus, for example, the special type of gate in Ugocsa also proves the presence of the former enormous oak forests, the *fishpot* (basket for

fishing) is evidence of the aquatic world before dewatering, and the surviving *cowbells* preserve the memory of the old livestock.

Because of the character and length of my thesis, I could not even try to collect and present the whole toolkit of a given settlement or farm, thus I did not strive for a complete inventory description of a site. The more so that the greater part of the economic assets and other objects of the research period have been destroyed. Instead, I tried to prove and complement the findings of previous research by examining and introducing the objects and buildings still present, with investigating modern material literacy, and with this complex method I attempted to reconstruct the lifestyle of the Hungarian population of the researched area in that era, that is, the first half of the 20th century. This way I tried to get an answer to the question: in the time followed by human memory, how do material objects reflect the changes in the lifestyle and culture level of the Hungarian population of Ugocsa, in particular the Salánk people. The historical-archival material and previous research findings have provided me with valuable information. In the repository of the Ethnographic Museum there is a significant amount of manuscripts related to Transcarpathia, most of which are still waiting for processing. I got insights into the life of Ugocsa villages of the end of the 19th century (a part of which have been turned Slavs) via the unpublished to date materials of the 1943-1944 Ugocsa landscape and folk research camp. With the help of Judit Morvai's 1969 Salánk collection, which was not published, either, through questionnaire surveys I could familiarize myself with the relations of the first half of the 20th century. My third resource, also a treasure, was the manuscript 'monograph' collected over the decades by Áron Bocskor, an amateur researcher living in Öregakli, about the history and ethnography of his native village. But the objects themselves are difficult to reproduce through the historical-archival material; therefore the other similarly important part of my work is formed by my own collection, observations, and guided interviews with local residents. The correctness of the findings of this present research was meant to be justified by the previous research (1943-1944 and 1969), and it is also true vice versa.

III. Thesis-like summary of dissertation findings

According to my initial hypotheses, the findings of my research have proved that the life form of Ugocsa Hungarians remained *peasant-like* till the middle of the 20th century and starting with the Soviet era till the end of the century it could be considered *post-peasant*. In the first chapters of my thesis I have introduced the background of the researched theme by applying secondary sources: Chapter 2 presents a selection of research connected to the main topic and summarises the Transcarpathian Hungarian ethnographic investigations, respectively, while Chapter 3 outlines the historical development of the researched area. The basis of the further chapters was formed by processing previous, mainly unpublished sources and my own empirical research as well.

1. The folk architecture discussed in Chapter 4 has been largely transformed by today, but it is still searchable. I have been convinced that the major characteristic features of the folk architecture of the Upper Tisza region are also valid for the researched area: these are, among others, the *houses with veranda*, the *summer kitchen*, the *double yard* (front and back parts), the *barn*, the covered door, the *structure with a cover without walls for keeping hay*, the *gate*, and the *plum drying oven*. There was a *small flower garden* in front of the house, with a *big garden* at the end of the site. The *double yard* can be divided into *front part* with the characteristic *vine arbour*, and the *back part*, i.e. the barnyard. The site was surrounded by a hedge or a lath fence, with a small and a big gate. The walls of the three-room house (front of house or clean room + porch/kitchen + back of house or pantry) were most often made of wicker patched with mud, later pise was used, and more recently bricks and stone. The roof structure was covered with shingles, later with tiles and tin; it is mainly a gable roof with rafters. The walls of the earth houses built on wooden girders and later on stone base, with board attic were whitewashed. The porch (kitchen) had an open chimney, and until an attic was formed above it, it could not be used as a living space. The *open porch* was a real rarity that has remained in the area. The family lived its life in the front room, where they used a fireplace as a source of fire in the house. All in all, the local house type can mainly correspond to the Szamos house area, although the influence of the northern and the eastern house area, as well as that of the Great Plain can also be felt here. During the past half century most of the traditional peasant houses with a veranda were replaced by frame houses lacking in style.

2. The buildings of the farmyard (*barn*, *pigsty*, *structure with a cover without walls for keeping hay*, *draw well*, etc.), like the house, have some similarities with the analogue

edifices of other Hungarian-inhabited territories; the interethnic relations between Hungarian, Romanian and Swabian folk architecture are also notable.

3. The memories of folk architecture are also rapidly decaying in Transcarpathia mainly in the villages that were flooded around the millennium. During the past half century most of the traditional peasant houses with a veranda were replaced by frame houses. The interior and furnishings of the house have also been transformed. Due to poverty and partial self-sufficiency, the garden, the yard and the farm buildings have undergone fewer transformations than the dwelling house.

4. The economic activity described in Chapter 5 was done in the first half of the 20th century according to centuries-old traditions. The farmers cultivated a number of farming branches in a proportionately small peasant farm: besides extensive animal husbandry, hay making, agriculture and viticulture, a number of supplementary activities like bee-keeping, hemp production, fruit growing, and fishing were also emphasized. Besides meeting their own demands, they could sell part of their products at the market: they grew wheat and maize, they kept the cattle, and they sold hay. The maize and the bean played a big role in Ugocsa. Due to its unique geographical environment, several settlements have specialized in something; for example, Salánk is famous for keeping cattle with big horns. In the handicraft industry, to the mid-twentieth century, beside hemp production and pottery, woodwork was of paramount importance.

5. The working tools remained unchanged for a long time. For example, sickle harvesting has gradually been replaced by the scythe from the turn of the century to the 1940s; the use of the flail has remained in many places. The objects of use were partly home-made and made by local craftsmen, cooperating with peripatetic merchants. Goods produced in factories were practically in use only between the two world wars, 'in the Czech era': mainly the factory iron plough and the threshing machine, but besides these, the former tools and work processes have also survived. During my research, I managed to confirm with tangible proofs the use of such tools as *the stack-making fork*, the *spit for carrying straw*, the three-pointed wooden fork, the *rod for carrying the hay stack*, the scythe, the wooden mortar for *grinding maize*, the *tool for rubbing hemp*, the tool for crushing hemp, iron brush, legged or wheeled distaff, the knife for cutting the shingles, the clamp or grip, the vine cutter or grape knife, the hay cutter, etc.

6. During the research of the transport and freight transport, I managed to reconstruct the Ugocsa peasant cart with a crooked wood on either outer side to keep its freight,

likewise I proved the application of the plaited net for carrying pots in the hand, the sheet for carrying hay, the dosser for harvesting grapes, and the general use of the back basket for carrying fruit in Ugocsa.

7. If we would like to list what has remained from the traditional farming of the Transcarpathian Hungarians, the following can be stated: After the collapse of the *kolkhozes* or collective farms, traditional grain production, animal husbandry, fruit, vegetable and vine production are done by relatively few middle and large enterprises. However, many people deal with vegetable and fruit growing in the form of family and small businesses. Out of the former handicrafts and cottage industries, pottery and wheel manufacturing have disappeared; the processing of hemp is only used to make the ragweed and the Bereg homespun for tourists; the once well-known craft of hoopers can now be found only in one settlement, Shalanky/Salánk. I believe that saving this is a task of strategical importance; this is also the reason why a separate chapter has been devoted to this topic in the present dissertation.

8. It might be the last moment when I managed to reconstruct the Ugocsa traditional clothing presented in Chapter 7 of the dissertation, which was simple, mainly in the case of older people, but had a lot of archaic elements. Collecting data in the area of clothing is extremely difficult because giving up the aesthetics of forming the dressing habits by peasantry had been completed by the middle of the 20th century in Transcarpathia, too. All in all, the Hungarian folk costume of the researched area is an integral part of the all-Hungarian wear, yet some local peculiarities can be noticed. Typical elements of local folk costumes include the home spun hemp linen trousers, shirts, boot trousers, the *jacket*, the bodice, the vest, the *apron* for males, hard or ‘wrinkled’ boots, and hats and bonnets changing from village to village, and the woollen coat, which was the characteristic winter wear of peasants, spreading from our area in the direction of the Great Plain. Besides this coat, the sandals (a kind of moccasin) also prove the relationships of the local Hungarians with the neighbouring Rusyn, Slovakian and Romanian residents.

9. In my thesis, I tried to give an insight into the folk decorative art of the area under consideration, though I could not devote a separate chapter to it because of the space limit of the dissertation (instead, I have summarized it when informing about the architecture, farming, and wear, and in Chapter 8 together with other tangible memories, respectively). The popularity of weaving and embroidery is reflected by the number of folk fabrics that have been reserved, which are worthy of the well-known Bereg homespun. The motifs observed on the woven fabrics can be found on the outer

ornaments of the farmhouses, on the carvings of the porch, the well and the gate, the carved and painted furnishings and objects of use. I would also like to point out the legged distaffs and spinning wheels numerous of which have been preserved, the folk ceramics and the archaic Shalanky/Salánk waxy egg painting. It is a local value that can be considered unique not only in Transcarpathia, but it is also noted in the all-Hungarian respect as an analogue of the Szatmár waxy egg.

10. One can come across similarly valuable objects in other spheres of the life of peasantry: via an old zither, a whistle made of baked clay, accessories of a nativity play or a sacral object we can proudly exhibit a large number of segments of traditional folk culture.

11. After WWI, the Transcarpathian Hungarians got into a peripheral status; therefore, they got stuck in their cultural development. This is the explanation why the tangible and the intellectual culture of the Transcarpathian Hungarian villages preserved more archaic elements and traditional cultural features than usual. At the same time, traditional *peasant* culture in Transcarpathia has also experienced a crisis.

12. The process of cultural change (acculturation) already began in the Soviet era, and after the change of regime an accelerating loss of existence is observed. One sign of this is that representative material assets have ceased to be a means of community identity. After the war, the buildings having the traditional, national and local features, furniture, work equipment and tombstones are gradually replaced. In the Hungarian villages of Transcarpathia we can also observe the global process of unification of the tangible culture.

13. In my thesis, I did not strive for enlisting the tangible ‘universe’ of a farm, but rather, I tried to select the most characteristic objects from the toolkits of several families. During my research, I found that from the given systems and quantity of objects, we can conclude the ethnic and denominational affiliation of the given family, its financial status and cultural level, occupation and lifestyle. This can be explained by their geographical environment, their economic specialization and their history. According to the meaning of the objects there are not only differences within the given settlements, but the characteristics of the individual villages also become striking. During more than a decade of research work an enormous amount of photographic material accumulated and it also resembles the puritan, conservative and stubborn nature of the Hungarians of Ugočsa, who, despite their minority status and tragic turning points, have retained their identity and culture.

14. The political difficulties, the minority status, the difficult financial state, the lack of a social network have all forced the Transcarpathian Hungarians, who may be more likely than their average to adhere to their being Hungarian and their traditions, to work out special survival strategies. Unfortunately, in the hope of their individual prosperity, more and more people are giving up their being Hungarian, while the interest of the non-Hungarian population in Hungarian language and culture is growing in Transcarpathia. The rapidly expanding emigration of the Hungarians of Transcarpathia, especially the youth, also warns us that if this little nation part does not receive the necessary care from the motherland, its survival and existence may become doubtful.

15. The life and culture of Transcarpathian Hungarians who are fighting for national survival are far from being completely researched. But to understand and elaborate on the social, economic and cultural processes of the recent past and the present, we have to prepare an inventory of the local traditions and values, and we have to finish analysing the era also investigated by me. My thesis is an attempt to sum up the subject matter of a traditional peasant life form that is hopefully a starting point for further research, and it can help to understand the economic, social and cultural processes of the Soviet era and the present age, and to understand and process scientifically the lifestyle of the Transcarpathian Hungarian population.

IV. Publications about the subject matter of the dissertation



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Candidate: Barnabás Kész
Neptun ID: RMG6MD
Doctoral School: Doctoral School of History and Ethnology

List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian books (1)

1. **Kész, B.:** "Egy földön, egy hazában" Hon- és népismeret kárpátaljai fiataloknak. PoliPrint Kiadó, Ungvár-Beregszász, 148 p., 2009. ISBN: 9789667966829

Hungarian book chapters (2)

2. **Kész, B.:** Az ugcsoi parasztporta. Hagyományos építkezés Salánkon.
In: Értékek és kihívások. A 2015. március 26-28. között Beregszászon a Nyelvi és kulturális sokszínűség Kelet-Közép-Európában: érték és kihívások című konferencián elhangzott előadások anyagai. Szerk.: Gazdag Vilmos, Karmacsai Zoltán, Tóth Enikő, Autdor-Shark, Ungvár, 63-73, 2016. ISBN: 9786197132508
3. **Kész, B.:** Tájak változatossága, hagyományok gazdagsága, népi kultúra.
In: Kárpátalja. Szerk.: Baranyi Béla, MTA Közgazdaság- és Regionális Tudományi Kutatóközpont Regionális Kutatások Intézete ; Budapest : Dialóg Campus Kiadó, Pécs, 392-420, 2009, (A Kárpát-medence régiói ; 11.) ISBN: 9789639899186

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5. **Kész, B.:** Kádármesterek Salánkon.
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Közoktatás 1, 23-26, 2016.





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List of other publications

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (1)

7. **Kész, B.:** Dzsublik - egy kegyhely születése.

Népr. Látóhatár. 21 (2), 33-38, 2012. ISSN: 1215-8097.

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of Web of Science, Scopus and Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) databases.

07 November, 2018



Further publications of the author

Foreign language books (4)

1. **Kész, B.:** *Cavaleri: atlas ilustrat.* Editura Kreativ, Târgu Mureş, 80 p., 2012. ISBN: 978-606-646-034-7
2. **Kész, B.:** *Rázboinicii: atlas ilustrat.* Editura Kreativ, Târgu Mureş, 80 p., 2013. ISBN: 978-606-646-104-7
3. **Kész, B.:** *Válečníci. Velká encyklopedie y 3D obrázky.* Vydalo Nakladatelsví FRAGMENT, Praha, 80 p., 2014. ISBN: 978-80-253-2224-6
4. **Kész, B.:** *Рыцари. Иллюстративный атлас.* Издательский дом «Фактор», Харьков, 80 p., 2013. ISBN 978-966-180-372-4

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1. **Kész, B.:** A hagyományos gazdálkodás eszköztárának bemutatása az iskolamúzeumban és a szakköri foglalkozásokon. In: *Közoktatás. A Kárpátaljai Magyar Pedagógusszövetség lapja*, 2018.

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1. **Kész, B.:** Az ugoctai parasztporta. Hagyományos építkezés. *Nyelvi és kulturális sokszínűség Kelet-Közép-Európában: érték és kihívások* című konferencia. Beregszász, 2015. március 26–28.
2. **Kész, B.:** Néprajzi kutatások Kárpátalján a második világháború éveiben. *A második világháború emlékére*. Történelmi konferencia. Beregszász, 2016. május 19.
3. **Kész, B.:** A salánki bodnárság – egy megmentésre érdemes kismesterség. *Csángó Fesztivál és benne a III. Kárpát-Haza Magyar Konferencia és Üzletember Fórum*. Jászberény, 2016. július 21–23.
4. **Kész, B.:** Adalékok a kárpátaljai magyarság tárgyi kultúrájának kutatásához. *Akadémiai napok az Európai Protestáns Szabadegyetem szervezésében*. Beregszász, 2018. április 27–május 3.
5. **Kész, B.:** Interetnikus jelenségek a kárpátaljai magyarság tárgyi kultúrájában. *„Multikulturalizmus és diverzitás a 21. században”*. Nemzetközi tudományos konferencia. Beregszász–Ungvár, 2018. március 27–28.
6. **Kész, B.:** Horkay Lajos, Salánk polihisztor lelkésze. *„Hegyet hágék, lőtőt lépék...”* *Irányzatok és módszerek a kárpát-medencei népi vallásosság kutatásában*. Konferencia a szakrális néprajzban iskolateremtő tudósok emlékére. Kolozsvár, 2018. június 1–3.