

*Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Historical  
and Institutional Precedents of  
the Hungarian Dance-House  
Movement*

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*This paper seeks to lay out a broad history of the latest wave of folk revival in Hungary, the Tanchaz (Dance-house) Movement. In order to do so, It will examine the engagement with folk forms by the (mostly urban) elite and the academy in connection with nation-building/nationalism in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungary; the rise of specific institutions and practices connected with Hungarian folk culture and their continuity or discontinuity over time; the sudden territorial and population shift that would leave a legacy of ethnographic and folkloristic material covering a territory much larger than the truncated Hungarian state that emerged in 1920 from the treaty of Trianon; and the specific conditions preceding the tanchaz movement and in which it arose. Focusing on the Bouquet of Pearls Movement of the 1930's and 1940's as an institution connected to folklorism and nationmaking, the paper reveals both continuities and discontinuities with the Tanchaz Movement that would arise in the 1970's. After a brief survey of the emergence of Tanchaz, the paper ends with suggestions for further research.*

## Introduction

This paper in progress seeks to explore a broad history of the latest wave of folk revival in Hungary, the Tanchaz (Dance-house) Movement. In order to do so, It will examine the engagement with folk forms and traditions by the elite and the academy in connection with nation-building in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungary; the rise of specific institutions and practices connected with Hungarian folk culture and their continuity or discontinuity over time; the sudden territorial and population shift that would leave a legacy of ethnographic and folkloristic material covering a territory much larger than the truncated Hungarian state that emerged in 1920 after the treaty of Trianon; and the specific conditions preceding the Tanchaz movement and in which it arose. Focusing on its precedents and emergence, this paper will not discuss the later institutionalization of the Tanchaz Movement or its present status. It will, however, suggest directions of research that promise to provide further historical depth.

### Nation-state making

By the time of the 1848 revolution, Hungary had been a Christian state for over 800 years, having established what we might call a multiethnic society. Not only were there small numbers of non Hungarians living in the Carpathian basin at the time of conquest, colonization of the region was actively promoted by the Magyars, who invited foreign experts for development, and offered nobility status to those who were willing to settle in the border areas. From the time of Ottoman occupation of the central part of the country in 1541, throughout the Habsburg occupation beginning in 1690, the territory of historic Hungary would be divided in various politico-beurocratic configurations. It was not until 1867, after a period of

martial law following the 1848 revolution, that Hungary would once again gain governance of the territory of historic Hungary . As the historical processes that had brought about the nation state system and the dominance of a capitalist mode of production took off in Western Europe, the Hungarian nobility embraced the language and idea of the independent nation state and formulated resistance to the Hapsburg Empire by stressing their distinguishing national characteristics. Essential to the transformation to the nation-state was a shift of the understanding of nation from the nobility (those with rights) to include 'the people of Hungary'. Tamas Hofer has pointed out that only in Eastern Europe did the study of peasant culture arise almost exclusively for the use of inhabitants as part of national cultural history. Essential to national awakening, he argues, are the institutions of national culture. The decades leading up to the 1848 war of independence, marked by efforts at national reform and Romanticism, would witness the establishment of National Museum, the Hungarian Academy of Science, the National Theater, and the establishment of Hungarian as the official language. The concept of an ethnic Magyar, Hungarian language speaking nation-state did not easily allow for multiethnic/multilingual notions of the polity, causing tension with non Magyar populations-especially with the Romanians of Transylvania, and with Croatia (a separate kingdom which had come under the Hungarian crown in the 11<sup>th</sup> century). This internal tension would help to seal the victory of the Hapsburgs in 1848.

The borrowing by the nobility from "the people" to build a unique national tradition through the adaptation of folk forms would lead to the elevation of the csardas to the national dance. The so-called csardas, a

composed piece borrowing from folk motifs, and popularized by Bela Weckheim and Mark Rozsavolgyi, would, by the mid 1840's, become de rigueur at balls such as those organized by the Protection Association. At these dances expressing Hungarian national independence, the use of the Hungarian language and the sporting of 'national dress' (which meant either clothing in national style or, clothing made of locally produced textiles) were also encouraged. (Nemes, 813). These cultural politics would continue after the failed revolution, with the founding of the Liszt Academy of Music, and the opening of the Great Market Hall. Increasingly, but especially from the 1880's on, we see national reform expressed in Hungary's participation in industrial fairs—the discovery and display of items considered uniquely Hungarian, and their production for the market. The 1885 national cottage industry exhibition would feature 'lifelike peasant rooms', and in 1896, ethnic villages were "displayed", along with inhabitants in City Park at the celebration of the Hungary's millennium. Instructive is the metamorphosis of Matyo embroidery into merchandise. From the turn of century on, the National Cottage Industry Association (Orszagos Haziipari Szovetseg) worked to propagate and popularize Matyo embroidery —which would appear among Hungarian items at the Turin world's fair of 1911 (Fugedi, 14). On that same year, archduchess Isabella the 'chief patroness of cottage industrial art' would organize a 'matyo wedding' at the Isabella ball during carnival season 'to popularize handicrafts'. As part of this process, the local intelligentsia placed orders with peasant women, providing lucrative employment. They would soon be followed by merchants. (Fugedi). This balance of interests nurturing this occupation with folk forms

spanning interests as broad as nation-building, economic development, and private business, would be well integrated in the Gyongyos Bokreta (Bouquet of Pearls) Movement of the 1930's and 1940's, to which we will turn shortly.

### **Ethnographic Collection, Technology, and the living memory of historic Hungary**

Tamas Hofer, citing debates between ethnographers and symbol creators, has pointed out that in Eastern Europe the ethnographic sciences produced material on which national symbols could be based. Ethnographic collection would precede the foundation of a separate field of ethnography. The Hungarian Academy of Sciences was founded in 1830 "to serve national development and the interests of economic reform"(Pallas lexicon). Beginning in 1832, the academy undertook the collection and publications of folksongs "with the intention of 1) scientific research and preservation and 2) to serve the formation of a national taste" (Sarosi, 188). While the Ethnographic Museum was founded in 1872 as the Ethnographic Department of the National Museum, and 1896 would see the formation of Hungarian Ethnographic Society, the first department of Ethnography would not be formed until 1934, at Pozmany University. To grasp Ferenc Sebo's claim that "the club movements of the 1970's emerged against a background of 150,000 collected and transcribed tunes, with much research and practical experience"(Sebo, 1998, 37), we must turn to the history of the ethnographic collection of music.

The collections of Bela Vikar, the first in Europe to record folk music with the use of a phonograph, date as far back as 1895. The composers Bela Bartok and Zoltan Kodaly

would begin their collections in 1905 and 1906, respectively. The Hungary that they documented using new technologies applied with methodological rigor was historic Hungary, a roughly thousand-year-old political-territorial entity that would be dismantled a few years later with the treaty of Trianon. Thus the wealth of material left to academic and folkloristic posterity thanks to the use of revolutionary recording technology and methodological rigor would contradict the new definition of Hungary- designed and reinforced by the Great Powers and happily accepted by the neighboring states from 1920 on. The content and availability of these ethnographic collections would have effects on the features of the Tanchaz movement.

With funding provided by Ministry of Culture on the condition that it accessible to public, a phonogram collection was established by Bela Vikar at the Department of Ethnography of the National Museum. From 1936-44, under auspices of The Academy of Sciences, and later, the Museum of Ethnography, a large number of recordings of folk music were made in the studios of Hungarian Radio under direction of Bela Bartok, Oszkar Dincser, Zoltan Kodaly, and Gyula Orutay, (Kelemen, 51). In 1936: under Bartok's direction, 4 experimental records were produced based on recordings made by Vilmos Seemayer. Each record (of which only fifty were produced) was accompanied by transcriptions of the music, lyrics, and background on collectors and performers, as well as photographs (Sebo, 2001,112). These transcriptions had been made by playing records at a slow speed to provide information not revealed by simply playing the music-Together these materials "provided listeners with an important guide, one that would enable them both to understand an all but forgotten world of music and make it a part of themselves"(Sebo, 2001, 112).

Later, under Ortutay's direction, with guidance of Bartok, Kodaly and Laszlo Lajtha, 107 records would be released by the Patria record company as the Patria series. While these were not accompanied by the type of documentation that had accompanied the earlier Bartok project, others would be produced in this manner by the Folk Music Research group of the Academy of Sciences formed under Kodaly in 1953. It was this wealth of documentation that awaited the revivalists of the 70's, helping them to, in the words of Sebo "figure out the basic techniques behind this unique and ancient playing style"(Sebo, 2001). The emergence of tanchaz, then, and the forms it would take, must be understood in a context where this material was available, not only in living form in certain isolated peasant communities, but also stored according to a methodology aimed at the salvage of disappearing forms and their playback in the future; accompanied by technical instructions for the reconstruction of this vanished form. Finally, all this was paired with a commitment to public availability.

In 1920, the treaty of Trianon would place two thirds of the territory of historic Hungary outside of the borders of the new nation state. While this created a political body that more closely resembled a monoethnic nation-state, it would also created a huge Hungarian ethnic minority in neighboring states, and an influx of refugees from these regions to Hungary in the 1920's. The monoethnicity of the state would be further honed after WWII when, under the direction of the Allied Great Powers, population transfers would take place between the states of the region (see Balogh). Yet, by this time, folklorists and the developing discipline of ethnography had already amassed a collection of artifacts, films, musical recordings, and studies reflecting the folk cultures of

greater Hungary. Living Hungarians inside and outside the new borders were left with a national identity and territorial relations that did not match the new borders, and the ethnographic sciences, the suppliers of national symbols were left in a Hungary quite different in territory and population than that which they had documented. The fact that pre-Trianon Hungary had been recorded using powerful new recording devices and techniques is extremely important in understanding the content of the folk revivals to come. The role of ethnographic collection and its origins in historic Hungary are apparent in the Gyongyos Bokreta Movement, to which we now turn.

### **Bouquet of Pearls: Folklore, or Folklorism?**

The activities of the Gyongyos Bokreta (Bouquet of Pearls) movement spanned the years between 1931 and 1944. The Gyongyos Bokreta was the project of Bela Paulini—a newspaper journalist (with degrees in engineering and fine arts) who had earlier experimented with theater productions set to the folk tunes collected by Zoltan Kodaly. Through the formation of the Bokretas League, Paulini brought together a number of resources to bring provincial folk dancers from all over historic Hungary to the stage in Budapest each year on Saint Steven's Day, itself newly elevated to a national holiday (Palfi, 120). The St. Steven's day celebrations in Budapest had won the support of the city council with the promise of tourism. While Paulini's stated intent was to preserve folk styles intact, arguing that "We should leave the village art for the village, on the one hand to be sensible, and on the other hand for reasons of purity" (Palfi, 131. my

translation), in fact, he was involved with reworking and embellishing dance material and costumes. The success of the movement can be contributed to a conflux of forces. In addition to the Budapest city council, The Gyongyos Bokreta's sponsorship base included The Ministry of Defense (when concerning Transylvania and the regions of northern and southern Hungary forfeited at Trianon), and other forms of state and municipal subsidy; including the Ministry of Culture and the Municipal Tourism Bureau). This sponsorship base allowed Paulini to pay his performers and produce a journal, the *Bokretasok Lapja*. By 1934, the Gyongyos Bokreta had been given the exclusive rights to organize a folk group by the Ministry of Religion and Culture (Palfi, 122). In the words of Imre Romsics "In order to hinder those outside the association, a meeting was held at the Ministry of culture in June, 1934, where they agreed to prevent by law any activities of folk art outside the Association" (Romsics, 24).

The Gyongyos Bokreta also had an active relationship with ethnography—being both championed and policed by ethnographers. Istvan Gyorffy—the first to teach the discipline on the university level, claimed to have suggested the idea to Paulini (Palfi, 120). By 1936, however, the Gyongyos Bokreta's working over of the material for the stage had come to the attention of Ministry of Religion and Culture, which then placed the it under the ethnographic authority of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society (Palfi, 125). Assigned to oversee the "authenticity of dances and costumes", ethnographers inspected dances and costumes, checking them against the ethnographic record, as well as conducting new research for this end. Yet, without any real authority for enforcement, their conclusions had little to no effect on the performance materials (Palfi, 126).

While the League would exist until 1947, it would flounder from the time of Paulini's suicide upon Soviet occupation. The Gyongyos Bokreta would have lasting effects on folk culture and folklorism in at least two important ways: First, dance researchers have asserted that there is no question that the Gyongyos Bokreta had effects on the preservation of folk dance. Gyorgy Martin asserts that "wherever the Gyongyos Bokreta planted its feet, the interest in tradition remained alive for a good period of time"(Martin, 108, my translation). Second, others have asserted that it was the Gyongyos Bokreta that "awakened the different youth organizations (especially the scouts), and contributed to the complex practices of the stage performance of Hungarian dances and customs found today (Pesovar, 3).

### **Táncház**

The late 1960's and early 1970's witnessed a wave of youth movement across the world. In Europe and North America, the late 60's and early 70's were marked by a general phenomenon of folk revival stemming from what we might call the urbanization process. Owe Ronstrom, examining this general phenomenon of folk revival in Europe in the late 60's and 70's, suggests a number of pre-conditions, including rapid growth of population after WWII, and the rapid expansion of world economy in the 1950's -leading to migration into cities. The first generation after this consisted of large numbers of people with no experience of the countryside, no experience of war, and less insecurity about the future (Ronstrom, 39). While people's lives were radically different from those of their grandparents, Ronstrom argues, before they were 'abandoned', these lifestyles were "well documented and trans-

formed into cultural heritage by museums"(39). In the 60's with the economy expanding even further, college students flooded the cities, with money less of a problem; it was harder for the state to retain centralized control. Youth acquired incomes over which they had control, were well-educated, and they had extra leisure time too. These resources would be used to be rebellious against the older generation. The music scene, according to Ronstrom, was not limited to folk, but to interesting new sounds, and focus was on process, not product. There was a movement away from big grand performances, flags, and parades, and towards amateur ethnographic research, and the development of 'alternative lifestyles'.

In 1970's Hungary, the Tanchaz Movement emerged in the context of a number youth movements and projects concerning the performance and preservation of folk forms, occupying various positions vis a vis the 'liberalizing' Hungarian state. Among those in the first, the Beat Movement is the most significant. Initial participants of the Beat Movement, influenced by the music and lifestyle of the Beatles, the Beat writers and rock and roll youth culture had had their first taste of publicity in the state run Ki, Mit Tud competitions. Among those in the second category belongs the state run Repulj Pava (Fly Peacock) radio competitions, which would be the first public venue for some of the tanchaz musicians. What kind of relationship does this reveal between the state and youth movements? Revealed is a process in which youths would respond to the "manufactured" programs of socialist planning, or perhaps simply the discontents of urban life, in creative ways, with the materials and in the contexts available to them, producing the beat movement, and later, the tanchaz. In the words of Ferenc Sebo, "The

experience of authentic folk music and dance in the city as compared to the hackneyed labour movement songs and the stage repertory was revelatory for musicians and the public alike”(Sebo, 1998, 36). Yet the resources and contexts available to youth movements in most cases were provided by the state. Not only would key participants in both movements emerge from state run competitions, but state run culture houses would be key locations for movement activities. In addition, In the case of the Tanchaz, resources were requested from the state in the form of courses for folk music and dance instructors and the establishment of summer camp. We do know that both the Beat movement, and later the Tanchaz movement would be studied by the Institute of Public Culture, upon which recommendations would be made about their sponsorship. Yet it would be unwise to regard either Beat Movement or the Tanchaz as top down state projects, or of strongholds of the Party.

The founders of the tanchaz movement can be divided very broadly into two categories; dancers and musicians. The dancers involved with the organization of the first tanchaz activities were members of competing amateur dance troupes. Their generation represented a movement away from the artificial choreography that had dominated the amateur dance troupes and the State Folkdance Ensemble in the preceding decades. Responding to an interest by members of the troupes to come together in a casual social context rather than only under competitive circumstances, Ferenc Novak (Bihari Egyuttés) and Sandor Timar(Bartok Egyuttés) would organize the first Budapest tanchaz. Their search for authentic folk forms to replace the dominant choreographed repertoires had led them to Gyorgy Martin, who encouraged them to organize a

social event based on the the Transylvanian tanchaz. The musicians involved in the organization of the first tanchaz events, and invited to play at the first tanchaz in Budapest, Bela Halmos and Ferenc Sebo, were both students of architecture at the technical university, where they had met playing in the symphony . Both had been influenced by the environment brought about by the Beat Movement, and were experimenting with ‘new’ musical forms. Halmos had made a name for himself accompanying folk songs on guitar in a Repulj Pava competition, while Sebo had been experimenting with singing Hungarian verse with guitar accompaniment. Together, seeking ‘new’ musical sources’ they too had turned to Martin for access to the recorded legacy of Hungarian folk music.

The social form and name of the tanchaz were borrowed from the folk traditions of a town in Transylvania called Szek. The prominence of Szek in the Tanchaz was partly the result of the existence of previous ethnographic material collected by academics. Yet, perhaps more important is that Gyorgy Martin -the prominent dance researcher responsible for introducing the youths - himself was involved in researching the dance of Szek. Martin would encourage them to find not just musical, but culturo-aesthetic influences in the dance culture of Szek, suggesting that they adopt the social form of the Tanchaz. No small fact either was the relatively high living standards in Hungary at the time, which provided opportunities for Eastern bloc tourism, including the possibility to travel to Transylvania to experience “living folk culture”. As a result of historical conditions, and partly in response to ethnic repression, ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania had preserved folk traditions that had long since passed within

the borders of Hungary. Thus began the trips by tanchaz participants to see Transylvania -'relatively unchanged', but increasingly endangered by the urbanization in general, and especially by the nation making politics of the Romanian state. One of these traditions was the tanchaz, the event that inspired the name and form of the youth movement in Hungary. This institution was widespread throughout the region but had many different names. The word Tanchaz referred to both the place, the peasant house where it was held, as well as the dance event itself. What made this dance event distinct was that, unlike most other opportunities to dance that were attached to occasions such as weddings, funerals., the tanchaz was an event where dance was at the forefront and was limited to unmarried youths(Halmos,12). Organized by eligible bachelors, the tanchaz served the purpose of dancing together with and becoming acquainted with eligible girls, encouraging courtship and locally appropriate sociability.

In Budapest, what had begun as a closed party for members of dance troupes grew within a short period into a mass phenomenon, multiplying to the provincial cities as fast as new competent folk bands could emerge. Key to its success was the decision of Timar and the musicians to open events to the public and to provide dance instruction. Critics feared that the movement was inspired by nationalism. Fans, however, claimed that it reflected a continuation of the tradition of Bartok and Kodaly- and thus of the serious research of folk forms and their integration into modern life.

This paper in progress has attempted to outline some of the historical processes and institutions which preceded the Tanchaz movement of the 1970's. As this paper reflects mainly the periods leading up to the emergence of this urban folk revival, it does not reflect much of the rich literature existing on the movement. Without summarizing what has already been written, I here suggest directions for further research. An investigation of the occupation with folklore by the scouts groups of the 1940's (especially the cserkesz) and the formation of the amateur folkdance ensembles (mostly connected with unions)in the 1950's would be fruitful. Absolutely necessary for an understanding of both youth movements and folk revival during the socialist period is an investigation of the Muvelodesi Intezet (or Institute of Public Culture) and the biographies and activities of key actors in that institution (Ivan Vitanyi, for example). A close look at the focus of the socialist state on youth is also called for, especially as regards KISZ (the young socialists) and the network of culture houses. A look into what Verdery has referred to as 'the overproduction of intellectuals' would be interesting to apply to this generation, perhaps especially as it might apply to amateur activities and the much celebrated 'second economy' Finally, an investigation into the relationship between participation in folk revival and professional activity in the ethnographic sciences in individual biographies would be enlightening.



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