

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL SLOVAK-AUSTRIAN
RELATIONS ON ETHNIC BORDER
(REFLECTION OF ETHNIC STEREOTYPES PRESENTED
IN ORAL PERSONAL NARRATIVE)

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This paper studies the coexistence of ethnic groups in Central Europe. Through the use of examples from research in the border area, we shall try to show ethnic stereotypes and their influence on everyday contact among people at a microsocial level.

Central Europe is known as the territory of a long-term coexistence of many ethnic groups which has always been characterized by an ample exchange of cultural and social phenomena, circulating through a number of institutional and non-institutional channels. On the other hand, the coexistence of several ethnic groups in a relatively small area has constantly raised questions of ethnic identification, ethnic tolerance or intolerance in everyday life. Contact zones of people in ethnic border regions provide interesting opportunities for research into this issue from the ethnic-cultural and a cultural-historical point of view.

This article is based on my ethnographic research conducted in Záhorie (a territory in south-west Slovakia) in the late 1980s and early 1990s and on the relevant archive materials and published sources. My aim was to cover the period from about the turn of the century to the present.

We should be aware of several important political changes that took place in that period. The Austro-Hungarian monarchy ended in 1918 and, until then, the Morava/March river formed an internal border between Austria and Hungary. After the disintegration of the monarchy, the river became the border between the successive states which included Austria and Czechoslovakia. Events before and during World War II brought more changes. In 1938 Austria was annexed by the German Reich and in 1939, Czechoslovakia was divided into the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and the Slovak State. The Morava/March river was the border between the German Reich and the Slovak State. After World War II Morava again became the border between the re-created states of Austria and Czechoslovakia and very soon afterwards the river became a part of the iron curtain which split Europe into two parts - the East and the West. In 1993, after the split of Czechoslovakia, the

Morava river became at its highest flow the state border between Czechia and Slovakia, and at its lowest flow, the border between Austria and Slovakia.

There is a variety of problems associated with cultural-historical relations, however, I will focus on the issue of ethnic stereotypes observable in the narration of people living in the border area. With regard to a rather limited scope of the contribution, I will primarily deal with the relationships between Slovaks and the Austrians. I will now put aside the Czecho-Slovak issue; there have recently been published several articles on the relationships of Czechs, Moravians and Slovaks in folk culture.¹ A short study by J. Kandert (1992) dealing with the stereotype picture of a Slovak and a Czech and with the development of this picture in nations examined from the 19th century up until to the present is of particular interest.

In everyday life, ethnic phenomena came to the front or are manifested most often in situations where members of different ethnic groups meet. The region along the river Morava has been the contact region of Slovakia from time immemorial. The river created natural borders between three ethnic groups: Austrians, Slovaks, and Moravians/Czechs. However, it was a very previous border and it would be probably more correct - certainly at least for the older period explored (the period of Austria-Hungary) - not to speak about the borders but about an ethnic contact and ethnic mixed region.

In modern history, at least from the 17th century onwards, there is evidence that there were joint intensive, particularly work contacts, among Slovak, Moravian, and Austrian farmers (Pichler, 1982, p. 24). Slovak agricultural workers started to appear in greater numbers in the eastern part of the Moravian Field (Hohenau, Waltersdorf, Ringelsdorf, Sierndorf, etc.) as early as after the Thirty-year War. They married Austrian girls and settled in Austria or bought a piece of land and settled down on the right bank of the river Morava (Pichler, 1982; Hrabovec, 1987/88). The number of Slovaks or Slavs (Slovaks, Moravians, and after the Turkish wars also Croats) in Lower Austria gradually increased, which makes us think of the Moravian Field particularly in the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the twentieth centuries as the ethnically mixed region.²

Before the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 the inhabitants used to cross the "borders" flexibly. Because of better job opportunities Slovak families often moved to the Austrian side. Information obtained from the respondents through research carried out in the field is also supported by literature data (Schultes, 1954, p. 4).

¹ This issue was the topic of the international conference held in Luhačovice in 1991. The contributions were published in the Proceedings: *Česko-slovenské vztahy v bádání o lidové kultuře* (1992).

² The older Austrian literature does not differentiate between Slovaks, Moravians, and Czechs. The Czechs include also Slovaks or they are described as "Czechoslavs" (Hrabovec, 1987/88).

In addition to the ethnically mixed region on the right bank of the river Morava, everyday life in border areas provided enough opportunities for contacts between Slovaks and Austrians until the creation of the iron curtain. People used to meet while working in the fields. Both the Austrians and the Slovaks had their pieces of lands, particularly meadows and woodlands, on both sides of the river. There was a very agile retail trade between the border regions. Further contacts were mediated by the inhabitants through their participation in various annual and religious events, ceremonies, and religious pilgrimages. Slovak Catholics from Záhorie often went on a pilgrimage to Mariazell in Austria and the Austrian pilgrims used to visit Šaštín in Slovakia. Deeper relationships between Austrians and Slovaks were established through intermarriages and new family relations. But probably the most important contacts between the two nations in this area existed thanks to labour migration.

The Slovaks used to go to Lower Austria as seasonal agricultural workers, maid-servants, farm-servants, and factory workers. They regularly went to work and no problems with administration did not occur until 1918. It was considered movement within one state, but even after the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 the crossing of the state borders was not limited (cf. Fielhauer, 1978 a).

The different language used by Austrians and Slovaks was not any hindrance to their contacts either. At the beginning and partly also in the first half of the twentieth century the inhabitants of border regions were able at least to communicate in the language of their neighbours. People bore this fact in mind in the upbringing of their children. In the period of Austria-Hungary and in a limited extent also in the inter-war period there were child exchanges - boys, in particular, between Slovak and Austrian farmers' families (called going for *frajmek* or *Kinderwechsel*) even for longer periods, for instance for one school year. Slovak families who had no possibilities to send their children to Austria placed them in schools with German language instruction. Thus for example in villages Moravský Ján and Sekule (Záhorie), children attended elementary Jewish (German) school.³

REFLECTION OF ETHNIC STEREOTYPES IN ORAL PERSONAL STORIES

We live with many stereotypes. Psychologists have shown that life without stereotypes would be impossible, we would be overburdened with unending solutions of trivial everyday situations. The problem becomes, however, more complicated if we succumb to elementary psychological mechanisms even in assessing relations among humans and human groups. On the basis of a wide comparative study of cultural-anthropological material, Harold R. Isaacs (1976, p. 40) came to the conclusion that in relation to the human body, basic stereotype visions or preju-

³ For the exchange of children and foreign language learning, see Fielhauer (1978b), Kiliánová (1991), Pospíšilová (1992, pp. 93-94).

dices of any human groups are based on opposites: clean/dirty, sexually normal/sexually more potent. These basic opposites which are probably common for most human groups can lead to further comparisons, for instance diligent/lazy, handsome/ugly, clever/stupid, etc.

After World War II, in the period which had long been unable to get over the trauma of the failure of human principles and of the explosion of race and national hatred, social sciences in Europe and overseas devoted much attention to the issues of ethnicity. Scientists tried to present various accounts of this phenomenon. Ethnicity was negated or was considered to be a part of group identity, which man would not need any more if his or her personal identity was sufficiently built up. Opinions also expressed that group identity may hinder man's road to a better arrangement of society. On the other hand, there were scientists who perceived group identity as an inseparable part of the human identity, which could not be assumed to be lost. However, it has to be filled with such a content that will enable tolerant co-existence of people of different races, ethnic groups, confessions, etc. Within this framework, we have to reckon also with stereotypes and prejudices in human behaviour as with the natural phenomena of human thought (Glazer - Moynihan, 1976, p. 3 ff.).

Ethnic stereotypes mean generalizations where perception of the members of one group by the members of another group is undifferentiated, i.e. they see them as almost equal, interchangeable. Ethnic stereotypes comprise an opinion of what properties should an ethnic group have. We differentiate them from ethnic prejudices which go even further. These are attitudes towards members of an ethnic group primarily containing negative assessments (Benedykowicz, 1988, Bačová, 1992, p. 30 ff.).

I have studied Slovak stereotyped visions about Austrians by means of oral repertoire in border villages. I based my research on the assumption that oral tradition and personal narrative, in particular, may be a very good source for examination of such a sensitive question, as is the ethnic coexistence.⁴ The answer of the respondent to the researcher's questions may or may not be honest. It is also probable that instead of the reality he or she will depict an ideal vision. On the other hand, episodes from everyday life, which are narrated for the researcher will reveal human behaviour in various concrete situations and shed light on the real coexistence of people living in the border area. In this sense I understand folklore (folk narrative) as a means for conveying one's information, opinions, attitudes, and feelings to other members of the group (local, regional, ethnic). He or she thereby uses possibilities provided by certain folklore models and a good knowledge of the culture of his or her own group. I think that in this case folklore (folk narration) as

⁴ For the issue of oral personal narrative as a folk genre and as an ethnographic source, see Kiliánová (1992, 267 ff.).

a phenomenon is not a conscious means of ethnic identification. It is one of the channels, through which information building ethnic identification flows.

I analysed oral personal stories and some other folklore prosaic genres, primarily humorous stories, anecdotes, and jokes narrated by 34 selected narrators. I also used the results of standardized interviews with 32 respondents and direct observations.

Oral narrative comprises of enough stories which are supported and communicated by stereotyped visions of neighbouring nations or ethnic groups in Slovakia. Oral tradition in this direction was also strengthened by folk reading in the 19th and 20th centuries. Various jokes, "real personal episodes", "real events" published in calendars and other printed materials described pictures of "typical" Slovaks, Jewish people, Gypsies, etc.⁵ In traditional oral literature humorous stories, anecdotes, and jokes in particular, but also other genres (proverbs, proverbial phrases, slurs, etc.) were often generalized, categorized and evaluated. The cycle of humorous stories, anecdotes, and jokes about Gypsies is almost classic and is widespread throughout Slovakia. Narrators present a Gypsy mostly as a clever wag who is able to get out of any trouble. But at the same time, they depict him as a thief, lazy man, and a freeloader. Narrations are created on the basis of the opposition "we" (teacher, peasant, priest, i.e. Slovak) and "they" (Gypsy). Their own group is almost always assigned better properties, their own ethnic group is valued higher than the other (ethnocentrism).⁶ Similar narration is known from traditional folk narration about Jewish people, less about Magyars, Ruthenians, Poles, or Germans who created a non-negligible minority in Slovakia in the past, or they were our neighbours.⁷ We do not know any stereotyped picture of a German that would resemble that of a Gypsy or a Jew in Slovak folklore. In the twentieth century Germans often appear in narrations about World War II but in no case is it a specific point. Germans are enemies in these narrations. A picture of a German takes on mainly features which are in folklore (not only in Slovakia) generally associated with the vision of an

⁵ The jokes and narrations about Jewish people and Gypsies were among the most frequently printed materials, less attention was paid to Hungarians, and other nations included were just exceptions. Cf. e.g. *Slovenský kalendár* (Slovak calendar, ed. by A. Bielek-M. Kukučín, 1887: a picture of a "typical" Slovak, German (Prussian), and Russian is in a short story 'Aliancia' (Alliance) (pp. 19-24), jokes about Gypsies are on p. 45; ibid., 1888: jokes about Gypsies and Jews (p. 100); *Slovenský kalendár. Kalendár Slovenského týždenníka*. Ed. M. Hodža, 1905: Jewish jokes (p. 157); ibid., 1910: Jewish jokes (p. 23), jokes about Gypsies (p. 58), a short story about a cunning Jew - a merchant who deceived a poor peasant - Slovak (pp. 60-75), etc.

⁶ Cf. legendary tales about Gypsies (Polívka, IV, p. 40), humorous stories and anecdotes (Polívka, V, pp. 50, 59, 73-79; Gašparíková, 1980, pp. 69-82).

⁷ Cf. legendary tales about Jews (Polívka, IV, p. 40), humorous stories and anecdotes about Jews, Magyars, Poles, Ukrainians, Russians, French, Germans, English, and Slovaks (Polívka, V, pp. 96-97, 112; Gašparíková, 1980, p. 104).

enemy; strength, cruelty, wickedness, bestiality and, on the other hand, stupidity (the enemy can be outwitted), ignorance, etc. (Ilomäki, 1994, pp. 104-105).

However, it should be emphasized in the case of Gypsies, Jewish people, other nations and ethnic groups, that evaluation and attitudes of ethnic stereotypes have always been and still are ambivalent and also ethnic stereotypes definitely have not functioned as unequivocal images (Krekovičová, 1992, pp. 173-174, 181-182; and foreign literature therein).

The materials from standardized interviews show that people living in Slovak border villages associate the image of Austrians with certain properties. I have put forward some comparisons with Slovaks: Slovaks are working harder than Austrians, Slovaks are more generous - Austrians more thrifty, Austrian women cannot cook well, Slovak women are better cooks, Slovak women are more beautiful, Austrian men are unreliable as partners, they want Slovak women but just to molest them, Austrian women have cleaner and nicer houses than the Slovak ones.

Interestingly the inhabitants of Slovak border villages do not differentiate between Germans and Austrians. In the local dialect Austria is *Rakúsy* (Rakúsko = Austria in Slovak) but the inhabitants of the country are called simply *Nenci* (i.e. Nemci = Germans).

Studying the issue of stereotype visions, I devoted special attention to assembling and analysing oral narratives presented by those informants who had gone for seasonal or long-term work in Austria as maid-servants, farm-servants, factory workers, etc. I completed the corpus of field work on 28 narrators, which, with respect to the age of present-day informants, depicted experiences from the beginning of the century until the closure of the borders in the 1950s with archive material from this area and on this subject-matter. I was thus able to shift the lower time limit and to cover also the period during the last decades of the 19th century (Kosová, 1954, pp. 60-69).

Analysing narrations of so-called seasonal workers and workers in Austria, I posed a question, whether people who had longer everyday contact with the members of another ethnic group would still have stereotype visions of that group or their attitudes would be different. The individual experiences captured in oral personal narratives confirm both directions.

Firstly, it must be noted that attitudes which can be deduced from oral repertoire create a whole spectrum and that most narratives are ambivalent. There are two extremes of the spectrum of opinions: confirmation and denial of the stereotype picture existing in the society. If such opinions are at all explicitly expressed in narrations, I could say in a very simplified way that the propensity towards denial or confirmation of the stereotyped picture depends to a large extent on experiences (positive or negative) of the individual working in Austria. In other words, the individual's experiences narrated as personal oral stories are as if "compared" with the picture of a German/Austrian in local society expressing his/her own attitude - whether positive or negative - accordingly in his or her narration.

For instance, a female informant who had worked as a maid-servant in Austria for several years, had good experiences: she started her narration with the words denying the negative stereotype vision: "People say that German women can't cook. But I enjoyed the food more than that prepared by my mother. These are experiences, which, ah..." (Now follows a humorous story about Austrian food).⁸

On the other hand, there is a story of a female informant who was not content with her work as a maid-servant in Austria. Her story reflects her fear of Austrian boys, supported by the stereotype about Austrian men, which was, in her opinion, confirmed by her unpleasant experience: "It was like this. When I was with those girls, the boys did not leave the Slovak girls alone...I don't know, as if, I don't know what they thought. And I did not stay with them." (Then follows the informant's story how Slovak girls went to dance in Austria, local boys danced with them and made fun of them because of their national costumes.)⁹

The research findings show that direct contacts of people from various ethnic groups do not automatically remove stereotype visions of the groups. This supports the conclusion reached as early as in the 1960s by F. Barth (1970, pp. 9-10). On the other hand, joint and frequent contact is the first step towards resolving similar questions and helping people express their own different individual attitudes.

A stereotyped picture of a German/Austrian has been little developed in Slovak traditional folk narration. Research into the border area focused primarily on this issue which brought with it a set of certain properties ascribed to the Austrians/Germans. However on the basis of the known facts I do not think that in this case we can speak about an evident and specialized ethnic stereotype.

We know that it is necessary to categorize people into groups and thereby compare the "we" group with the "other" one. We also know that in the case of abstract and very resistant opinion we cannot rely on its self-operating disappearance from human thought. The analysis of concrete accumulated material can explain the facts from which sources the individual features of the stereotyped picture are created. Part of the features will appear as visions of the pureness or dirt of "they" and of their different sexual behaviour, which might be, as it appears, anthropological constants. In our material, they are reflected in the stereotyped vision of Austrian men and of prettier Slovak women,¹⁰ in the vision of cleaner houses of Austrian women. Other properties can arise from differences in the civilization, cultural and economic development of both nations which are declared to be ethnic differences (e.g. visions of the Austrian women having nicer houses, Slovak women being better cooks). The differences in the value hierarchy, e.g. the vision that "Slovaks are more generous" can also be evaluated as an ethnic difference.

⁸ Moravský Ján, informant P.H. (born 1923), field research of the author in 1991.

⁹ Moravský Ján, informant A.Š. (born 1914), field research of the author in 1991.

¹⁰ It should be taken into account that tenser sexual relations between Slovak girls and Austrian men followed probably from the social position of the Slovak girls in Austria.

Our aim is to contribute to the explanation of the mechanisms of the formation and existence of some ethnic stereotyped visions by the results achieved so far. We believe that similar investigations will help people to overcome barriers on the route to better understanding and a peaceful coexistence.

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