

**JÁN PODOLÁK AND THE ESTABLISHMENT
OF INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES
AT THE DEPARTMENT OF ETHNOGRAPHY
AND FOLKLORISTICS**

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Focusing on two events, the aim of this paper is to describe the specific forms of the commencement of intensive international cooperation, which, in spite of the predominant practices of the time, were brought to fruition at the Department of Ethnography and Folkloristics (now the Department of Ethnology and Museology) at the Faculty of Arts at Comenius University in Bratislava at the end of the 1960s. The events in question were the *Seminarium Ethnologicum* international student seminar course and the founding of *Ethnologia Slavica* (later *Ethnologia Slovaca et Slavica*), which is an international yearbook for Slavic ethnographers. The initiator and founder of both endeavours was Professor Ján Podolák.

The form, opportunities, and frequency of specific international contacts at universities and other academic institutions from 1945 to the end of the 1980s offer a litmus test of the research atmosphere in ethnology in Czechoslovakia during this period. They reflect the individual thematic, theoretical, and methodological orientations of academic centres and often document the whole political situation and the consequent involuntary “discipline” versus “freedom” in choosing a thematic orientation, formulating research goals, and interpreting

achieved research results. This is also reflected in the thematic and problematic orientation of study programmes, research possibilities, and the publication of findings, as well as in specific activities related to university education. Contact with the results of research in a particular scientific area, including in international literature, and an intensity of international cooperation with research centres are important prerequisites for developing both scientific and educational centres. This was continually applied in most European countries in the area of scientific cooperation and in the level of information held by individual university centres. However, in socialist Czechoslovakia this intensity was strictly “territorially” (geopolitically) reduced and directed towards some chosen states of the socialist bloc, particularly when it concerned travelling abroad or publication opportunities. In this way, a communicative framework was created which was defined by the common principle of a Marxist-oriented methodology and its application in scientific research. Post-war ethnology in Slovakia was characterized by a continuing positivistic and historical orientation, which under ideological pressure gradually transformed into various forms of the Marxist variant of evolutionism (Dejiny slovenskej..., 2013). The reason for this was that in the second half of the 20th century up to 1990, there was a strict application of principles of Marxist-Leninist ideology in social sciences at higher education institutions (Melicherčík, 1952, p. 5) and indeed in the running and control of all society. Personal contact with partner institutions and academic staff in “non-socialist” countries, which was very sporadic, was limited to a few conferences and seminars and to just a small number of researchers and teachers. Being sent to an academic conference was more common for top-level staff in specific research areas or for directors of academic centres, whose own orientation did not always correspond with the thematic focus of the conference in question. Often the sending of teachers on longer stays abroad was almost exclusively tied to so-called “lectorates”, which, for example, dealt with the teaching of the Slovak or Czech languages at foreign universities.

Study trips to other socialist countries were also not that common. Bilateral cooperation with the “West” was monitored and only took place with certain centres (usually “twin” centres at tertiary institutions which, in any event, were mostly located in other socialist countries). Contact with countries from the West was not just rare; in a number of cases it was totally absent. This is despite the fact that, in addition to Russian, many Slovak researchers and teachers were able to communicate in English or German. It was not uncommon for correspondence with the “West” to be seen as undesirable and sometimes even the basis for the surveillance of particular individuals by the relevant security bodies.

The travelling of students abroad (on programmes similar to today’s CEEPUS and Erasmus), even to twin institutions, was also uncommon. They were isolated

instances. It was often the case that these sorts of study stays were only permitted following an evaluation of applicants' work, for example, in the Czechoslovak Union of Youth (later the Socialist Union of Youth), or because of their exceptional performances in elite sport. Collectively organized short trips to twin universities were possibly an exception to this. This approach was common even at high-school level. Relatively more frequent contact and travel opportunities were present in the areas of technical and natural sciences. From these principles, which were applied over nearly five decades in the working lives of research and higher education institutions, it can be said that the most active contacts and informers of scientific matters for Czechs and Slovaks were academics from non-socialist countries who came to various Czechoslovak universities and scientific events. As a rule, they helped establish initial contacts with centres abroad after 1989 as they were already familiar with the scientific orientation and profile of specific universities and other academic institutions. They also created opportunities for the publication of scientific research results from particular centres.

The abovementioned practices were evident in the second half of the 20th century, particularly in the area of the social science disciplines, including ethnography/ethnology. An exception was a very short period in the 1960s, which in the historical and political science literature is connected to the "political thaw" in Czechoslovakia and the Prague Spring and which brought a more positive outlook in the areas of science and higher education. Unfortunately, this renaissance and the resolve to change society – including in the areas of science and education – was stopped for two more decades following the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact forces in August 1968.

Despite these events and established practices, at the end of the 1960s the *Seminarium Ethnologicum* international student seminar course and *Ethnologia Slavica*, an international yearbook for Slavic ethnographers, were both established at the Department of Ethnography and Folkloristics at the Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava. The initiator and founder of these activities was Professor Ján Podolák, who came to the Faculty of Arts in 1966 as a habilitated internal employee (Associate Professor) from the Institute of Ethnography at the Slovak Academy of Sciences. His invitation to work at the university was mostly a result of the acute need to strengthen the academic profile in ethnology after the sudden death of Professor Andrej Melicherčík, who had been a significant figure in Slovak ethnology at both the university and at the Institute of Ethnography. Podolák's arrival at the Faculty of Arts was connected with a request by faculty leadership for a proposal to be drawn up on building a separate discipline in ethnology, which at that time was still a part of the Department of Archaeology, Art History, Ethnography and Folkloristics. In outlining the proposal, Podolák considered it important to include a philosophy of establishing a discipline meeting

four requirements which he had formulated before coming to the Faculty of Arts and which he submitted to the faculty leadership. Gradually (over three years) these requirements were met. This resulted in the founding of an independent Ethnology Section in 1968 as a centre dedicated to the comparative study of Slavic ethnology on both a Slovak-Czech and Slovak-Slavic level. (The orientation of the discipline towards Slavic Studies had been a part of general ethnology from its very beginnings in Czechoslovakia in 1921, with a focus on this being particularly felt in the lectures of the seminar course established by Professor Karel Chotek) (Horváthová, 1993, p. 240). In the year the section was established, the university agreed to the organization of *Seminarium Ethnologicum*, an annual international seminar course at the department which aimed to invite university students from abroad to participate in joint field work with ethnology students from Bratislava. Part of this plan was for this course to be held each year in the summer in a different region of Slovakia. The third core demand was for the founding and publication of *Ethnologia Slavica* (An International Review of Slavic Ethnology) as a foreign-language periodical for Slavists. Its first volume was published in 1969. Finally, the university agreed to the establishment of the Department of Ethnography and Folkloristics as an independent centre and the first of its kind in Slovakia. This agreement meant the allocation of five systemized faculty positions. The core philosophy behind the study programme and research at the new department corresponded with a verbal agreement on coordination reached with existing departments in the field based in Prague and in Brno.

In recalling his own beginnings at the faculty, and with many years' hindsight, Podolák evaluated the fulfilment of this programme and the primary emphasis on establishing channels of professional communication with centres abroad as follows: "This sort of broad organizational base allowed for quality tuition in ethnology as well as broadly envisaged scientific and research activity, the regular publication of *Ethnologia Slavica*, the publication of a series of books, and the organization of international seminar courses and conferences of Slavic and European ethnologists" (Paríková, 2016).

It is also worth mentioning that from the outset in 1968 the department's scientific and research section, the international student seminar course, and the international yearbook for Slavists all used the term "ethnology", which at that time was not in common use in countries belonging to the socialist camp. During the approval process for Podolák's submitted strategy, the university leadership did not react to the use of "ethnology" with much understanding. However, after having the differences in the terms "ethnography" and "ethnology" explained to them in the context of the development of European research (something that was requested by the History Section of the Research Board of the Faculty of Arts), Podolák's arguments were accepted. According to Podolák, the decision to

use “ethnology” came from his own regular professional contact (both research and organizational) with academic peers in Western Europe, where the term was in routine use (e.g., the academic journals *Ethnologia Europaea* and *Ethnology*, the European Ethnological Atlas, and in the naming of academic institutions and university centres). The justification for using the term to describe the academic discipline itself was also seen in developments following 1989, when it was adopted by a number of Slovak and Czech institutions in place of “ethnography”, which was an older expression for the discipline (Paríková, 2016).

The idea of putting the *Seminarium Ethnologicum* into practice was notably helped by the short-lived liberalization of the political regime towards the end of the 1960s. At the time there were favourable conditions for initiating specific visions of active international cooperation at the Department of Ethnography and Folkloristics. Podolák, who was the seminar course’s initiator, said that: “At the beginning of this endeavour in 1968, contact among students and teaching staff in socialist countries with their peers in Western Europe was minimal. We knew very little about each other. And I was saddened by that. I knew from my own experience how this form of cooperation could be inspiring and enriching. I wanted to grant [students of ethnology] this sort of experience” (Paríková, 2016).

Seminarium ethnologicum, which essentially took the form of a university summer school focusing on field research, took place every year in a different region of Slovakia (Spišská Belá – 1968, Liptovská Teplička – 1969, Oravská priehrada – 1970, Stará Ľubovňa – 1971, Levoča – 1972, Mlynky–Gemer – 1973, and Trenčín-Opatová – 1974). The organization of the following three years involved the participation of partner institutions at universities in Poznań, Łódź, Belgrade, and Warsaw (Škovierová, 2011, pp. 140-142). During the planning of the eleventh edition of this event, this series of seminar courses was halted. (Many years later in 1993 there was an attempt by Professor Gábor Barna in the Hungarian city of Szeged to build on this tradition by offering summer seminar courses in two-year cycles) (Seminarium..., 2011, pp. 147-150).

The choice of region for the event was determined by its suitability for the realization of ethnological field research in relation to the chosen theme, as well as its cultural character and natural and geographical distinctiveness to a certain degree. This was primarily due to the presence of a number of international participants, most of whom were visiting Slovakia for the first time; one of the aims of these events was to provide an opportunity for them to learn more about Slovakia. The choice of region was made in liaison with regional and local cultural institutions.

The invitation to take part in the seminar course and field research was extended to students, teaching staff, and researchers at ethnological centres at twin universities and to higher education and research institutions in the West where

Podolák had established research and collegial relationships; these had all been acquired during his frequent research trips examining shepherding traditions as a part of the International Commission of the Study of Folk Culture in the Carpathians and Balkans, his participation in international conferences, his role as a member of the board of editors of the journal *Ethnologea Europaea*, and in other activities.

Field research was also undertaken by Slovak and Czech students.¹ The financing of the stay of international participants was met by the Faculty of Arts at Comenius University and the Matica slovenská national cultural institution. The expenses of local participants were met by the Slovak Ethnographic Society from a subsidy provided by the Slovak Academy of Sciences. Reciprocity for these expenses took the form submitted research papers and photographs, which became a part of the documentation and archives of participating institutions. The academic leadership of the selected topics of the field research was shared by international and local academics (including those from the Institute of Ethnography of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, the Slovak National Museum, and the Slovak Institute of Monument Preservation) as well as teachers. Each year of the course had a set choice of main thematic foci for field research which students, researchers, and teaching staff were informed about in advance. They would then make their choice of field research when applying to participate in each year's event. The role of the course's management group (made up of Czechoslovak and international experts) in focusing on the chosen topic was to lead the field research, methodically manage the collection of material, and discuss the achieved results with participants upon the completion of the course. Part of the course involved evening meetings of students, researchers, and professors which provided information on specific research and education centres abroad, including the thematic focus of research and publication activities. The content of lectures was changed depending on the composition of academic staff in a given year and was updated with information about current theoretical issues in research and the application of ethno-cartographic methods in the planning and preparation of ethnographic atlases in Europe. Participants' interest was concentrated on the methods of recording researched phenomena in the field (audio and visual media) and methods of processing this material in documentation.

Each year of the course offered opportunities for discussion on the preparation of possible bilateral partnerships between members of participating higher education institutions, the planning of joint research projects on particular issues,

¹ The total number of participants was 402. Of these, 248 were from Czechoslovakia and 114 were from other socialist countries. In addition, there were 42 participants from Western European institutions (Great Britain, Finland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, and Austria), and 2 participants from North America (Canada and the United States).

and the publication output of the research results. This included meetings of the Organizational Committee of the Ethnographic Atlas of Europe and of the editorial board of *Ethnologia Europaea*, which included significant academic figures from research and higher education institutions.² One of the last courses witnessed the birth of the idea to publish an academic volume in honour of the Hungarian professor Béla Gunda entitled *Land Transport in Europe* (eds. A. Fenton, J. Podolák, and H. Rasmussen, Copenhagen, 1973), which was presented to him in the same year it was published at the seminar course held in the Gemer region.

The regular attendance of international professors and students offered a perspective on information concerning current scientific matters in different countries. In addition to gaining new knowledge, the course offered an opportunity for students to evaluate their abilities to communicate in a foreign language (mostly in German and English). When talking with those who had participated in these courses as students, it was revealed that these events had inspired many to focus more on improving their knowledge of foreign languages. This is because the smooth running of field research and the evening seminars was dependent on such issues. Among the Slovak and Czech students there were many who facilitated conversation within research groups and during scholarly debates (in German, English, and Russian).

In addition to the purely academic programme, there was much mention of the course's social aspects, which included excursions, visiting museums, sampling the attractions of folk culture, and visiting folklore festivals and other events held during the course's duration. Many contacts made on the course grew into friendships and professional relationships (Na Seminarium..., 2011, pp. 143-152).

Despite the lively interest from international and local participants in the course, the positive feedback received from the ethnological community, and the publication of reports and reviews, there was a strict ban introduced in 1973 by the Faculty of Arts at Comenius University and the Communist Party of Slovakia on continuing the organization of future events at the faculty. This had the consequence of bringing an end to the existing continuity of the course's organization. Despite the ban, the course was held in Slovakia one more time (in Opatovská dolina near Trenčín in 1974) and was organized to a sufficient level to meet the needs of those who had applied to participate. Thanks to the good reputation the course enjoyed abroad, and particularly the good relationships

² The course chronicle, which is in Podolák's possession, records the following notable scholars in European ethnology: B. Bratanić, Y. V. Bromley, N. A. Bringeus, O. Nelleman, J. Burszta, A. Fenton, H. Fielhauer, M. Gładysz, B. Kopczyńska-Jaworska, V. Novak, R. Wildhaber, M. Zender, Z. Ujváry, C. Vakarelski., B. N. Putilov, and others.

and solidarity felt among peers concerning Podolák's core idea, it was possible to organize the eighth year of the course in Poland, the ninth year in Yugoslavia, and the tenth and final year once again in Poland.

The second significant endeavour occurring at the same time in terms of international cooperation at the Department of Ethnography and Folkloristics was the establishment of the academic yearbook *Ethnologia Slavica* (An International Review of Slavic Ethnology, which since 1992 has been published as *Ethnologia Slovaca et Slavica*). Podolák was the yearbook's founder and long-term editor-in-chief. The first volume of the yearbook (for 1969, published in 1970) was dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the founding of Comenius University. The yearbook was founded with the aim of creating and renewing research oriented towards Slavic Studies with a focus on expanding the prevailing philological, historical, and folkloristic orientation of the field with studies featuring an ethnological focus. Podolák himself said that: "Slavic ethnography must have some common organ, so that it at least has a presence among Slavic Studies organs; in this case a joint periodical would suffice. This proposal of mine was supported by a group of approached peers who were present at the 1968 International Congress of Slavists in Prague. At a special meeting outside of the official programme, they approved of the founding of the periodical, which I suggested be named *Ethnologia Slavica*" (Paríková, 2016). The founding members of the yearbook were: J. Podolák (Bratislava), J. Komorovský (Bratislava), P. Bogatyryov (Moscow), Y. Bromley (Moscow), M. Gavazzi (Zagreb), C. Romanska (Sofia), and C. Vakarelski (Sofia).

The primary motivation in forming the idea of a yearbook was the scientific legacy of Pavol Jozef Šafárik, who had placed an emphasis on the comprehensive study of the Slavs in terms of archaeology, linguistics, ethnography and folkloristics, and ethnic demography (Podolák, 1970, pp. 7-15). His significant work for the Slavic world found a continuity in the scholarly production of Lubor Niederle, and subsequently Kazimierz Moszyński, who enriched Slavic Studies with new methodological approaches and who opened a perspective on research into Slavs and their interaction by including a scientific perspective incorporating contact with non-Slavic ethnicities in Europe. This approach was projected into the published works of later volumes of the yearbook (Staszak, 1986, pp. 7-18; Balassa, 1977, pp. 85-104; Komorovský, 1970, pp. 177-187). Researchers, particularly those in the non-Slavic world, recognized the importance of a number of studies published which emphasized lines of enquiry concerning the ethno-genesis and original homeland of the Slavs. Within the context of the conditionality of the natural and geographical characteristics of different territories following permanent settlement by the Slavs given in a number of studies, some works discussed the influence of the first political structures on the Slavs' development, culture, and way of life (Great Moravia, the Czech state, the Polish

state, the Kingdom of Serbia, and the Bulgarian Empire). In later volumes of the yearbook, editorial interest shifted towards the current spectrum of research (see Brzozowska-Krajka, 2010, pp. 51-61; Profantová, 2010, pp. 45-51).³ Despite the unfavourable atmosphere for approaching the issue of the relationship between religiosity and ways of life, the yearbook contained contributions dealing with the Christianization of Slavic territory, which was an important milestone in the territory's development. Within the content of each volume, contributions on the history of Slavic Studies and on new centres focusing on Slavic Studies both in Europe and further afield (e.g., Sweden and the United States) were a constant feature. It gradually became a tradition for yearbook volumes to be dedicated to significant figures in Slavic Studies (e.g., V. Novak, J. Burszta, K. V. Chistov, M. Gavazzi, and J. Michálek) as well as to Podolák himself. Part of editorial practice was to publish work by the students of the yearbook's founders in an attempt to maintain a certain continuity of the basis of Slavic Studies as an academic discipline. A specific part of the published material comprised reviews and informative reports (*Informatorium*) which gave news of important events and edited works dealing with Slavic Studies which included studies from Slavic countries as well as from non-Slavic parts of the world.

From the very beginning of the yearbook's publication, the choice to publish studies in non-Slavic languages (in English, French, and German)⁴ had the aim of presenting the results of research undertaken on Slavic territory to the non-Slavic world. Additionally, from the first volumes onwards, summaries of each study were published in the relevant Slavic language. In this way, the editors attempted to preserve the Slavic nature of the yearbook and present the Slavic territory which the given study focused on. Over time the thematic structure of contributions to the yearbook changed as they reflected new approaches and research issues in Slavic Studies. Unfortunately, the *Informatorium* section was discontinued over time. This was caused by the difficult situation in publishing yearbooks at Comenius University, particularly the limited funding available for editing yearbooks published at the university. This was also a reason behind the publication of double issues.

It may seem like a paradox, but despite various forms of political pressure against Podolák as the editor-in-chief, the yearbook received a highly valued position in terms of its international reputation and came to be seen as an "emissary" of the beginnings of international cooperation (Hlůšková – Paríková,

³ Also see a comprehensive picture of the topics and content of each volume of the yearbook in: Stano, Pavol. *Index Ethnologia Slavica* vols. I – XX, 1969 – 1988 – appendix to volume XX.

⁴ Upon the basis of reactions from abroad, the editors moved away from publishing studies in French in 1970.

2012, pp. 240-251). Reactions and responses published in reviews document the professional interest in the yearbook, even in non-Slavic countries, as it provided information about Slavic cultures about which little was known at the time. Individual volumes presented information and findings gained from significant events and released publications. Thanks to this aspect of the yearbook, which certainly added to its attraction, it significantly contributed to extensive exchanges between libraries on an international level. At a time when there was a lack of currency for the purchasing of international literature, the yearbook was of great help when exchanging publications with centres abroad, helping the humanities disciplines at the university as well as other disciplines and other faculties. Despite the particular situation in publication practice in Czechoslovakia after the political screenings after 1970, when the yearbook's editorial team was obliged to vet local authors to see if they had the permission to publish, the yearbook included contributions by Czech and Moravian scholars who had been expelled from the Communist Party and who had difficulty publishing anything in their own academic environment. Eventually, this unfavourable period caused problems for Podolák himself. The result of all this was that editorial responsibilities for the yearbook were taken over by Emilia Horváthová, who was also entrusted with the running of the Ethnology Section. Alongside the ban on organizing the international student seminar courses, and ultimately a ban on even lecturing at the department (which lasted until 1990), this decision caused Podolák much sadness and pain. These radical and incomprehensible forms of approaching his scientific, organizational, and teaching activities, which spanned over four decades at the Faculty of Arts, were a reaction to Podolák having been awarded the prestigious Herder Prize as an expression of international recognition and great respect; in 1974 he received the prize in person in Austria.

After Podolák's departure from the Faculty of Arts, the leadership of the editorial board was assumed by Magdaléna Paríková as editor-in-chief, with the role later being taken up by Hana Hlôšková. Currently Marta Botiková holds this position. Despite a name change and the abovementioned difficulties, the yearbook is published to this day.

In place of a conclusion, it is perhaps appropriate to convey Podolák's ideas motivating the birth and existence of both endeavours which set the foundations for international cooperation at the Department of Ethnography and Folkloristics at the Faculty of Arts. At the forefront of his ideas was his faith in the usefulness of an organized group of specialized and erudite ethnographers and folklorists who would guarantee and ensure the quality tuition of ethnology as well as scientific research in the discipline, the regular publication of a periodical with an orientation towards Slavic Studies, and the creation of a space for gaining access to research carried out abroad in the form of international seminar courses

and conferences of Slavic and other European ethnologists. The realization of all of this brought specific results and sent a certain “message” concerning the beginnings of international cooperation that endures to this day.

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