

SOŇA ŠVECOVÁ: THE FIRST LADY OF FAMILY STUDIES IN SLOVAK ETHNOLOGY

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In May 2017, we visited Dr. Soňa Švecová at her home in Prague. The meeting was enjoyable, full of new information and emotions. Research into her family and relatives was also Dr. Soňa Švecová's lifelong subject of interest and mission. We found out about what led her to this topic, her methods of field research, results and interpretations and her fascination with fieldwork.

In 2019, Soňa Švecová celebrated a wonderful anniversary, her 90th birthday. Out of a sense of respect and collegiality, this paper will bring together information and stories from her life, extracts from her correspondence and other sources. We have included the material obtained from this interview in the text of a biographical document prepared in 2011 by Professor Zuzana Beňušková (2011), as the basis for the script of a film documentary prepared as part of the series Personalities in Slovak Ethnology.

Soňa Švecová, née Gaňová, was born on March 3rd 1929 in Dubnica nad Váhom as one of two children in the family of Viliam Gaňa, who was a leading expert in special needs education, and Šarlota Gaňová, née Ágoston, a teacher. From her mother's side of the family, Soňa Švecová acquired a knowledge of Hungarian, which came in useful many times in her later professional life. She completed her schooling at the School of Arts and Crafts in Brno, then worked briefly as a textile designer in the Centre for Folk Art Production in Bratislava. She remembers those years as follows:

Š.: Wait, oh yes, children, that was wonderful, that was an excellent research. I was only in my second year when they gave me two thousand crowns, that was a lot of



Hommage to Soňa Švecová. Graphics. Author: Jindřich Švec, 1997

money at the time, to travel around the whole of Slovakia... the whole of it. From Martin, Liptov, going back through Gemer... Many villages and somewhere there is such and such a woman who knows something, and she knows something, too. They were very generous, no paperwork and such like (travel expenses documents). And in the end, we used to go to Rejdová. Because those Horňáky were there, Soňa, look at this. Now how did I know what to do to, a student in my second year of secondary school? And those Horňáky, they were aprons made of sheep's wool...woven aprons. And that was just one such detail.

In 1951, Soňa began studying ethnography at Comenius University in Bratislava. However, after one year, she left to follow her husband to Prague, where she continued her studies. She spent her third year on a grant-funded stay in Budapest. "It was good in Budapest, a very good school. And afterwards I went there very often. Budapest and I liked each other."

V.: And the main thing is that you speak Hungarian, don't you?

Š.: My mother was from Komárno. But you know, I didn't learn much, but I understood everything. Mother came to learn Slovak. Father didn't like hearing us speak Hungarian, even though he understood it...But I liked them (Budapest, my Hungarian colleagues) very much indeed. They were very nice people.

From the end of her studies in 1956 until her retirement in 1987, she worked as a research and teaching employee at the Department of Ethnography and Folklore Studies of Charles University in Prague.

Š.: Mjartan always told me, when I was a student, that I would go there (to the then Institute of Ethnography of the Slovak Academy of Sciences). He wrote me a letter in person, "try architecture". We don't have anyone for architecture, you'll deal with Jurkovič, he also said that I'd go with Chotek for some research or other. And Pražák, too, he'd take me to do some research. None of that happened... They didn't give me a job at the institute, but everything was different. All that was left was for me to cry my eyes out, and then they offered me a post of assistant lecturer in Prague.

The period of normalisation in the 1970s put an end to her adding to her qualifications.

Š.: I stayed in ethnography. As an assistant at the faculty. I wasn't really very much of a faculty person, I didn't put down any roots there, not at all. I was always somewhere on the margin. Of course! It was great that 1968 came after. Yes. A big storm and they left a big nobody like me, there. You know? After 1968.

And there was lots of turbulence there, but luckily, it didn't concern me, I was too far down. Well. And that Robek, who threw people out, he probably knew I wouldn't harm him. He knew it well. Why would I meddle in politics? And I know that some people were against me. Well, as an exception, he should have sacked me, and he did sack a few people, but more for having an opposite opinion. He knew that I had a opposite opinion, a different one, but he left me there because I couldn't really do him any harm. Showing what a tolerant lord, yes, lord he was. I never really got involved in politics much, because I didn't really understand it. I still don't understand it, I still don't know what it is. I don't know.

I learnt what they told me to. But look, in the end I made it, I gave lectures on what I did. But at first I had to... in the first year the basic information about what ethnography is. So at least I learnt that a bit...And then I dealt with all sorts of buildings, yes, I had a sort of semester of buildings. In effect, what I did was what I suggested myself.

She carried out a significant part of her research work in Slovakia in the Zemplín region, the Záhorie region, the Hont region, in Liptovská Teplička, doing more long-term research in Čičmany, Hrušov and Jedľové Kostofany. She also did research among Slovaks in Hungary and in southern Moravia. The beginnings of her professional career were associated with fine arts and material culture, where she focused on housing and folk architecture. She thus followed on from the research topics of her acclaimed university teacher, Vilém Pražák.

Š.: You know what? I was already bored with the subject of building. Very bored. I couldn't go any further and I started to take an interest in the life in those buildings, because it was the only thing that could mean anything to me. Whether the haystack was to the right or to the left, that didn't do much for me...

V.: Those buildings are linked to the family...

Š.: Yes, of course, those buildings are for people, aren't they? And there are people there.

However, the social aspects of housing and villages began to dominate. She defended her thesis on social groups in Čičmany in 1966. She focused on the form and structure of the family, family relations, the status of the woman in the family, the form of passing on property, godparenthood, the terminology of the family and social groups.

Š.: That was some research, children. Surprises, I didn't expect life to be so rich. There were miracles. You know what, not even that relationship between people, girls, boys... the girls used to look after the sheep up on the hills and the boys followed them, and I asked that old lady – and weren't you afraid for your daughters? And why? Well, they weren't married (laughs)... And you know what they told me? You're talking

like a priest. The mixture of bourgeois thinking with village thinking, they are two completely different things, maybe not anymore, but they were two very different ways of thinking, quite different.

But they weren't cut off from normal life. They just adapted it to what the situation offered or forbade. The situation, not instructions... A respondent told me, so they went for a walk my friend, look over there, the hemp plants are swaying from side to side, let's join in... (laughs). But it was impossible, you couldn't really sleep with your neighbour. The whole world would hear about it. And she wouldn't want people talking about it.

She took a particular interest in research into groups of isolated *kopanice* settlements, their social relations and the way of life of their inhabitants.

V.: And did you find any topic there?

Š.: ...that I would do something about family relations. But I really had no idea what and how. Questionnaires? Of course not... And so that's how I got into it. And there's no village where I wasn't able to take a little special something from it. Wherever it was... I liked it, how the men fought with the women. When you start fighting a man, then the woman calls her sisters, and when it was three against one, then they beat him up. (...laughs). Or they would be absent for years working abroad... well, and in the meantime she conceived and gave birth, but she knew what would happen but... it happened, and when he came back, she knew he'd have to beat her. She hid in the trough, but he found her. And then they carried on living happily.

V.: And his parents just accepted it, did they?

Š.: Yes, they were just people, too. They knew – she's young, he's away.

V.: And then they brought up the child together?

Š.: Of course. What else could they do? Where would they have put it?

V.: Life brings such clear-cut situations....

Š.: Yes. That's how we must look at life. Not according to rules.

This topic also became the subject of the two scientific monographs written by her. Based on her research in the village of Jedľové Kostofany from 1967 to 1972 she prepared the monograph *Kopanice settlements and the village* (1975) and her research into isolated settlements in the Hont region from 1971 to 1980 formed the basis of her monograph *Lazy, isolated settlements in the 19th and 20th century: the development of isolated farming settlements in the area of the Krupina plain* (1984). In 1997, a publication edited by M. Botiková *Traditions of the Slovak Family* was published, to which Soňa Švecová made significant contributions as the author of seven chapters.

She is known among her colleagues and students as an excellent field researcher.

Š.: I was never interested in following anything. I wanted to listen to them, live with them and something always came up which wasn't really talked about very much at the time. Never. In my opinion, it's a sin to try and get information deliberately from these people. It misrepresents the whole situation. Just living with them, I slept there with them under those quilts...

V.: And what was it like? How did you choose where to go?

Š.: I didn't...(laughs)...I really didn't...no, of course not. And do you know how much I hate questionnaires? To death. It deforms everything.

V.: Research...

Š.: Well, it disappeared in that century. People start taking things to the village. Jesus, life was wonderful, when the man was there, the woman was here, and they would go up and down with the milk. And it was closer for him to do the ploughing and for all the work... all their life and they didn't mind.

Even though people talk about her as a researcher spending long periods of time in the field, she herself admits that she only managed to withstand at most one week in the field.

Š.: I never managed to last more than five days. I used up all my energy. It's not that I couldn't do it, and then everything seemed to be repetitive. I had, you know, a big appetite. And it doesn't matter, but then I went there twenty times in a row.

However, she then regularly returned to visit with her informants, which whom she was able to communicate in an informal and friendly manner. She spent several years researching selected sites. In this way, she obtained information about the less visible sides of people's lives...

It is not very well known, that during her research on family matters in rural environment Soňa Švecová encountered in the field the issue of limited reproduction.

Š.: But in those single-child families, yes, because it was a physical need. They had only one child because they weren't allowed to sleep with their husband. And they laughed at me, saying that for example Čelovce was a single-child village, but in the night, they ran around from house to house (laughs...) they got women...

B.: Ok, but they knew how to protect themselves, so...

Š.: They didn't....

B.: And then what?

Š.: Abortions. Terrible. Even in the sixth month. They let it grow, only then could they... And then when the frogs croaked in the night in the pond, they said "Evka's crying",

because if you're a boy, you're Adamček, if you're a girl, you'll be Evka. They baptised the child...some even started crying...They induced the labour with a massage. Yes, it was a premature birth. That's what Chotek writes in his work on Cerovo... Evka's crying.

V.: What did they do with those children afterwards?

Š.: They drowned them.

V.: In the pond?

Š.: They threw it into the pond, exactly...

V.: That's tough...

Š.: I don't understand the pressure they must have felt to... I heard a lot about it. They said we slept together, like man and wife, but there were no children. They weren't allowed to sleep together. And K. confirmed for me that the atmosphere can be so awful and stifling that even the man was afraid. That if society forbids me from doing it, then I don't do it. I don't understand it, but apparently, it's true.

V.: And that the child isn't really born, because it's not supposed to. You know that when, it's like those...

Š.: No, a child isn't supposed to be conceived, but listen, it's just not where there were single-child families. In the Czech Republic, for example, and I heard this several times with... when young people live with their parents, but each couple in their own room, then the older ones, and I experienced this too, had to leave their door open at night. Yes, and this is true, it's not rare for the older ones not to want the young ones to have another child. They protected the first one, and later, too. The first one. Look, it was a question of the family's survival.

Soňa Švecová was able to analyse in an excellent manner the local communities and was also able to combine various sources. She complemented her field research with a study of archive material, thus giving her work a historical dimension.

Š.: How did land consolidation work? Because this was an epochal break-through. Land consolidation. They all had small plots of land here and there and suddenly it all had to be put together by the owner. I'm telling you, I admire those Maria Theresa times. Something unbelievable, when only horses were a fast means of transport and they managed it in two decades. And even today they can still say... Ah, that land of the neighbour's... ah, that forest?? that belonged to our grandmother...well. It was a huge break-through... Huge, you know what belongs to a peasant and what belongs to the lord, and so on, the whole village had to come together, and things were made clear there.

B.: Land consolidation also affected the land of lords?

Š.: Well no, but the lord's land was not separate, you'll be surprised, but the lords didn't even know where their property was. They didn't know. So even their plots of land had to be measured up, because they didn't know how much was there. It was like a nodal point in the development of life in Slovak villages.

Soňa Švecová declares being inspired by the works of Hungarian, Austrian and Polish ethnologists and social historians. Even though she never left the Central European area, her original approaches for searching for and interpreting research problems and her theoretical and methodological approaches resonate not only among ethnologists, but also among social anthropologists, historians and social geographers in Slovakia and abroad. Although she spent most of her life in Prague, her research activity is associated with the study of folk culture in Slovakia. She never cut off her work contacts or friendships with her Slovak colleagues, carefully following what was happening in the world of Slovak ethnology and closely cooperating with the editors of the journal *Slovenský národopis* [*Slovak Ethnology*]. She occasionally lectured at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the Faculty of Arts of Comenius University in Bratislava and took part in research projects into social groups and the family. She cooperated in the preparation of the synthetic volumes of the *Etnografický atlas Slovenska* [Ethnographic Atlas of Slovakia] (1990), working on the topics of isolated settlements and terminology concerning family relationships and with the *Encyklopédia ľudovej kultúry Slovenska* [Encyclopaedia of the Folk Culture of Slovakia] (1995), for which she worked on ethnographic groups and entries dealing with relationships. However, on a personal level, she did not accept the methods used by the atlas:

Š.: An atlas? That's an unreliable method. A reply to one question? What is an answer to one question about? Who will you come across accidentally?...

The terminology of family relationships interested her in a historical as well as in a comparative context

Š.: So you know what? I got involved, because it had long been in my mind – why does Slovakia have so many terms for family relationships, and the Czechs only have half as many? These Slovaks have varied terminology, and the Czechs have all sorts of Sokols everywhere....? Well, because we're the agrarian country which naturally mingles together. It's impossible not to, it's a necessity, because everyone has to be in that village, in the Slovak village. From the 17th century, Czechs had it in such a way that only one person inherited a farmer's land, and industry was being built, and new villages were still being established in the 19th century. But with some sense of profession. I don't know, they were also being established in Slovakia, but small, woodcutter villages. Well and I'm telling you that when you've got five children and only one inherits everything, and the other four have to make a living, well then, they drift apart. They didn't need those family relationships. And they didn't make their future in their village, of course, they went where the railway was being built. Or they

went to do something else, didn't they? And this creates a completely different society, like the one which was created in the West a long time ago. And institutions played a large role in this, for example, in 13th century France apparently policeman went around households and wherever they saw a manual flour mill, they broke it, to make people go to the miller's. You know? They simply worked constantly at it, whereas here it was subsistence living. And not even the aristocracy had any money. You know how happy they were when some Thuzos had gold coins? Well, they didn't have money, for example, they mortgaged the whole of the Spiš region for that reason. There was no money anywhere.

B.: We also mentioned some interesting facts about the terminology of family relationships...

Š.: (laughs...) I'm glad you mentioned it. Because in some article, you wrote about a "neter" [niece]. For example, in Bratislava, in the town, it's called "neter" in my family, too. But somewhere else you won't hear the expression "neter". And do you know where the word comes from? You know, in the Czech Republic they discovered some manuscripts in the 19th century... and there was a lot of fuss about them. One half said that they were fake, the other that they weren't. Some old Czech poems were beautifully written on them. The author, he was the archivist who made them. He found some small documents, and erased the text and... but the first letters were beautifully written, he wouldn't have been able to do that, so he wrote the verses so that the first word was on the original document. That's how he faked them. The expression "neter", it's from him, the counterfeiter. Do you understand? Linguists discovered that, not me. Well, well. But it's not an unknown term, because in Indo-European languages, some of them, this "neter" exists. So go and ask in a village who a "neter" is. They won't tell you, they don't know. Nor a "synovec" [nephew]. He's a son, a son, and whose son, a brother's son. And then the new bourgeois culture became richer, of course. So, they made up all sorts.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Soňa Švecová led the sub-committee for social relations at the Czechoslovak section of the International Committee for the Study of Folk Culture in the Carpathians and Balkans, and as part of this, she was responsible for further interesting seminars focused on isolated settlements, morality in the traditional folk environment and ethnographic and regional groups. From 1969 to 1972, she was a member of the committee of the Slovak Ethnographic Society of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and was a long-standing member of the main committee of the Czechoslovak Ethnographic Society of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. Despite the fact that Soňa Švecová stands in the eyes of her colleagues (even much younger ones) at the top of the ladder of scientific researchers and her professional scope clearly crosses over from ethnology into social and cultural anthropology, she never held a directorial position in leading ethnological institutions. She received two awards from the Slovak Ethnographic

Society of the Slovak Academy of Sciences for her contribution to science: the 1st prize for best work of the year for her study “Social and Cultural Relations in the North-Eastern Region of Hont” (1984) and 2nd prize in the category of lectures for her lecture “The Economic Status of the Woman in a Farming Family” (1984). The publication “Slovak Family Traditions” to which S. Švecová made a significant contribution, obtained the prize of the Literary Fund in 1997. In 2009, on the occasion of her birthday, a seminar was held in Bratislava devoted to the research topics to which Soňa Švecová had made a significant contribution. On behalf of the Czech Republic, it was attended by Prof. PhDr. Josef Kandert, CSc., who was influenced by her at the beginnings of his career, and who was associated with her as a colleague through their research topics and fieldwork in Slovakia. In 2012, she was awarded a Hungarian state order intended for foreign researchers, Pro Cultura Hungarica, for her long-term cooperation and building of collegial relations and understanding between (Czecho)-Slovak and Hungarian ethnologists.

Soňa Švecová is the mother of two children who have given her a large family with grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She spent her years of marriage with the artist Jindřich Švec (1927–2015), who was a painter, textile artist, a creator of fabric designs and tapestries. At the beginning of her research, he used to accompany her and document their fieldwork in his drawings. Soňa Švecová and her work became the subject of several of his drawings (e.g. page 126).

What people have said about Soňa Švecová¹

Alena Plessingerová: “All her publications bring something new and revelatory; they have clever criticism as their common feature. She sees previously unnoticed issues, which she deals with based on her knowledge from her long-term fieldwork, based on her wide-ranging ethnographic education, her piercing observation and judgement and her talent for scientific work. On top of all this, it was of course necessary to add a dose of hard work and overcome the discomfort which field work brings. This is enough praise, but it is honest and just. It can be summed up in one brief sentence: Soňa Švecová is responsible to a great extent for new knowledge and new methods in the ethnography of Slovakia” (Plessingerová, 1979).

Ján Botík: “Soňa Švecová is one of the most striking figures in Slovak ethnography. She obtained general recognition for her constant discovery of new topics and issues in the study of folk culture, as well as for her search for new

¹ We selected the quotations from Beňušková, 2011.

theoretical and methodological starting-points for dealing with them. Among Slovak ethnographers, she is a so-called lone wolf in her use of stationary methods for gathering information in the field. As a result of such an approach to the object and environment of her research, only few people can equal her in her in-depth analysis of researched phenomena and problems and micro-social surveys. And only few people were aware to such an extent of the need to research small social groups and relatively closed local communities which are the most particular existential framework and in many cases a determining factor for almost all the elements and attributes of traditional folk culture” (Botík, 1980).

Marta Botiková: “Soňa Švecová focuses in her work on research into social culture. However, she does not look for abstracted structures within it. She understands the social aspect as the natural environment in which the bearers of culture operate. All the while, she subjects phenomena to a historical analysis with precious consistency, leaving no space for half-baked solutions or speculations; on the contrary, she gives evidence with an almost legal precision for her statements, using objective written sources, which await her in the archives, gathering dust. This renders the next level of her work even more effective: the confrontation between objective sources and subjective testimonies by informants. She is able to listen to them carefully, with respect for their pithiness; she likes using them to replace her own text, but never without purpose, but to obtain the necessary distance for a scientific evaluation of a fact” (Botiková, 1990).

Kornélia Jakubíková: “Personally, I find it particularly gratifying that she didn’t do what was “done” at the time, but what she enjoyed and interested her. It is probably for this reason that she avoided several positions and titles (which she would have deserved), or they avoided her. However, this did not affect her authority and renown. She remains independent and original” (Botíková, Škovierová, & Jakubíková, 1999).

Zita Škovierová: “Personally, I respect her greatly and admire her for several of her qualities. In my opinion, she has a natural talent for finding an interesting problem in the field in which she is active. The sequentiality of topics which she dealt with and the progress of the studied questions show that she “understands” the life of those people among whom she carried out her research; she has a huge sense of empathy (which sometimes appears in her public presentations, in particular when quoting the testimonies of her informants, and especially so when they are female), and has a truly anthropological view. Ambitious, hard-working, independent, in one word “good”, in its literal and figurative sense” (Botíková, Škovierová, & Jakubíková, 1999).

Magdaléna Mrázová: “Every morning we would set off using the sporadic local transport, or on foot, to the surrounding half-empty villages where we learnt about the life and fates of those who had been exiled from Slovakia. We had done some previous research in advance, so we looked for specific names. In the field, Dr. Švecová behaved in a sensationally human way, with infallible intuition: “Come on, those will be Slovaks, they have corn growing in their garden... They are old people, let’s wait until they’ve had time to get ready in the morning...” From her I learnt her method of research – she didn’t force anything, she drew people into a friendly discussion, which she magisterially steered in the right direction, but not hesitating to divert to a completely different topic if she felt something interesting – she had great intuition. She closed her eyes then and focused completely. She took notes in her dense handwriting, but nobody minded, because she continued to converse in a lively manner. During breaks, we sat at the edge of the villages, where she would smoke passionately – I remember that apart from coffee, she didn’t need to eat, which bothered me quite a lot at the time. She was untiring, full of energy and life, she kept going even when we had had enough...” (Mrázová, 2009).

Juraj Podoba: “In the context of the period, the striking quality of a large part of her scientific publications is a clear illustration of the limits which that period set even for exceptionally talented researchers, among whom Soňa Švecová belongs without a doubt. She overcame the obstacles of the period and isolation from what was happening in worldwide/European science with the exceptional originality of her approach and the perseverance with which she devoted herself to her research efforts. Švecová went “her way”, using invention and her very own research intuition, and in the end many of the results of her scientific work are compatible with the conclusions of ethnographers, or qualitative social scientists in general, working under the conditions of modern social science in the context of an open society, enjoying the privilege of independence and the freedom of scientific research. I am bold enough to affirm that with the better part of her scientific publications, Švecová was two to three decades ahead of this period which constricted and limited her, and not just in terms of the ethnographic mainstream, but in general concerning social science research from the second half of the 20th century focused on research into people and society, as it was carried out during the period of her active scientific life in the countries of so-called ‘real socialism’” (Podoba, 2009).

Juraj Langer: “As a child, Soňa already subconsciously knew the meaning of cultural difference in relation to her family, and this topic has attracted her like a magnet during the course of her whole life to date. Even when she was working on folk production, buildings and housing, family structure, ethnic and ethnographic

groups, we could always feel in her work that the most important thing was to understand the difference in the nature of people in closed communities and the reasons for their behaviour. Soňa Švecová is one of the last ethnologists who encountered this difference in relation to the traditional culture of mountain villages and isolated settlements. I can understand the joy that contact with the local families and discovering their lives brought her. At the same time, she was one of the first people who used western European anthropological literature at a time when few people tried it. She opened new areas for ethnological research in the Czechoslovakia of the time. She acquired a wide-ranging European theoretical viewpoint, but she preferred her field research to the opportunities for advancement in her employment. She lived to serve the objects of her research. In the end, this could be felt not only on a scientific level, but also in her high level of tolerance and understanding for all those whom Soňa met in her everyday life” (Langer, 2009).

Josef Kandert: “I consider the period of the 1970s and 1980s to be fundamental in Soňa Švecová’s Promethean role. The beginnings of this research and organisation period are once again linked to construction. She was already a member of the committee for buildings, when at the beginning of the 1970s she felt the need to research the subject of the family in Slovakia. In the spirit of traditional ethnography, the relevant authorities of the International Committee for the Study of Folk Culture in the Carpathians and the Balkans (hereafter MKKKB) decided to add research into family and family relations in general to the committee for customs. Švecová’s uncompromising attitude, however, was successful and thus an institution which brought much of use over the following years succeeded in being established. It appears to have been the only committee with a similar focus in the whole of the socialist bloc and in the whole area of Carpathian research - perhaps with the exception of Poland, where similar research was also being carried out, but under a different authority....The seminars by the “Carpatian sub-committee” prepared participants for a different type of research from traditional ethnographic research. They were individual actions with a duration of one or two years; but looking back, it is clear that they created a development curve, the results of which are still apparent in Slovakia today. Slovak ethnologists/ethnographers and folklore experts, plus several Bohemian and Moravian ones, and now even their students, research to a much greater extent the processes of change in Slovak society than is the case in the Czech Republic, where the traditional ethnographic approach to the choice of topics and how they are dealt with dominates. It is much easier for them to move around in the ‘border waters’ of ethnology, social anthropology and sociology” (Kandert, 2009).

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