

**BIRTH AND EARLY CHILDHOOD
FROM A CULTURAL-HISTORICAL
AND ETHNOLOGICAL POINT OF VIEW**

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There is no universal “childhood” that would be valid for all times and places. The life of children varies in time and space, in relation to social circumstances in each culture, society and community. This general statement can help us create a suitable framework for reflection on the need to learn “the stage of birth” of a person, or to be more precise, of a little person who becomes the object and subject of social and cultural existence. From a whole range of more general and more specific points of view (biological developmental, psychological, emotional, socialization-related, educational and so on), the ethnological or anthropological point of view appears to be the most multidimensional and holistic because it integrates many of the mentioned points of view and respects many other contexts of this changing phenomenon, the individual and historical stretch of human existence. It may be this multidimensionality that poses a difficult task for a researcher: where to grasp or from which direction to approach the defined, or how to define the universal and at the same time specific period which reflects particular geographical and historical, social and ethnic dimensions of an individual existence.

The introduction which was supposed to help us open this question-laden reflection can also be understood as an apology for why research into childhood or children as subjects and objects of socio-cultural phenomena and processes has got off the ground so slowly. This fact was highlighted by Martin Kanovský (Kanovský, 2011) in his introduction to a series of articles dedicated to the social and anthropological research on children. The same year also saw the publication of a study by Margita Jágerová, dedicated to breastfeeding and neonatal care – from a comparative perspective of cultural change (Jágerová, 2011). If we review older studies on the ethnology and anthropology of childhood in Slovakia, we will find out that there are not as few of them as it may seem, but they are thematically and methodologically varied. One of the first anthropological/ethnological works that were published at the beginning of the 20th century was a book dedicated to the culture of childhood (Chotek, 1923). In the last third of the 20th century Ján Mjartan wrote a monograph which not only summarized the author’s

own research, but also, in a comparative perspective, the extensive ethnological material on the theme of childhood that had been published until then (Mjartan, 1974). The thematic range of ethnological research into childhood in Slovakia is, on the one hand, varied, but on the other hand also rich. The texts with this focus can in the broader sense include texts focused on aspects of folklore (children's folklore and folklore for children), demographic aspects (the phenomenon of one-child families), aspects of family life (a child in a family, a child in an incomplete/monoparental family, the upbringing of children) and ceremoniality related to a child's life or possibly the position of a child in different ceremonial cycles. The focus on the theme of children and childhood can also be contextualized politically: an example could be the International Child's Year (1979) or some scientific projects that are currently in progress. They resulted in several events which led to the publication of essay collections that treated childhood from different ethnological or folkloristic viewpoints (*Dítě a tradice...* 1981; *Slovenský národopis* 31, 1983, No. 3–4). The development of the sociology of childhood is similarly mentioned by I. Chorvát (Chorvát, 1999).

Childhood and its manifestations in cultural-historical life reality have also been dealt with by ethnological museums. One of their more recent projects was an exhibition entitled *Ohýbaj ma mamko* [*Discipline a Child When He Is Still Young*], installed by the Slovak National Museum – The Ethnographic Museum in Martin within the Museums and Ethnicities cycle. This cycle is a joint project of the ethnographic, historical and minority museums within the Slovak National Museum. The exhibition was supplemented by a collection of contributions thematically focused on childhood and adolescence (Feglová, 2010).

Historical research has also produced several studies that are valuable for the period and the social environment that they cover. They offer a cultural-historical insight into childhood in the context of Upper Hungary. On the other hand, attempts to reconstruct “childhood” in our territory in the Middle Ages are quite rare (Bottanová, 2008; Chorvátová, 2007). More numerous are works that examine the phenomenon of childhood from the 17th to the 19th century, especially in the environment of noblemen and burghers, with a particular focus on educational institutions. These themes were elaborated also thanks to the conference *Žena a právo* (2004) [*Woman and Law*], which led to the publication of a remarkable collection of contributions, and thanks to a more recent extensive multithematic publication *Na ceste k modernej žene* (2011) [*On the Way to a Modern Woman*].

Nevertheless, we think more could have been done, also in terms of the popularization of ethnology. In Slovakia there is no synthesizing publication of current knowledge as is the case in the neighbouring countries: some of them are thematically specific (Navrátilová, 2004; Rožman, 2004; Deáky, Krász, 2005), others more general (Lenderová, Rýdl, 2006; Fontanel, d'Harcourt, 1998; Childhood, 2001). This is also the case of the work by the Hungarian ethnologist Zita Deáky (2011). Since Slovak scholars have not done justice to the historiography or ethnology of childhood yet, it is good that the monographs of this author from a nearby cultural region are available.

It is of interest to note that Deáky has been following the phenomenon of childhood over a long period. She starts at “the beginning of all things,” with the cultural history of birth drawing on Hungarian sources from the 16th to the 20th century. It is very important knowledge related to the beginning of life, which is not significant only on an individual basis, but has, needless to say, its historically peculiar social and cultural character.

It was in the 1990s that Deáky focused her attention on the theme of midwives, whose activities were closely linked with childbirth. For the first time in Hungarian academic literature she introduced the occupation of a midwife as one of the first female occupations which women were free to choose and in which they could be trained in their national language (Deáky, 1996). She outlined the development of this occupation from the mid-18th century until 1960 through an analysis of state regulations related to midwifery, textbooks and educational institutions in the Hungarian Kingdom and later on in Hungary. She also defined the responsibilities of midwives in the past. The threads of her research have been picked up by Lilla Krász, who focuses on depicting the position of midwives in rural environment in the 18th century by analyzing archival material (Krász, 2003).

Both researchers worked together on an impressive scholarly monograph *Minden dolgok kezdete* [At the Beginning of All Things], in which they described birth from a cultural-historical viewpoint in the 16th to the 20th century (Deáky, Krász, 2005). Their work follows the development of the rational medical science and obstetrics and documents customs and superstitions with which a new member was expected or welcomed in a family or a broader community. The authors conceived the book based on individual stages of the journey to motherhood: from the first menstruation and fertility or infertility connected with it, through pregnancy and birth to puerperium. On this journey women were accompanied by midwives in the past. Their responsibilities in the individual stages of a woman's life, together with the development of the profession from a village midwife to a certified childbirth assistant through several centuries, reflect the modernization of society.

Thanks to advances in the field of medicine in Europe in the 20th century, birth is now part of a modern system of health and social services, where medicaments, testing and monitoring of physical processes of the mother and the foetus play a role. In today's European countries, both in academia and public life, there are lively discussions about the place of birthing, help to the woman in labour, the identity of the newly born from the first minute... The authors explore how birth was perceived and approached in a certain historical period, what the responsibilities of midwives were, and what herbs and superstitions were relied on. They present the results of the cultural-historical research into Hungarian materials about childbirths and birthing. The work contains visualized historical and ethnographic evidence.

In Slovak academic literature midwives have received very little attention so far. Like in other corners of the world, they were first dealt with by historians of medicine (Bokesová – Uherová, 1967). There were several studies which

evaluated the significance of the first midwifery school in Slovakia (Morovicsová, 2003), the development of the profession of a midwife and the use of Slovak-language textbooks (Falisová, Morovicsová, 2011; Pekařová, 2013). As for ethnological literature, there was only one study directly dealing with midwifery (Beňušková, 1990), although this theme could not have been, quite naturally, avoided by authors of specialized studies and chapters of general monographs about customs related to childbirth either. Mentions of midwifery also appear in connection with the issue of birth control as a cultural phenomenon and, last but not least, in connection with magical practices and folk medicine. The topic can also be found in older ethnographic resources (the manuscripts of Čaplovič, Dobšinský, 1880), as well as in more recent partial or more complex works.

In the introduction to her latest book entitled *Dobří chlapci a děvčátka* [*Good Boys and Girls*] in translation, Zita Deáky continues with her cultural-historical and ethnological excursus into the history of childhood. In its theoretical part she reflects the existing writings in the field of the history of culture or possibly the history of everyday life related to the phenomenon of childhood and a child's status in a family and community. Among others, she touches on the reception of Philippe Ariés's richly argumentative book which brought shocking findings about the (non-)existence of childhood. Since the publication of Ariés's book several authors have commented on his claims and mitigated his argumentation denying the existence of childhood in a human life cycle before the 17th century. The American historian Linda Pollock pointed to further possible interpretations and sources that do not confirm Ariés's hypotheses. Interpretations that suit the European context the best are included in the work of the Israeli historian Shulamit Shakar and the German ethnologist Ingeborg Weber-Kellerman.

Deáky follows the life of children from the age of about two until the age of seven – from the “first teeth” to being admitted to institutions (school, service, training). She covers materials from the 16th to the 17th century to the end of the First World War in Hungary, from time to time venturing further into the inter-war period. She selects the less covered aspects of life style which the common reader has not had the possibility to learn until then. It is not a “historical” book although it respects the historical context. After all, the child was everywhere and experienced things just like adults – we only have less evidence. She deals with the whole process of socialization, which involves religious education, inseparable from other activities and values, initiation into work and the normative system of conduct. The social and emotional antipole of “happy” childhood is the childhood of children orphaned as a result of war and other events, as well as the childhood of children from incomplete families or possibly those born out of wedlock. The author considers the child's living needs just as important as family and relationships: the child's place in a house or yard, diet, sleep, clothing or personal hygiene. A child during a holiday or holidays directly related to children, a child at work, child labour, a child at war – these are topics and possible views of the culturally specific and socially differentiated circumstances of childhood. An extensive chapter is devoted to health or illness from the viewpoint of home

and institutionalized treatment, health services, as well as the treatment of children with a physical or mental disability. Several chapters are focused on children outside families, in different institutions such as orphanages, nurseries and kindergartens. Children's literature, which has been developing since the 19th century, is part of the survey too.

The author's research into childhood in the life of an individual and a community is respectably broad and inspiring. Although she occasionally also deals with the peculiarities of some ethnic groups (for example, Jewish holidays in the cycle of childhood, Roma children brought up outside family), she most frequently works with the cultural material of the majority group, which provides an interesting socially differentiated portrayal of childhood – of peasants, craftsmen, burghers and noblemen. The book is also captivating due to a lot of newly discovered illustration material.

When we return to the beginning of our article, we can say that in many respects we are ready to produce a work parallel to that of Deáky using Slovak material. We have started preliminary research into ethnological and historical literature focused on birth and early childhood. However, more research and more detailed heuristic work will be required to cover the theme. The reading public will certainly appreciate such work in the future.

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