

JURO JÁNOŠÍK
A FAMOUS ROBBER CHIEFTAIN IN THE HISTORY
AND FOLKLORE OF THE SLOVAK PEOPLE
(on the 300th anniversary of execution and death of the robber)

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The greatness of a national tradition is indicated above all by its vitality within the national organism itself. If this tradition, however, exerts an active influence on the culture or cultural life of another people, then this is evidence that we have to do with a firmly delineated, specific and unusually rich tradition. This general statement is also confirmed by the most wide-spread and richest Slovak popular tradition, that of Jánošík, whose scope by far exceeds the boundaries of the Slovak people.

Jánošík was, of course, not the only outstanding robber personality, however, he has come to occupy pride of place and become the nucleus of the robbers' tradition in Slovak history. The term „Jánošík tradition” has become a concept in Slovakia and it is certainly not by chance that this designation does not only refer to itself, but to the robbers' traditions generally. Nor is it by accident that the Jánošík tradition has attracted the attention of the most diverse disciplines. Apart from the folklorists, not only historians of art, ethnomusicologists, historians, literary scholars and sociologists keep on returning to it, but also philosophers, legal historians and researchers of other disciplines.

More than three hundred years have passed since the birth of Juraj Jánošík. This legendary hero has become the starting point of the robbers' traditions, which for centuries accompanied the life of the Slovak people, strengthened it in fateful moments, traditions which, however, also turned into a source of inspiration. They also played a significant part in the recent past, during the Slovak popular uprising towards the end of the second world war, and through their undisputed values also become part of the Slovak present.

Although the robbers' traditions find their expression in various sectors, in none more so than in folklore. Yet they are reflected not merely in popular culture, but also in literature and high professional art. These two spheres communicate with and enrich each other, exert an influence and join the single stream of national culture.

In Slovakia, the robbers' traditions represent only part of a broader whole, Other national groups in Slovakia have had their share in building Jánošík's image and

in any base, folklore creations about Jánošík are not restricted to Slovak territory. They can be found also among the neighboring peoples in Bohemia, Poland, Hungary and the Ukraine.

In the written sources, the first tidings of robbers in Slovakia have been preserved from the period of early feudalism, such those in the legend of Sts. Svorad and Benedict of the year 1064 referring to robbers in the area of Trenčín. It may be assumed that the origin of brigandry on Slovak territory is connected with the enslavement of the till then free peasantry, which resisted it in particular by escaping from the land. A major amount of evidence about robbers has only been preserved from the end of the 15th century from north-eastern Slovakia. There, a numerous band under the leadership of Fedor Hlavatý, comprising fugitives from their overlords in Slovakia, the Ukraine and Poland, engaged in far-flung predatory activities in the spring of 1492. They found support with the rural communities, because they attacked the feudal lords and townships in the Slovak-Polish border area. At the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, the ranks of the Slovak robbers were strengthened by conscripts released from military service, the „haiduks“. Economic decline set in the middle of the 17th century. Soldiers' raids caused the serfs great damage, ravaged their farmsteads and landed them in misery. The impoverished peasants fled to the mountains and joined the robbers. At that time, brigandry spread above all in north-eastern Slovakia, but soon grew also in other regions, especially in Liptov and Orava.

Brigandry acquired an outright mass character only after the suppression of the „rising of the estates“, which was headed by Francis II. Rákóczi in the year 1711. Deserters from the ranks of his „kuruci“ joined the robbers' bands. The activities of Juraj Jánošík, the best known robbers' chieftain in Slovakia, belongs to this period of brigandry's upswing,

Juraj Jánošík hailed from the village of Terchová, where he was born in a poor peasant family in January, 1688. As a lad of twenty years, he joined Rakoczi's rebel army. After the battle of Trenčín, he left the ranks of the „kuruci“ together with many fellows, but was soon recruited into the imperial army, whence his parents succeeded in buying him out. As a soldier of the detachment of the guard on Castle Bytča, he made the acquaintance of the prisoner Tomáš Uhorčík, a robber from the Kysuce area, who persuaded him to join the robbers after he had been released from the imperial army. When Uhorčík soon left the band, Jánošík set up his own and became its boss. The number of its members was subject to change, sometimes twelve, sometimes more than 20 robbers belonged to it. Jánošík with his band pillaged in various Slovak regions, even as far as Silesia and Moravia. His brigandry, however, did not last long, only from the fall of 1711 to the winter of 1712. In early March, 1713, he was caught and on 17th March of the same year he was sentenced the death in Liptovský Svätý Mikuláš and banded, being only 25 years of age.

If the tradition of Jánošík has entered the general consciousness in Slovakia, this has happened thanks to the active, incessant and many-faceted effect of popular culture. This tradition became anchored in a rich scale of popular creations. Most distinctly it manifested itself in folklore output, above all in folk tales and

songs. Its intensity, however, also irradiated into other spheres outside folklore, most frequently creations of popular art.

In Slovakia we find rich artistic material on the Jánošík theme, covering a wide range of material culture from objects of everyday use to works with a decorative and representative function. For the first time, the Jánošík topic makes its appearance on the so-called Habán faience vessel, a wine jug. It is dated 1726 and originated in the Moravian-Slovak border area or else in south-western Slovakia, Jánošík, is there shown with a jug and a rifle, and from among his comrades, Ilčík with a saber and Gajdošík with a bagpipe. In following the evolution of Jánošík images popular paintings on glass must be mentioned in the first place. They were very widespread among the people and constituted especially in the northern, but also other parts of Slovakia a lasting part of the interior decoration of people's houses. They called to the mind of the Slovak people Jánošík's and his band's heroism even more often than the tales and songs, Jánošík and his comrades are frequently represented also on ceramics objects carved of wood such as distaffs, washing boards and ladles.

Folklore creation knows many robbers' tales, but most often one runs into the figure of Jánošík, whose name is known all over Slovakia. His name does not have a form settled once and for all, but varies: Juro, Jurko, Ďuro, Ďurko, Ďurina, Jánošík, Janošák. In Songs, Janko, Janík or Janičko also occur.

The tales of Jánošík mostly tend in the direction of the historical tales, although this is not so unambiguous from the historiographic point of view. Some robbers' images the people created themselves and individual adventures linked with robbers likewise arose out of their minds. These two levels of „reality“ are evident in all folktales denoted as historical, no matter what they deal with. In this way, new „realia“ got into the robbers' tales, presented in very concrete terms, in connection with other historically attested figures, All these traditions are inspired by domestic and period coloring.

The fact that a multitude of adventures has settled around outstanding robber figures – and this applies above all to Jánošík – has been responsible for their special biography in the popular tradition. The cycle of each one of them reflects, as it were, the fate of one hero or another. Thus, the people bring the lives of the robbers close to themselves according to their own ideas. The popular biography of Jánošík comprises the following stages: Jánošík's youth, the way in which he acquired outstanding qualities and abilities and how he came by his outfit, then the period of his brigandage, his arrest, death and finally his bequest. It is within the framework of these stages that the themes of the Jánošík tales develop.

Jánošík had been destined since birth, as it were, to become a robber and a famous robbers' chieftain at that. He had to be strong, because his mother nursed him either seven or twelve years, according to other versions he gained strength with the help of supernatural beings – witches, nymphs, the devil or a snake. Sometimes, Jánošík acquired extraordinary force and exceptional qualities through the mediation of miraculous objects: a belt which conferred strength for a regiment, a shirt which made its bearer invisible, or an axe which cut by itself. When he was thus well prepared and had come by his suitable outfit, he set out for his

raids. The incitements for these were various, e.g. by one raid he took vengeance on one lord for his father's death, or else he had seen some wrong, which the lords committed against the poor people, which he decided to avenge. In most versions, he made a beginning by robbing his own father, by the which he convinced himself of his fitness. As an outstanding brigand, Jánošík could not ply his trade by himself, but was joined by other mountaineers. After a contest in axe-throwing he became their leader, the robbers' chieftain.

The raids of Jánošík and his band assumed many shapes. Whereas other brigands known in Slovakia also committed outrages occasionally on poor people, Jánošík's brigandry wears an exclusively positive, „classical“ character, which may be summed up in „take from the rich and give to the poor“. Typical is his farce in disguising himself for parties and banquets in castles, or else without disguise on roads or in woods, uttering the words „The soul for God and the money for me!“ Mercilessly he punished well-to-do innkeepers, who robbed and cheated the people, but also slanderous women or girls who had sung derogatory songs about robbers. Sometimes he would stick nails into their soles, which (the nails) he had had them buy at the fair. On the other hand, for girls who had sung nicely about the robbers, he would measure cloth „from one beech-tree to the other“ and present them with ducats.

A separate group of tales about Jánošík is made up of episodes from his arrest, which is sometimes unsuccessful, for he evades his pursuers through superhuman power or his skill. If he is caught nevertheless, he has mostly been given away by the advice of an old woman lying on the stove that peas be strewn under his feet, or else by the treachery of his beloved one. After his arrest, death was in store for Jánošík, as for other famous robbers. Jánošík, however, went to his execution resolutely and at the last moment still displayed his boldness and heroism. He smoked three pounds of tobacco under the gallows, danced several times around it and rejected the pardon which he received at the point of death with the words: „Once you have baked me, eat me up!“

Jánošík's treasures scattered over many places in Slovakia belong to his precious bequest. According to the popular traditions, they are in rocks, caves, hollow trees, in wells or in the ground, Once a year they come to the surface, and burn with a red or blue flame; they are guarded by some superhuman being, mostly a monk, a dwarf, a snake or a dog.

The tales of Jánošík belong to the cycle of sagas, which are not so poetically adorned as the fairy tales. Besides, the story about him often does not exceed the scope of a short report. Then it resembles more a short piece of information than a proper tale. References to certain places, such as his seat, his well or his grave can be considered that kind of information. Yet sometimes this report merges into a wide-ranging tale recalling a story. If it is seasoned with narrative motifs, poetical features typical of fairy tales penetrate into them. But also after this adaptation, the stories of Jánošík do not forfeit their typical concrete character, remain linked with a definite setting and are descriptive of scenery. The narrator of a tale about Jánošík rarely gives a precise indication of time, but often refers to the antiquity of the event. Fixed phrases and images, subject to little variability,

dominate the stories. Their frequent occurrence has fixed them so much in the people's minds, that they have acquired independent validity and to-day still occur in everyday speech like proverbs.

Songs sometimes play a significant part in Jánošík's narrated adventures, contributing as an insertion towards the build-up of the hero. Most frequently, however, songs about Jánošík make their appearance as independent creations, often to the accompaniment of a musical instrument or of dance.

In the lyrical and lyric-epical songs, a robber without a proper name constitutes the most frequent figure; a figure close to Jánošík is Janík the robber, or Janíček, Ďuríček without an attribute. Jánošík is mentioned but occasionally. What is characteristic of these songs is above all personal reflection and expression. They deal in particular with the shepherd's life, theft and its consequences for the brigands.

The subjects of the epic songs are peculiar. In them, the robber is a typical figure, sometimes likewise without a name or with the name of Janko or Janik, Character features set him apart from ordinary people. He is either cruelly severe or exceptionally witty, uncatchable or on the contrary caught and punished for his deeds. A significantly different group is made up of songs, which by their topic recall the „biography“ type of popular narration, it is true, but in which Jánošík's adventures concentrate mainly on robbery, on the last stage of his life, on the episode of his arrest, stay in prison or his being taken to the gallows.

The songs about Jánošík are on the whole a reflection of his real life, but also of the attitudes at the time towards him as well as of various stylized facts about him, shot through with fantastic elements.

It may be said that in the basic genres dealing with Jánošík, what is universal and specific, general and individual has merged into a peculiar whole, and this an integrated one. The remaining spheres of popular culture, beginning with decorative art, through dance and music all the way to proverbs, falls into line with this treatment. This many-faceted effect provides one of the keys which open the way to the depths to human feelings and ideas. When we confront the figure of the ideal robber – the notorious Juraj Jánošík – the supreme values emerge before our eyes: freedom, justice, loyalty, friendship and happiness. This general philosophical sub-text contains the most precious contribution of the Jánošík tradition, a tradition which remains a live source of inspiration for artistic creation, just as the various manifestations of Slovak popular culture, satiated with the spirit of Jánošík's bequest, have remained vital to our days.

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