

The Three Hats of Death

A Hungarian Case Study

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For the last ten years I have been examining the use of the material environment by individuals and families. My data generally concerned the changes in how objects have been used by particular groups over three generations from the beginning of the century to the present. Alongside participant observations my main material has been interviews with old people looking back on their lives, and private photographs “illustrating” family or personal life stories. It struck me in connection with the interviews that not only “souvenirs” exercise the function of recalling memories but, in certain contexts, all other objects do so as well. Man remembering and forgetting through objects realizes and expresses his own self. In doing this, objects inevitably become linked with ego-ontological explanations which become mythologies for an individual, a family or a small group, allowing identity to be nurtured and expressed. A growing need for this on the part of fragmented societies has appeared in the last ninety years, when global social myths have been relegated to the background, split, deprived of their meaning, commercialized or affecting the subconscious.

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For many years I have regularly spent several weeks in the country late in the autumn to study Hungarian peasant customs related to death. In the 1980s I repeatedly visited a village in North Eastern Hungary where I put up in an old peasant house. Situated in the centre of the village near the church and the council-headquarters, the house in its essential followed local architectural traditions, and its size and arrangement showed that it had been built by a well-to-do smallholder. Now, however, the circumstances of the occupants have undergone a drastic change. Many tiles were missing on the sagging roof, the plaster was peeling and the rising damp has reached the windows in the walls. The large farmyard was even more revealing on the poverty of the inhabitants.

Three old women were living in the house. Their carefully mended black clothes and reticent, quiet manner betrayed that they must

have seen better days; now they rubbed along on a portion of the smallest co-op farmspension. This was why I had chosen their house for lodgings. I thought they must badly need the rent I paid them. I was also attracted by the quietness of the household. My landladies never came into my room, not even by accident, and they led their lives in such a natural and imperturbable reticence that, even though we were separated by a single door, I could scarcely hear the slightest rustle from their quarters, nor could I make out the words of their rare conversations. When I had selected these lodgings, I was also hoping to be able to learn from them something of my subject, since it had always been the duty of old women to attend to the dying. They always eluded my questions. After a couple of polite sentences they withdrew into their silence. I saw I had no hope of getting closer to the three women, and even less of becoming acquainted with the

causes of their present circumstances. I understood their reserve as a warning to keep my distance. And so I did.

Early in November, on the eve of All Souls, the evening bell found me wandering through the cemeteries in the neighbourhood. I took pictures of the families lighting candles at the graves as dusk rapidly closed in, arranging asters and pine-twigs in remembrance of their dead, and I recorded their prayers, songs and conversations. When the bells stopped ringing, they returned to their homes. In the soft drizzle the artificial flowers reflected wetly the fizzling candle light. The descending mist enveloped the few lights in the village. In the hillside graveyard not stars but candles gleamed.

Returning to my room I was surprised to find a fire going in the stove. To my still greater surprise, the door to my landladies' room, which had always been closed, was now open. In the spacious room a chest of drawers stood between the two windows facing the street, under a crucifix and a mirror, and – and this was rather strange – three candles were flickering on the floor under the crossbeam. The light coming from below threw a strange radiance on the folded hands of the three women, gave a mask-like character to their faces and threw their enlarged shadows up into the ceiling. I would have liked to take a photograph but did not want to disturb them. The three women were praying by the candlelight, and their hands, usually clasped around their sticks, seemed to have found a surer support when folded in devotion, as if their aged, decrepit bodies were imbued with an inner force. But why the candles on the floor? And why exactly under the crossbeam? Looking up, I caught sight of a cross in the lower surface of the beam and the date, of construction, 1924. As I was making out the name of the builder, I thought I saw something hanging from the other side of the crossbeam. Instinctively I took another step to see better. Their brims pressed against the boards of the ceiling, there hung hats, side by side. The light of the three candles flickered away on the three dusty, shabby, cobwebbed hats, and the three women praying below them on the eve of All Souls'. The can-

dles burnt themselves out with a last blaze and left three black patches on the earthen floor.

The following day, All Souls' Day, I asked my landladies to explain what I had seen the previous evening. They started to speak willingly, taking turn in their narration.

In 1919 a young man arrived in the village. He came from a true Székely family in the Székely Country, in Transylvania. During the Great War he had fought on all the main theatres of war the Austro-Hungarian army had been engaged on and, when he was wounded, he was taken from hospital to hospital and thus came to know the whole of Hungary. When the Peace Treaty of Trianon took away two thirds of old Hungary part of the lost territories included Transsylvania, the birthplace of the young man. He did not want to become a citizen in a foreign country; he took his hat and bidding his parents and the paternal house farewell, tried his luck in his diminished country. That was how he arrived in this village, whose hilly fields reminded him of his childhood surroundings.

The young man was of a proud and wilful disposition. His character was best expressed by the way he wore his hat. He married into one of the richest families of the village, one in which a hard-working man was badly needed since the farmer and his son had died in the war. At the same time there was also a growth in the family, as after the war, Hungary's new northern border was drawn along the second village from them, and the young bride's sister, who had married there, had come back with her husband, seeking shelter with them. The young husband was lucky in his farming. He had a new house built in place of the old one on the land that had long been in his dead father-in-law's family. He had a metal cross placed on the roof, and also had the masons shape crosses on the gable and between the two windows overlooking the street. "There are as many crosses on this house like on a coffin," the villagers said. Onto the crossbeam he himself carved a cross and added his name, as the head of the family and of the household, and the date. When his father lost his wife, the size of the house made it possible for him too to be

invited to come and live with them, as alone, he felt even more homeless in his own native land. But the old man still did not want to leave the soil which had nurtured his parents and grandparents and all his ancestors. He did not think it was he who should leave. But when the third invitation arrived from his son, he made up his mind to cross over to them. He thought he could still be of some use to his farmer son.

But even with his son he could not forget. Even though it was a fine house and a flourishing farm. The village had taken his son into its midst and he was held to be among the best of farmers. Half the village raised their hats to him. The son too, did his best to be useful to the community that had received him. He provided work for the have-nots and the needy; he and his wife contributed much to the renovation of the church, presenting a new bell, and, an unprecedented thing in the village, they made donations to the local elementary school. So the father felt he could stay on without inconveniencing his son. He soon found ways of making himself useful around the house: he supervised the building of the stable behind the house, and himself groomed the three pairs of horses in it.

Nonetheless, he could not strike root. The people here use different names for horses of different colours than people over there use. Even the tools have different names here. Indeed, different words are used to drive and urge on the animals from those he had known since childhood.

He turned even more silent than he used to be. In the evening he drank his wine with his son, but later he drew apart and drank it by himself. He was very happy, as was the whole family, when his grandson was born. When he was shown the baby he said: "What a tiny little child. It may even fit into my hat!" The child was given the name of his father and grandfather; he did not live long and soon had to be buried. But even the graveyard was alien for the old man, the grave-posts, too, being of different forms. He could no longer go back home, nor could he settle down in his new home. He even lost patience with the horses. One evening his daughter-in-law, entering the front room, found the old man's hat on the chest of

drawers between the two windows, under the mirror and the crucifix. Her father-in-law never left his hat lying around, the hat which he had brought from home, nor had he bought a new one here. The young woman had her misgivings and hurried to her husband. He started to look for his father. They found him in the stable, hanging from the very beam he had had lifted over the box when he arrived.

They had him laid out decently and put the hat beside him. The priest was unwilling to bury him. The farmer went to see him at the presbytery.

"Take off your hat, my son, when you are speaking to me!"

"I'll take it off when I know to whom I do so."

"You know me well enough."

"No, I don't. I don't know whether you are a priest or a man."

"Well, I'm a man who is a priest."

"Then I cannot pay my respects to you. If you were a man, I would lift my hat to you, but here and now I don't. I will have my bell taken down and my father buried beneath it."

Finally the priest gave way, and the old man was buried to the toll of the bell.

One year later, the Vienna Award of 1938 returned part of Transylvania, including the boy's birthplace, back to Hungary. The farmer no longer wanted to return, but he had his father buried next to his mother, as is meet. "If only you could have waited another year, father," he said over the grave.

Next year a boy was born to the couple, a strong, healthy boy, whom they named after his father and grandfather.

"So there's one who could have worn his grandfather's hat", the father said; he and the family were very happy. And he went on to work with even greater drive, putting all his strength into it. The war was still being fought in distant lands. Yet its breath could already be felt there too. His wife's sister's husband was among the first to die on the eastern front. So they took his sister-in-law in. The bell was taken from the tower and melted down to make guns. His strong horses could barely draw the cart in the autumn mud to the railway station. Then he himself had to join the

army. He was not at home to see his fine horses, reared under his father's eye, requisitioned.

The two women were left alone with the child. "If the man is not at home, I'll wear the hat!", the wife asserted; she held her own bravely in the hard times. The war came to an end, but peace brought no relief. The man returned after four years of captivity and took over the farm from his wife. He did not hire a day-labourer but went to work on the fields with his son. And he had much joy in his son. The boy knew how to work and, like his grandfather, was tongue-tied.

Peace brought no ease. Grave news reached the village. And then there came strangers, wearing town clothes, trousers and peaked caps and berets. Jockey caps. They established themselves in the building converted from the notary's office into a council house and took stock of the possessions of the people. They watched to find out who went to the pub with whom, who fraternized with whom and who went to church. They started organizing a co-operative farm.

The Transylvanian farmer's house was right across the street and caught their eyes. The more so since he did not raise his hat to them, as more and more people in the village did. One morning the party secretary summoned him to the council hall. He sent word he would come in the evening after finishing his day's work. He turned up at nightfall. All the agitators were gathered together in the office, their blue caps lying among the glasses on the table. They offered him a seat; he did not take it. They offered him a drink; he did not take it. They pointed to the hat-stand for him to put his hat on; he did not take it off. They prompted him to join the co-op farm, advising him, asking him, finally ordering him. Each time he declined.

"If you sign up, we shall tell the others who have already joined that you were the first to sign up. You are a large farmer, you are a good farmer. You will be the chairman. The others will go after you."

"I won't collectivise."

"No?"

"No. And I won't give you any more of my time. I have to go and see to the animals."

"You're not going anywhere! And who has jammed your hat onto your head? Can't you take it off!?"

"There is no one here who I would want to take it off to."

"Isn't there? Believe me, you will shit into your own hat some day! Let him stand next to the stove. Get the fire going. You step over to his wife and tell her to send over his best fur-coat if she wants to help her husband. And get her to send some wine too. We will make you shit into your hat all right!"

They had him stand at the red-hot stove in his warmest fur-coat. He was sweating freely, with drops falling from the brim of his hat, from the tip of his nose, leaving black patches on the earthen floor. The men were sitting stripped to the waist, drinking, planning and organizing, cursing at him to sign up, otherwise he would not get away from here.

The woman was pacing the room between the two street windows, watching to see when they would let her husband go. She was praying before the crucifix. Early at dawn two shirt-sleeved men came over and took her along:

"Speak to your husband! Perhaps he will listen to you. He will understand that the village will bend with him, and if not will break with him!"

The woman kept silent. She was staring at the men. She looked at her husband, wrapped and bound up in the fur-coat at the red-hot stove. There was no longer any light left in his white face, only his eyes were glowing in the shadow of the brim of his hat. If he were to faint he would be burned himself on the fiery iron. And she looked at the men, drinking her husband's wine and tumbling over with fatigue. She knew there was no escape. She started pleading with her husband. He was listening to her and looking at her. He also knew there was no escape. And when the sun rose, he sent her with a hollow voice, to see to the animals and continue the ploughing with the boy. They let the woman go. The agitators were tired but they knew they could not leave without completing their job. There was no

escape: neither for them nor for this man, nor for the village. And in the morning, when the loud-speaker on top of the council hall started to blare out marches to damp the sound of the bell, the man staggered forward and, supporting himself against the table put down his name at the bottom of the enrolment form.

The woman returned from the field at night-fall. She was looking for her husband. His bed was unmade. His hat was lying there in front of the mirror, under the crucifix, where once she had found the hat of her father-in-law. And in the mirror she saw her husband's booted legs. He was hanging from the forged hook driven in beside his name in the crossbeam.

The old priest came over to cut him off the rope. And he was given a quiet burial. Few people attended the funeral, which coincided with the meeting to establish the co-op farm. The burial feast was given in the back-room; the first room had been seized for the co-op office. The horses, cows, the cart and seed-corn were taken by the co-op during the week of the funeral. The newly widowed woman and her sister, herself a widow for years, from the window of their bed-chamber watched their animals driven off, and their farmyard – and the whole village – ravaged from morning till night.

Two years later they moved the office. The front room was returned to them and they put the furniture back into place. They scrubbed down the chest of drawers, which during those two years had had a bust of Lenin placed on it. They put back the broken mirror and the crucifix to the wall between the two windows, in place of the pictures of party dignitaries. The widow put a stool under the crossbeam, stepped up on it and hung her husband's hat on the wrought iron nail.

From that time on it was there the family commemorated their dead, since to visit the old man's grave would have called for a passport; they could not go to the grave of his son, since it was forbidden to celebrate All Souls' Day.

The years slipped by. The two women were working by day in the co-op farm, and the boy was attending school. He was a diligent pupil

and the teacher encouraged him to continue with his studies. He did not say anything when the boy kept his hat on during classes, which amazed the chairman who came from the Young Pioneers' County Committee to attend the end-of-term festival. "Get that lad to take that hideous thing off his head! You cannot see his red pioneer's kerchief properly because of it": The festival commended. The boy remained obstinate, but then he threw his hat down. "Fuck your school!" he shouted, snatched up the hat and ran away.

He could not go on with his studies. He was taken on in the near-by mine, where he worked first as a hauler and later underground. In vain did they warn him, he would not wear the compulsory hard leather protective cap, he did his work in this own hat, always pulled down over his eyes, his father's hat in his bachelor days. His mates called him "Hat". Once on Miners' Day, the party secretary offered to fill the hat with beer for him if he took it off. The sun was shining upon the clearing, the goulash was simmering in the cauldron, and the miners at the beer barrel urged him on. He did not take it off, he went home.

He was seventeen when he heard on the radio that there was a revolution in Pest. Revolution! And they needed help. The boy threw up his hat high in the little square before the changing-room and shouted "Let's go". A few of them loaded the bus which used to take them home to their villages with dynamite, paxite fuses and pickaxes. They piled into the bus, some forty of them, and headed for Budapest. The boy hung out of the window and shouted back to his mates from his village: "Tell my mother I've gone!" And they could see him waving with his hat.

By All Souls' the two women were left alone. And they had no news from the boy even by the following All Souls' Day. They were not able to give any words of comfort to the girl whom the boy had been courting and who dropped in to help the two women, first in the evening, and later by day too. Because without man's hand they were finding it more and more difficult to cope with all the work. On the Eve of All Souls' the three of them stood together over the two candles in the front room.

In December the postman brought a parcel. On the tattered paper they spelled out the seal of the National Penal Headquarters. The mother removed from the parcel the hat in which the boy had started out to work on that day. A slip with an inventory number fell out from it. The mother brought a nail and hammer, her sister put a chair under the cross-beam and she and the girl held on to it firmly while the mother drove the nail into the beam and hang the boy's hat beside those of his father and grandfather.

The story that I heard in the mid-eighties in the border village in North Eastern Hungary summaries perfectly everything I had intended to learn on Hungarian peasant society – indeed its way of life and speech, its acts and wear, its positions and symbols, its ethos and values, its tragedies and its handling of these tragedies.

I could draw the following conclusion from the story.

In my social anthropological work over the last ten years, I have been examining the use of the material environment by individuals and families. I mostly used the methods of ethnology; my data generally concerned the changes in how objects have been used by particular groups over three generations from the beginning of the century to the present. Alongside observations based on participatory studies, I could turn to two important sources for data: The experiences and assumptions concerning death and mortality, and family photographs. Particularly instructive has been the observation of the mutual relationship between interviews with the aged and the sick looking back on their lives, and private photographs "illustrating" family or personal life stories. I understood that the material environment as a whole can be similarly interpreted. The personal material world assumes its specific importance through individual use. The same group of objects can assume different meanings through the different ways they are used by the same person. It struck me in connection with the interviews involving the interviewees life that not only "souvenirs" exercise the function of recalling memories but, in certain contexts, all other objects do so as well.

The material environment to those using it and understanding it continuously expresses a constant struggle and reciprocity of remembrance and oblivion. The prime mover of this personal interplay of remembrance and oblivion is a ceaseless search for identity, for its expression, affirmation and restoration. The objects keep changing and forming together with their users, they conform to challenges, they actively express this process and show the imprint of their users. Man remembering and forgetting through objects realizes and expresses his own self. In doing this, objects inevitably become linked with ego-ontological explanations which become mythologies for an individual, a family or a small group. These family mythologies allow identity to be nurtured and expressed at the level of individuals, relatives and small groups. A growing need for this on the part of fragmented societies has appeared in the last ninety years, when global social myths have been relegated to the background, split, deprived of their meaning, commercialized or affecting the subconscious.

The "Story of Three Hats" sums up all that Hungarian peasants can remember and what they could forget or should have forgotten of the last ninety years.

In many cultures, remembrance and the fostering of memories falls to the women rather than to the men. In most cases wives outlive their husbands, and infant mortality is higher among boys; mourning and the remembrance of the dead have thus become part of the traditional tasks of women. Tradition has also made it the duty of women to deal directly with the dying and the dead. In the same way, the remembrance of events concerning family and local community also forms part of the strict expectations imposed on women. Knowingly or instinctively, it is for the women to nurture the axis of the past in the dimensions of time, and on given occasion, to properly relate the past.

The three women not only had to endure the tragic events, they also had to find – in a form best conforming to tradition and in a way the community could control and tolerate as a worthy manner of commemoration. They also had to find the way in which they could meet this

expectation by setting up adequate symbols and cherishing them. The weight of these demanding expectations are eased by deep-rooted traditions, which help them not to break down or to shun their past – not even if an integrating society would act against these traditional principles. This stern expectation can lose force and validity only with the disintegration of the local culture.

The three women could not visit the burial places because the grave of the grandfather was separated from them by a new border. The tending of the father's grave was made difficult by authorities hostile to religion, prohibiting. All Souls' as a holiday and turning it into a working day. The son, as a political prisoner, was buried in an unknown, unmarked, possibly a mass, grave. Since they had no way to indulge in public commemoration, they sought and found a worthy way of doing so in private. But the closed and reticent manner of their very behaviour and clothing also publicly expressed their remembrance, and indeed, even the shabby state of the house and farmyard served as a reminder of their loss.

The fact that they could find, presumably instinctively, an appropriate method of remembrance, may also spring from the very naturalness by which they treated symbols: in this case the symbolic meaning of the hat, a typically masculine article of clothing.

Throughout Europe, and especially in Italy and Hungarian-speaking territories the hat is a typical masculine symbol. In the village of Szék, in the Mezőség, for instance, teenage boys are given a hat by their godfathers, and by the time they reach the age of a young bachelor, they have learned how to wear it in a proper, rakish way. In married life the hat becomes the accomplishment and crowning of the husband's dignity as a man, and with its trimmings and the individual way of wearing it, it not only indicates the clan he belongs to but also shows, for instance in a fair, the region he has come from and the ethnic group he belongs to. In old age the hat is worn with proper dignity and after its owner's death it is buried with him. In the case of the three women it was right, even though unusual for

them to mark the place of death with the hat.

Regarding hats, one can clearly observe an integral unity between wearing and conduct – traditional yet allowing for individual varieties; a man's way of wearing his hat can express his temperament, his mood, and even his respect or contempt for those he meets. Head-wears in typical form served as a device of important non-verbal signals between people of the same or different sexes. In and around the village where I did my field work, it was strictly forbidden for a lad or young married man to take off his hat in the company of girls and young married women and play it by turning it round his finger, as this was considered the most indecent invitations.

But the hat has other symbolic meanings as well. In the villages whose inhabitants are of several religious denominations in North-eastern Hungary, all the men of the house have had strictly assigned places for their hats on the rack. Strangers, eventual inhabitants of the house, never took their hats into the room; the exception was the priest, who usually entered the house with his hat in hand and placed it on the bed – but only if he wanted to stress he was about to settle some problem or tensions in the family. Apart from him only lads courting the daughters of the house and already accepted as suitors could put their hats on the bed. In this sense, the hats hung on the crossbeam meant that there could be no more important or dearer guest to the house than the deceased men. And that had always remained present for the women. For the widows to place their husbands' hats at the holiest, central place was tantamount to a renewed oath of allegiance.

The master of the house, by hanging his hat in its customary place on the rack at the end of the day, indicated to family and visitors alike that the day work was done, something had been closed. In this sense, the hats hung on the crossbeam meant "It is finished."

The story as told by the three women employed phrases and expressions concerning the hat in a varied and consistent manner. Several local women, when recalling the newly married husband, the lad who had come from Tran-

sylvania, expressed independently to one another, how much the fine strapping newcomer had been to their liking by saying "And how well he knew how to wear the hat! O God, how well he knew!" Such linguistic stereotypes play a major part in lifting this folk narrative out of its non-recurring, occasional form, lay special emphasis on it, and indeed, through the references to the object in the centre, elevate it to the level of tragedy and the text of a family myth, in a concentrated form.

It is not easy to remember and forget in a worthy manner. Particularly if the integrating society desires with all the power at its disposal to obliterate and to govern the memory of its citizens. Nonetheless, it is very difficult to pass enforceable measures against the dead and against traditions concerning the dead. The leaders of society at that time has re-arranged the holidays of the year. The only public commemoration was on All Souls' Eve (although that too was restricted), an occasion when the nation could confront itself as reflected in the memory of its dead. The significance of this confrontation was further enhanced by the fact that apart from the pressure of the holidays that falsified history, Hungarians living beyond the borders of present-day Hungary were subject to various forms of discrimination and oppression directed against them as an ethnic minority. For them this occasion, limited to the cemetery, was all they had to commemorate not just their own relatives but, through their ancestors, the historical roots of their national identity; by spelling out the inscriptions on the graves, they could keep their mother tongue alive and pass it on to their children; it was all they had to remind themselves and their kin of what happened to their ancestors and to themselves, and to mourn for their present and immediate future with their songs and prayers. When the authorities somewhat eased its pressure, there was a silent but irresistible strengthening of the festive power of All Souls' Day which has remained a normal working day. No reason could be found to set any effective ban on this. Death is a democratic institution and everybody has his own deceased. And they call to be remembered.

So the three women, under the hats, lighted their candles for the three men on All Souls' Eve, becoming part of a nation-wide circle of celebrations. This is how the dead vitalized the living. The elemental tension between the official and the popular mass commemorations lent a specific invigorating strength to All Souls' Day and to the living remembering the dead.

There has been a profound difference between official history and private, family history in the judgement of the dates and periods of national history that should be forgotten and those to be preserved in living memory. The wearers of the hats – together with millions of the country's population – considered conditions before the Great War to be unambiguously worthy of remembrance, and they referred to them in everyday parlance as "the good old days of peace."

The Great War led to national, family and individual tragedies. Hungary lost the war and with it two thirds of her territory and more than half of her population; some became citizens of foreign states, some fled back to the new, Hungary, others still emigrated to the New World. The majority, however, stayed in their place of birth and tried to find the most suitable way of maintaining their disturbed identity. The chaotic post-war period included, in 1918, an attempt at a bourgeois democratic regime, which in 1919 was followed by a brief but extreme Communist dictatorship which, coming just after the war, once again generated identity crises, mainly among the country people. The peasantry rejected the Soviet Republic which they linked with the war and which, modelling itself on the neighbouring Soviet Russia, also had intended the launching of a *kolkhoz* system. At the time I visited these widows, the official view of history still used the phrase "the glorious 133 days" for that brief interval. For the wearers of the hat it was a bitter period that had then started, even if the son had been able to expand his farm. Neither he nor his father could get over the trauma of being driven out of their birthplace. Their turn of mind more or less coincided with the revisionism of what is known as the Hor-

known as the Horthy era, which Marxist historians have treated in a negative light, blaming it for its chauvinism and a policy that paved the way for fascism and helped German expansion against the Soviet Union. One year after the old man's death, the 1938 Vienna Award reannexed part of his native land to the mother country. This had a positive effect on many split families, and the event was positively evaluated in terms of the country's economy and its future hopes as well. So the Award was considered just something bordering on a miracle, and not only by the wearers of the hats.

The Second World War brought personal and national perils and tragedies. Communist historiography of course has placed the country's liberation and the role Soviet troops played in it, cast in an unambiguously positive light; the day on which all of the territory of Hungary was controlled and occupied by Soviet troops was a national holiday. The independent Small-holders' Party, the leading party of the short coalition period (1945–48), represented the interests of the countryside and the peasantry, and they could govern with a huge majority vote and a power that sprang from a fairly unequivocal national confidence. In 1949, the "year of change", the Communist Party achieved total power and began the final liquidation of private property; land that had been shared out in 1945–47 was now forced into co-operative farms, something that was considered the triumphal progress of collective

ownership; the peasantry and the middle-class saw in this the liquidation or radical transformation of their traditional way of life and of the basic pillars of their identity. In the life of the family in the present story, personal tragedy made the process even more excessive.

The popular uprising in 1956 against the communist authorities gave rise to a short-lived hope. Everybody had confidence in achieving national independence, and the country people trusted in being able to return to their former natural way of life. But Soviet troops re-established the communists' power, those who took part in the rising were ruthlessly persecuted, executed or imprisoned for years, even young lads, who had taken part in the fighting in large numbers. From 1960 onwards, during a period called the "consolidation", the collectivization of the peasantry was carried on with renewed rigour and completed on a national scale. With the loss of the son and the farm, the lives of the three defenceless women mourning under the three hats, became totally hopeless.

A tension as explosive as this between the authorities and the nation in their remembrance and forgetting could not and cannot last for long. There is no culture that could bear a situation in which several generations of people remember in their private life and within the family, things that are different from what they are officially expected to remember.