

From Peasant Dish to National Symbol

An Early Deliberate Example

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The process of shaping national culture coincides with the production of traditions in which special meaning is given to increasing numbers of elements of everyday life. This paper discusses an example relating to food. The example is older than the mass-production of tradition. During the decades around 1800 it was the relatively numerous nobility who went in for the national idea in Hungary. When Austrian enlightened absolutism strove to unify the dependent countries, the Hungarian national features were endangered in the late 18th century. Most of the Hungarian nobility put up resistance which manifested itself both in political opposition and in the production of national symbols, in noblemen's clothing and peasant food alike. The peasant dish they chose as a symbol was further fostered at home, so that it soon reached the refined table physically as well.

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The dish known as goulash is an early example in Hungary of how peasant customs were picked up and developed during the period of shaping of national culture around 1800. In fact, goulash is a special case. It seems to have been taken as an immediate weapon in the political fight, deliberately selected to characterize one of the ways in which the Hungarians were different, even though it was not necessarily a dish common to all Hungarians. During a period of national self identification it really became the food of more and more Hungarians.

A detour into the early modern period shows that goulash was not the first dish that Hungarians made into a symbol of and for themselves. In the 17th century such a role was given to sauerkraut with meat, a dish cooked together in the same pot. According to the proverbial saying, this was called the "arms of Hungary"; here the word "arms" is to be interpreted as much in the symbolic as in the factual sense. It was an inward-looking symbol, strictly representing the fact that in Hun-

gary the dish was a common denominator, frequently eaten and well liked at all social levels. It expressed the connectedness of all subjects of the old Hungarian crown and did not seek to distinguish them from non-Hungarians outside the country. When this symbol was first recorded in the mid-17th century, it was said that it had already survived from earlier generations. The choice certainly originated with the upper classes, but the dish chosen was in no way an exclusive feature of their kitchen. It was common food, not borrowed by any social stratum from another. The dish of sauerkraut with meat, included in menus of four to twenty courses, appeared every day on the table amongst the highest and upper middle classes in the early modern period; and the common soldier got it nearly every day in two-course meals. What the artisans and peasants ate is not documented from meal to meal at this period, but sauerkraut with meat was clearly their most frequent meat dish. From the 16th to the early 18th century at the feasts of artisan groups, sauerkraut with meat was the

most standard dish in menus of 4–8 courses. The outstanding role of the dish amongst the working classes did not lessen its appreciation by members of the élite. Upper class memoirs report the dish as the favourite food. Sauerkraut with meat even became proverbial in its quality of being considered as very good food. Following the pattern of Proverbs 15.17 in the Old Testament (“Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled [stall-fed] ox and hatred therewith”), the 17th century Hungarian proverb ran “Better is humanity than sauerkraut with meat”. Although Hungary was divided into three parts by the Turkish occupation in the 17th century, the saying including the symbolic dish was known and used all over the old Kingdom. Sometimes it was especially stressed that the different regions all felt the dish to be their own, whether the capital city under the Hungarian crown or Transylvania on the East and Southern Hungary together with Croatia (which belonged to the Hungarian crown that time), where the saying ran “sauerkraut with meat is the arms of Hungary and Croatia” (Lippay 1664; Zrinyi cookery book, *a.* 1662; Mikes 1724; Bél *c.* 1730). The same dish was no less important generally in Middle Europe, as Hungarians who promoted the symbol knew very well. They simply did not mind. It should be added that in foreign gastronomic literature of the period, there were stereotypes of “Hungarian” dishes but none of these was used by the Hungarians for self-characterization.

We shall probably never learn why in the early modern period it was felt necessary to choose a symbol from the field of eating habits and by what steps the actual choice came into being. The symbol chosen was never called “national” but always “Hungarian”, just as the subject of the Kingdom called themselves *Hungarus*. As the 16th–17th centuries were a period of Turkish occupation in Hungary, it would be easy to suggest that to stress the connectedness of all Hungarians in every possible way was a natural reflex of the situation. But so little is known so far about contemporary “self” symbols of countries in other European regions, or even about earlier ones in Hungary, that it is better not to qualify.

The same period produced not just neutral, cultural, self-characterizing stereotypes, but also symbols of positive intent in Hungary. Such was the first common dance of the Hungarians, the *hajdú*-dance of the 17th century, which had been developed from a weapon dance suitable for herdsmen into one for the common soldier and even the aristocracy, as a symbol of the country’s heroic struggle against the Turkish occupation (Martin 1985).

The case of goulash was in every detail different from that of the symbolic dish adopted in the 17th century. In the status of “the national dish”, goulash was first recorded in 1794. At that time, it was not common to all social strata, but a peasant dish only. Of the period of its rise, it is necessary to note that the decades between 1770 and 1848 fostered lively political and ideological movements. The Enlightenment, conflict between the Crown in Vienna and Hungarian nobility, the wide-ranging movement to develop the vernacular Hungarian language, romanticism, the first appearance of literary popularism that saw the roots of Hungarian culture in history and contemporary popular culture – all these resulted in acceptance of the peasant culture as part of the national heritage, at a time when peasants were not part of the nation by law, nor yet in the consciousness of noblemen. Parliamentary preparation for the abolition of the *ancien régime* first started in the 19th century, and the decisive change in the social system came with the 1848 revolution. The proportion of nobility to the rest of the population was in Hungary (as in Poland) the highest in Europe, at over 4%, while that of the middle classes, including artisans, stood at around 1.5–2% only (Pach 1960: 434–436, 486).

The “discovery” of the peasant culture was the concern of only a small number of men of learning and of letters. They first turned their attention to the arts and to feasts. The collection of oral folklore started with a call from a linguist in 1782. In 1828 it was a poet who formulated the view that folk poetry was the main source of national poetry. A series of pictures showing peasant costumes was first published in 1816, and a description of a peasant wedding ceremony in 1827. Goulash does not

Horse-herd in old-fashioned dress eating self-prepared goulash on the protected lowland pasture area *Hortobágy*, a standard show for tourists. Photo: 1980 by the National Tourist Information Service, Budapest.



fit into this sequence, nor was it part of it.

The adoption and elevation of the concept of goulash seems to have been an immediate reaction to a situation of national danger. From the 16th century, Habsburg emperors had worn the Hungarian crown, but Hungary's legal independence from Austria had not been affected. This status became endangered by the reforming politics of Joseph II (1780–1790). They aimed at economic and social modernization, and the building up of a united empire covering Austria, Bohemia and Hungary, with one homogeneous form of administration.

Trying to prevent improvement in the feudal *ancien régime*, the majority of the nobility everywhere opposed the monarch, but in Hungary opposition could readily be given a national character. The reforms proposed that Hungary should give up its former independence and follow Austria and Bohemia in administration, law and the use of German as the official language. The conflict became very sharp with the monarch's language decree in 1784. In defending the Hungarian language, the conservative Hungarian nobility were protecting something that was common to all

Hungarians. Historians see at this point in time the first appearance of modern nationalistic thought – the idea of linguistic-ethnic affinity – in the political movement in Hungary which was to receive all Hungarians into the Hungarian nation.

The Hungarian nobility had been fighting politically for years on a basis of strong nationalistic feelings that came to a head in 1790, when foreign affairs prompted the Emperor to withdraw his decrees about Hungary. He died soon after, and Hungary prepared for a new parliament and coronation. The Hungarian nobility demonstrated by appearing at associated events in so-called “Hungarian costumes”, which were also worn at meetings in the country. In doing so, they put aside the mode of the preceding decades that had followed the Vienna fashion, and dressed again in Hungarian clothes in the style of the early 1700s, as a clear symbol of being different from Austrians, and of being Hungarians. The movement towards this fashion was so strong that visiting foreign noblemen were still buying and wearing “Hungarian” suits of clothes in the early 1790s.

One such visitor, a German from Saxony, was the first to record goulash (a meat dish seasoned with paprika and eaten by the common peasants on the Plain) as a Hungarian national dish (“ungarisches National-Gericht von Fleisch mit türkischem Pfeffer” – Hoffmannsegg 1800: 136). The qualification “national” originated in all probability from the people with whom Graf Hoffmannsegg most frequently kept company, the same ordinary noblemen, who had inspired him to wear “Hungarian costume”. If this interpretation is correct, it means that in addition to the “Hungarian costume” adopted by noblemen, the upper-class policy of national resistance produced another symbol to show that the Hungarians were different; but the second symbol had a very different social background.

Graf Hoffmannsegg came from Dresden and travelled in Hungary during 1793–94 to complete his zoological collection. He ate goulash in the huts of peasants on the outer fields of the agro-town of Szeged, when bird-watching with the city’s chimney-sweep, a good hunter. Hoff-

mannsegg recorded other dishes in Hungary which were unknown in Saxony, but it was only goulash he called a “national” dish.

The goulash of 1794, seasoned with paprika, was a peasant dish, not ancient but fairly new in this form. Without paprika the dish (small pieces of beef, or mutton, stewed in a cauldron over an open fire) goes back to the cookery of the herdsmen employed in the 15th–18th century cattle-ranching on the pastures of the Plain, and from whom it got its literary name, *gulyás*. (Typological parallels to the dish can be found in Lappland and in Turkey as well as in distant regions of Asia.) Peasants also cooked this herdsmen’s dish on the Plain, at least in the 18th century; they were the ones who added paprika to the goulash in the second half of the 18th century, at a time when paprika itself had only just become spice of the people. The paprika plant came from the Balkans to Hungary in the early 18th century. Peasants put it into cultivation, most frequently on the Southern-Plain. The second generation were already growing it consistently and by the third generation, *gulyás* seasoned with paprika appeared, first recorded at Szeged in 1786. At this point the dish was also given a new name, *paprikás hus* (“meat with paprika”), but this paper will keep to the internationally better-known word, goulash. Paprika powder was discussed in scholarly works of the 1770s–1790s as a spice exclusively used by peasants. At peasant level, goulash remained a regional dish of the Plain for about another century.

Although sources reporting the eating habits of the period are not plentiful, it is clear that the discovery and adoption of goulash as a symbol of an independent Hungarian culture did not prompt the nobility to introduce it in their own menu at once, in the way they took on the former costume of noblemen. But the role given to goulash during the shaping of an independent Hungarian culture during the situation of defence around 1790 did not fall into oblivion. The first Hungarian who presented goulash as a symbol of “proper” Hungarian culture in print was one of the upper classes drawn back to political opposition. In 1804 goulash with him was still the food of the common folk on the Plain (Szirmay 1804: 18–20).

Man in wrongly imitated dress of c. 1900 cooking goulash for tourists in a lowland village, local women watching the exercise in the 1980s. Photo: National Tourist Information Service, Budapest.



The social expansion of the dish developed from the early 19th century. At first goulash sometimes appeared also in the old form, without paprika. From 1803 the dish appeared in dictionaries. In 1807, in a Hungarian-German dictionary by a Hungarian, published in Vienna, the German was given as *gulasfleisch*. In 1810 students and artisans ate it in the city of Pest with such a side-dish, which was not a rural but clearly an urban custom. The first

cookery book (1816–18) to include goulash was written by a middle-class housewife to help the common people who were short of grain by teaching them how to use the potato, and therefore it discussed common dishes. At the same time a master cook who worked for important magnates did not yet include goulash in his “Hungarian national cookery book” for the nobility and the higher bourgeoisie. For this audience, goulash came first into a cook-

ery book in 1826, as an addition to a large collection of recipes translated from the German but also called "National cookery book" because of the language. In the 1830s no Hungarian cookery book was to be found that did not include goulash. Paprika powder itself also entered the upper class kitchen mainly in connection with goulash.

In 1825 in the city of Szeged, clever citizens were accused of seeking their own advantage by standing gentlemen a dish of goulash in an inner-town restaurant. The bill of fare or menu came into use in Hungary in the 1800s, but a few early examples survived only from the 1830s in provincial towns and from the 1840s in Pest. In the 1830s there was goulash on the menu in agro-towns both on the north-eastern edge of the Plain (Nyíregyháza) and in western Hungary on the Austrian border (Magyaróvár). In the 1840s there was goulash in the most elegant restaurants of Pest. The latter kept menus in two or three languages where goulash always appeared only in Hungarian and not even under the literary name *gulyás*, but under a name used by the peasants on the Plain, *pörkölt*.

The success of the goulash was not achieved by a spontaneous spread. The dish was still widely considered as a symbol of the "proper Hungarians". The magnate reformer Széchenyi criticized the gentry in 1830 because they did not make enough effort for economic and social modernization, but of course the eating of food with paprika alone was not enough to make them the proper Hungarians they wanted to be (Széchenyi 1830: XVII). At the same time, Hungarian intellectuals who helped the French social scientist F. Le Play to describe the farming and household of a Hungarian peasant in an agro-town on the Plain in 1846 did not fail to tell him that the form in which most of the meat in the family under observation came on the table was the national dish – "La principale préparation de viande est le mets national dit *Paprikas hus*" (Le Play 1877: 280).

The upper-class cuisine improved goulash freely to make it acceptable on the table too. They abandoned cooking in a cauldron on an open fire, which was the general way of prep-

aration amongst the herdsmen and also prevalent amongst peasants at feasts, when they went through large quantities. Cookery books suggested the use of sirloin for goulash, while common people used every part of beef and mutton. The upper-class cuisine recommended sour cream for some variants, which peasants never used, and put goulash with side-dishes on the table while peasants ate it only with bread. It was with these modifications that the upper classes began to eat goulash, in fact, and the dish then really became a means of symbolizing national cohesion.

With the peasants themselves on the Plain goulash became the leading feature of a new style of diet. During the 19th century the status of the dish rose from being the food of ordinary meat-days to being the dish of a wedding feast. From the wedding feast, goulash has even been displacing the 17th century's "Hungarian dish", sauerkraut with meat. This upgrading was not caused by the fact that intellectuals had transmitted to the peasants the concept of goulash as the national symbol of Hungarian culture, but it was certainly reinforced by this fact. There is early evidence from 1839 for such an evolution, in a manuscript chapbook for use by the master of ceremonies at peasant weddings, where the verse recited when serving goulash included a comparison between a light dish appropriate for "Germans" (i.e. Austrians) and the goulash appropriate for Hungarians (Kecskemét; National Library, Manuscript Oct. Hung. 416). There were no Germans in this agro-town and verses for such chapbooks were in most cases originally compositions by intellectuals.

Goulash had originally been selected to show the "other ways" of the Hungarians to the outer world. This goal was reached, since Austrian gastronomy fell into the trap and took up *Gulasch* as a novelty. In a cookery book published in Austria (in a provincial town, far from the Hungarian border) goulash first appeared in 1826. From the early 1830s the dish was regularly included in elegant Viennese cookery books (*Gulaschfleisch: Bœuf à la hongroise*) with paprika and in variants without paprika. Through transmission by the Viennese art of cookery, *Gulasch* became established by the

1840s–1850s in cookery books for the middle classes and for the catering industry both in South-Germany and Berlin (Wiegmann 1967: 215–218). The Hungarian name of the dish had still an extensive career ahead of it: in connection with variants of the dish it entered English, French and Finnish alike.

At home the first cookery book with a special section for aboriginal Hungarian dishes was published after the abolition of the *ancien régime* and the lost war of independence against the Habsburgs (1848–49), but before the Austro-Hungarian *Ausgleich*, the compromise of 1867. The section carried forward goulash in seven – rural and urban – variants.

To look at other symbols of the period we return to the role of dance in the culture. Because it was a public performance, dance was very suitable for becoming a symbol, especially because time lags in development meant that the country dance culture in the East Central European area was strikingly different from that in both Western and Southern Europe. Research has shown that dance types to represent the national culture were always chosen here from the popular genres, as, obviously enough, the upper classes danced according to the latest international styles. Popular dance in the area meant for long the peasant's dance, and the upper classes, looking for symbols of national identity, turned to it. In Hungary, within a short period, the upper classes chose two different peasant dances for national symbols, neither of which was ancient but in fact of a new style amongst the peasants themselves. The first was a male solo dance, *verbunk*, chosen in the late 18th century, and then a couple-dance, *csárdás*, in the 1830s. The standard names were actually given to both dances by the upper classes: *verbunk* from German *Werbung* "recruitment", because peasants' sons danced it when being recruited, and *csárdás* from the name of country inns as the dance of such places. Professionals came into being who arranged these dances for use at balls and on the stage. The *csárdás* still counts as the national dance at the present day (Martin 1979; Martin 1985; Pesovár 1985).

In the first half of the 19th century intellectuals were deeply engaged in descriptions of

the national identity in the field of personality marks, morals, arts, and also in signs of outer appearance. Amongst the latter food, clothes and dance were discussed frequently. The dish and dance chosen were taken from the up-to-date peasant culture and both were developed in such a way that the upper classes could use them. The borrowing of costumes from the peasants was never considered, as the appropriate forms could not have been easily found.

The patriotically stimulating role of goulash lasted for a shorter period than that of the *csárdás* dance. In the late 19th century, after the Austro-Hungarian *Ausgleich* of 1867, urban forms of goulash were regular everyday dishes of the middle classes in Hungary without any nationalistic overtones. It was the middle-class cuisine then, which served to disseminate the dish to the peasants beyond the Plain.

At present goulash keeps its high festival status on the Plain, whilst being an ordinary, everyday dish in the town and countryside everywhere else in Hungary. Modern folklorism has not included goulash in the national symbolic estate for domestic use but has made use of it for the tourist industry. From the 1960s the catering industry has been making much of it (in spectacular variants) as part of the Hungarian image in international tourism, whilst Hungarian intellectuals feel annoyance now about the exaggerations.

Food and taste, of course, are not only part of national symbolism but also evident means of pinpointing national identity. In this way, the use of goulash amongst expatriots creates a new symbolic meaning. In its capacity as a national dish, it experienced a revival amongst the emigrants. Goulash, which is a stew, is especially suitable for such a role in North America, where steak dominates the meat dishes (Schuchat 1971). Meantime in Hungarian restaurants in both the USA and Canada, goulash has a leading position amongst the main-course dishes, while (according to a small statistical sample) it is by far the most frequent "Hungarian" dish on the domestic tables of Hungarian-American families (Szathmary 1983). How this picture came to develop is a story in itself.

Note

The data used directly or indirectly in this contribution will be documented in detail in a forthcoming Hungarian publication on goulash by the same author. There is no comprehensive publication on the topic as yet, and it seemed preferable not to trouble the reader with hundreds of individual sources here.

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