

Peasant Dance Traditions and National Dance Types in East-Central Europe in the 16th–19th Centuries*

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The author analyses the interrelation between elite culture and popular culture as it appears in the modern history of East Central European folk dances. According to his opinion, differences among popular dance traditions of various zones in Europe reflect phase shifts in the historic development: some regions preserved medieval and renaissance dance forms while other regions adopted more modern styles. In contrast to the spread of courtly and elite dance forms among the common people, the appearance of “national dance types” represents the conscious incorporation of peasant dance traditions into the national culture. In the 16th–17th century the *Hajdu* (Heyduck) dance might be considered as an early forerunner of these “national dance types”. Originally a weapon-dance of herdsmen and soldier-peasants, this dance acquired a sort of national significance during the centuries of war against the Turks and was practised in all layers of contemporary society. Later in the 19th century, during the era of national awakening, the creation of “national dance types” was guided by national ideologies and followed a remarkably similar pattern among Hungarians, Slovaks and Transylvanian Roumanians.

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The focus of this discussion is the relationship between folk culture and high culture, between popular and elite culture as exemplified by East-Central European folk dance. I contend that the examination of dance in this cultural region reveals processes that are characteristic of other European, and even non-European regions. The cultural history of East-Central European dance tradition may contribute to a general understanding of the relationship between folk and elite cultures.

Dance is considered to be the most ancient and most universal, the easiest to understand, and in all times the most popular art. Cultural historians trace its roots back to the dawn of times, to ages before even the existence of music or poetry, or at least agree that dance was one of the most important elements of the an-

cient and complex manifestation of total art (“Gesamtkunst”). In the study of dance it is more difficult to differentiate between popular and elite levels than it is in other art forms. This difficulty is illustrated clearly by the almost total lack of written records. This is the case even in the most aristocratic branch of autonomous dance art, the classical ballet. It is precisely this lack of fixed and written records in the process of perpetuation and diffusion of dances which creates ample opportunity for a dynamic interplay between popular and elite culture.

In the history of East-Central European dance cultures the concept of the so-called *national dance culture*, is particularly significant. It expresses not only the similarities which connect the peasant and noble, the popular and

elite components of a given national culture, but also the continuing interaction between these components. The most conspicuous expression of each national dance culture is that *national dance type* which is recognized as such by compatriots and foreigners alike. The development of national dance types in East-Central Europe is the concern of this paper.

The different eras of European dance history were characterized by distinct dominant styles and fads, the impact of which varied greatly from region to region, depending on how speedily they spread and how readily they were received. As a consequence of these significant regional differences, characteristic dance territories developed, each with its own idiomatic dance styles. Therefore, the regional differences practically reflect phase differences. In other words: in each characteristic dance zone of the Continent different dance genres dominated. A closer scrutiny reveals, however, that all of these genres were parts of the general dance history of Europe during different eras. (Pesovár 1967, Martin 1975).

The West European zone's dance culture is dominated by the so-called *country dance* which is a combination of the couple- and group-dances. The repertoire of movements in these dances is simple. By contrast, the spatial choreography is complex and involves disciplined, diversified group movements in unison. Individual dancers are paired and, at the same time, they are parts of a larger dance collective, which does not allow for any individual improvisation.

The country dance evolved from the 17th century on. It became dominant in Western Europe among the people who led the bourgeois development and had an impact in North and Middle Europe as well. This genre, which presupposes a well organized and consciously guided dance life, reflects the popularization and folklorization of elite culture. In Western Europe this genre, which carried the imprint of courtly and bourgeois culture, by the nineteenth century completely suppressed those older, medieval and renaissance dance categories, which, by contrast, have remained typical, in other, more peripheral parts of Europe (cf. Sharp, 1909; Sachs 1933).

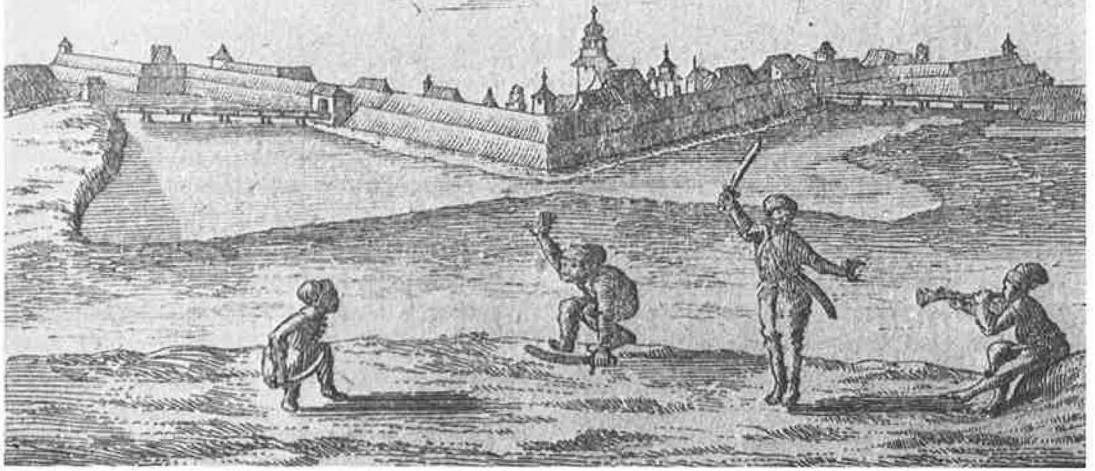
The more slowly developing East European regions were dominated by the male dances of a late medieval character and the improvised couple dances of the Renaissance. While the medieval weapon dances, collective and individual male dances and the unregulated couple dances were generally practiced, the oldest chain dances survived only sporadically and the newer country dances did not play a notable role. (Wolfram 1966, Martin 1968, 1975).

Due to the centuries long Turkish occupation, the dance culture of the Balkan people was for a long time isolated from the general European trends, and is still defined by the medieval forms of the collective, chain and circle dances. In this region the most general European new-style dances, the couple dances, are an exceptionally rare and new phenomenon. (Wolfram 1962, Janković 1933–1964, Martin 1979).

In the development of national cultures (in the modern sense of the term), dance played a vital role, especially among the East-Central European peoples. In the era of national Romanticism, these people were conscious that their dance culture was different from that of Western and South-Eastern European people alike. East European people were inspired by this awareness to develop their dances into national symbols. Thus the national dance culture of these people reflected phase differences in their respective developments.

The representative national dance types always emerged from the popular genres of the respective period and region. Accordingly, in German and Austrian regions, as well as in Czech and Polish territories, the walking, whirling and jumping variants of couple dances became the national dances (*Walzer* and *Ländler*, *polka*, *polonaise*, *mazurka* and *krakowiak*). Among the peoples of the Carpathian Basin – Slovaks, Hungarians and Transylvanian Romanians – the role of national dances were played by male dances (*hajduheyduck* dances, *verbunkos*, *căluș*) and improvised, free couple dances (*friška*, *csárdás*). Finally, the national dances of the Balkan peoples – Roumanians, Serbians and Bulgarians – are collective chain dances (*hora*, *kolo* and *horó*).

COPPREÚNIZ



1. *Hajdu*-soldiers dancing in front of the fortress Kapronca (Koprivnica, Croatia) 1686. Three soldiers are performing a classical weapon-dance accompanied by a “turkish pipe”. – Etching of Justus van der Nyport, from the Birckenstein volume.

These dances always emerged from the sphere of popular culture. The upper strata of society generally accepted the latest European dance styles which took time to be adopted by the lower strata. These were not appropriate to become national dances because of their international character. Popular dance of the East European people was identical with the peasant dance until the nineteenth century, and consequently the national elites, seeking for symbols of national identity, turned to the rural dance traditions. (Réthei Prikkel 1924, Szentpál 1954).

The dance history of the Slovaks, Hungarians and Roumanians in the Carpathian Basin shows in several temporally subsequent examples how the emergence of national dance types occurred through the geographical and social diffusion of a peasant dance. It even oc-

curred that the very same dance type was elevated to be *the* national dance – although with time differentiation and distinct ethnic modification and colouring – of several neighbouring peoples, who had similar culture and history.

From the written sources of Hungarian dance history of the past five centuries three dance types are known which became “national” dances, practiced by the whole country and all strata of society, in given periods of history. Not only Hungarians but also foreigners recognized these as representing the Hungarians. Such national dance types were: the *hajdu* weapon dance in the 16th and 17th century, the soldiers’ recruiting dance *verbunkos* in the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century and finally, the *csárdás*

from the last third of the nineteenth century.

The two centuries of the *hajdu* dance history coincided with the florescence of other parts of Hungarian culture. After the first endeavours in the Middle Ages, literature in Hungarian, secular poetry and composed music evolved in this era. Some elements of a modern national awareness appeared. European Humanism along with the currents of the Renaissance and the Reformation found a creative reception in Hungary. (Kardos 1955, 1961, Klaniczay 1961, 1964).

Written evidence of the earliest known type of our dances, the *hajdu* dance, can be found from the fifteenth century on. Until the beginning of the eighteenth century, reference is made to the dance with descriptions of its character, notes of the accompanying dance music, and, occasionally, pictorial representations. The dance was performed by men alone, or by men in groups, eventually forming a circle. Sometimes even women joined in. The dance generally had an informal, improvised structure with the virtuoso handling of weapons (the sword or the axe), and with fighting or fencing gestures and movements. The contemporary witnesses emphasize the wild rumbling nature of the dance, its practically acrobatic jumping and squatting motifs. They mention the arm movements and rhythmical exclamations of the dancers. Musical accompaniment was provided by the popular instruments of the period: the bagpipe, *tárogató* (turkish pipe, a wind-instrument), and the drum. From some contemporary notations of melodies we know that the accompanying music had a fast-moving eightnote rhythm as well as the characteristic motifs of bagpipemusic. (Rèthei Prikkel 1924, Kaposi-Pethes 1959, Pesovár 1972, Martin 1965, 1969, Kürti 1983, Szabolcsi 1954).

The *hajdu* dance is referred to by indigenous and foreign sources for about two hundred and fifty years as the most typical and original Hungarian dance. This era was filled with continuous combats and crises. The *hajdu* dance is first remembered in the last third of the fifteenth century, during the reign of King Mathias Corvinus. His independent and strong kingdom still successfully resisted the Turkish menace, but already was being driven to strug-

gle. The *hajdu* dance was at its height during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The period was characterized by ceaseless warfare, and continuous sieges of fortresses, when, as a result of the unpreventable Turkish expansion, the Carpathian Basin was divided into three parts. The Kingdom of Hungary was reduced to the western and northern parts, under the rule of the Habsburg Dynasty. The eastern part constituted the relatively independent Transylvanian principality, which maintained its independence by skillful diplomacy between the Habsburgs and the Turks. The most devastated middle part of the Carpathian Basin became the area of Turkish occupation.

The last evidence of the *hajdu* dance is from the beginning of the eighteenth century. By this time, the Turks were driven back to the Balkans and the Hungarians were fighting for national independence against the Habsburg dominance. During the national uprising led by Ferenc Rákóczi the 2nd (1703–1711) Hungarian insurrectionists were still performing the *hajdu* dance.

The *hajdu* dance illustrates clearly how a dance becomes generally accepted by all strata of society.

According to early sources from the fifteenth and sixteenth century, the *hajdu* dance was exclusively performed by members of particular social groups: herdsmen and armed cattle drivers (the so called *hajdus*) who became in time peasant soldiers (*hajdu* soldiers). The first fifteenth century source describes the celebration of victory by Pál Kinizsi, a general of King Mathias Corvinus after a battle with the Turks (1479): the armed soldiers dancing on the battle field among the corpses of the Turks (Bonfini 1941:141, Martin 1983). Herders and cattle drivers were also skillful in the use of arms due to the lack of public security at the time. From the beginning of the sixteenth century the *hajdus* were increasingly requisitioned for military service, because of the frequent intrusions of the Turks (cf. Szabó 1956, Bères-Mödy 1956).

The *hajdus* played an important role in the Hungarian Peasant War of 1514. After the war severe laws were passed to discipline them and the *hajdu* dance for quite a while thereafter



2. Dancing Hungarian soldiers and pandours. They are performing a chain-dance of mediaeval background which illustrates the collective character of the *hajdu* and soldier dances. – Coloured etching of an unknown artist, 18th century.

was mentioned only in a pejorative tone. Moreover, this critical attitude was aggravated by the explicitly puritanical, anti-dance spirit of the Reformation Period (cf. Balogh 1969, Módy 1969, 1972, 1975, Pesovár 1972).

From the second half of the sixteenth century, the country was continually in a state of war for nearly two hundred years. During this time the number of the *hajdu* soldiers grew steadily. At the beginning of the seventeenth century István Bocskai, Prince of Transylvania settled the *hajdus* at the Turkish border in a chain of fortified towns treating them as a free privileged soldier class. From that time the *hajdus* – together, and mixing with the impoverished, soldiering gentry – constituted the main force within the national military element. Foreign travellers in Hungary were amazed by their bravery and prowess. A German eyewitness at the siege against the Turks in Esztergom in 1594 recorded that, to the annoyance of the Turkish defenders, the fighting *hajdus* danced the *hajdu* dance in the moats under gunfire. (Takács 1921: 87). The overwhelming importance of the resistance against the Turks was manifested in the dance culture by the metamorphosis of the *hajdu* dance from the custom of herdsmen into the first national dance of the Hungarians, which in turn became a symbol of the heroic struggle in the

most important political efforts of the period.

The national character of the *hajdu* dance is substantiated by its widespread geographical distribution. Some 15 Hungarian fortresses, towns and villages can be associated with the *hajdu* dance in this period. In addition to these 15, we may add a number of other locations where individually known performers of the *hajdu* dance had their residence. Thus, we know that the *hajdu* dance was known and performed in at least two dozen places. As to their location, these places are scattered all over the Carpathian Basin, from Transylvania to Pozsony (Bratislava), from the northern Carpathians to Croatia.

The general diffusion of the *hajdu*-dance all over the ancient Kingdom of Hungary reveals that the non-Hungarian people who lived in the Carpathian Basin also accepted it as their own dance. Thus, the *hajdu*-dance was danced by Slovakian, Carpathian Polish (Goral), Ruthenian, Roumanian, Serbian, Croatian peoples as well as by the ethnic group of the Gypsies. (Martin 1965, 1969, Elschek 1980).

It is important to emphasize the widening of the social distribution of the *hajdu* dance. Earlier, as a dance of the herdsmen and soldiers, it was performed in camps, castle courtyards and inns. By the end of the sixteenth century, however, it was already being danced in palaces

and even at the royal court by noblemen and aristocrats as well. On university festivals, at balls organized in connection with sessions of the parliament and even at coronation celebrations the dance was performed. In 1572 the first significant Hungarian poet, Bálint Balassi, himself a wealthy nobleman, caused a sensation with his virtuoso performance of a herdsman dance at the coronation festivities in Pozsony (Istvánfi XXV: 326). In 1615, György Thurzó, the *nádor* (palatine) of Hungary, sent a dancegroup of *hajdus* from northern Hungary to a festival at the University of Wittenberg (Mednyánszky 1829: 304–309). Count Miklós Zrinyi, poet, warlord, and governor of Croatia also commemorates the *hajdu*-dance in his baroque epic poem in the middle of the 17th century. (Zrinyi 1651, “Obsidio Szigetiana” IV: 37–39). Pál Esterházy, one of the richest magnates of Hungary, later palatine and also a gifted composer performed a *hajdu*-dance with weapons at the royal court, during the Diet of 1647. (Réthei Prikkel 1924: 134).

Finally, János Kemény, ruling Prince of Transylvania in his memoirs recalls at the end of the 17th century his nurse, a “soldier woman”, who was an excellent *hajdu*-dancer. (Kemény 1980: 36).

These examples illustrate that the *hajdu*-dance became a theme of the contemporary national literature. Those “fighting with pen and sword” not only danced, but included the *hajdu* dance into poetry, chronicles and memoirs. Travellers from abroad recorded the *hajdu* dance in artistic engravings and drawings with scenes of weapon dancers performing to the tunes of the Turkish pipe, the drum and bagpipes before the fortress (cf. Birckenstein 1686). Moreover, stylised melodies of the *hajdu* dance appear in contemporary Polish and German musical compositions. (Kürti 1983). In sum, the *hajdu* dance appeared in Hungarian literature as a symbol of the heroic struggle against the Turks and also inspired foreign writers, artists and composers.

After the Turkish occupation was over and a



3. *Csárdás*-dancers in the Great Hungarian Plain, mid-nineteenth century. A scene of soldiers' recruitment. In the center, a peasant lad takes leave of his girl-friend, two other pairs are dancing with free improvisation. In the background a gypsy orchestra, in the foreground gypsy children. – Chromolithography of an unknown artist.



4. Round *verbunk* dance, a popular survival of the historic soldiers' recruiting dance tradition. The start of the dance. Szany, County Győr-Sopron, 1971.

new era began in Hungarian history, the *hajdus* completely lost their important role and privileges. The Habsburgs attempted to eradicate all memories of the insurrectionist uprising under Rákóczi (1703–1711) in which the *hajdus* played their last important role. Thus, for example, playing the Turkish pipe or *tárogató* was forbidden, because it was also a reminder of the rebellion. In this changed historical context the *hajdu* weapon dance lost its former symbolic relevance. By the eighteenth century the *hajdu* dance once again reverted and became restricted to the herdsmen and peasant strata.

Although the two centuries long national role of the *hajdu*-dance came to an end, it did not disappear without leaving remnants. Rather, it survived in an unobtrusive way in different social strata and among various ethnic groups in modified forms.

The most authentic continuation of the *hajdu*-dance can be found in the instrumental herdsmen dances, which were preserved until the 20th century by rather isolated groups. In peripheral regions the dance had its own separate course of development. Several branches of it were isolated from one another, and became endowed with regional-ethnic colour-

ings. Hungarian, Gypsy, Slovakian, Goral, Ruthenian, and Roumanian folklore contains dances which are related to the *hajdu* dance style in their formal and musical features and sometimes even in their name. (Martin 1965, 1969, Elschek 1980, Krešaneč 1959, Kotonski 1956).

The continuation of the *hajdu* dance style is not limited to the peasants and herdsmen. On the elite level, its elements became incorporated into the new Hungarian dance and music style, the *verbunkos* or recruiting dance style, which in the national Romantic era during the 19th century became an expression of the national culture in the modern sense. (Lányi-Martin – Pesovár 1983, Pesovár 1972, Szabolcsi 1961).

The *hajdu* dance in the sixteenth and seventeenth century could not yet be categorized as a national dance style in the modern sense. Only from the turn of the nineteenth century, we may speak of such a national style in East-Central Europe. János Horváth, a historian of Hungarian literary populism, distinguishes between two kinds of attitudes in the elite toward the peasant culture. On the one hand, there is an "unselfconscious, instinctive" application of elements from folk culture prior to the eight-

eenth century. On the other hand, a conscious populism appears from the 18th century on. (Horváth 1927). The national role of the *hajdu* dance is an example of the earlier, unconscious type. Its popularity was facilitated by the historic pressure, and seemingly, by the partial diminishing of the cultural gaps between various social strata.

The development of modern national dance types was a direct result of the conscious effort of the elite who wanted to mobilize all strata of the society. Romantic national ideology played a primary role in the selection of particular folk dance types as the representatives of national character. The national elites wished to develop and stylize the dances according to the aesthetic principles of the age. They strove to adjust these peasant dances to the taste of the nobility and the urban middle classes by regulating and eliminating regional differences and refining their performance. In the formal changes introduced to the dances we can readily identify elements of certain western and neighbouring influences, such as French, German and Polish. (Martin 1979b, Pesovár 1965, Szentpál 1954, B. Egey 1956).

In the reorganization of dance life the elites had two aims: they wished to raise the folk dance to the level of theatre dance and connect it to composed music; and further, they tried to

make it an organic part of the social life throughout the nation. Two simultaneous currents – “upward” and “downward” – characterized these efforts: the creation of new artificial dance forms for theatrical and public use, which were selectively taken from peasant dance traditions; and the rapid dissemination of these new dances among the rural population, what was the “folklorization” of the national dances.

This effort, that lasted for several decades contributed to the integration of dance in each national language territory. This process followed a similar path among the people of the Carpathian Basin: the Hungarians, Slovaks and Transylvanian Roumanians, despite ethnic and language differences.

The development of characteristic national dance types took place from the last third of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century. During the first phase of this development, the national elites selected a peasant male dance of a kind which, in their opinion, represented suitably the historical past, the national character and also symbolised the political desires and goals.

In Hungary the *verbunkos*, the recruiting dance, became the national dance of the Hungarians. Recruiting in eighteenth century was a frequent occurrence during which village



5. “Cumanian *verbunk*”, a popular variant of the historic soldiers’ recruiting dance. Kunszentmiklós, County Bács-Kiskun, 1959.



6. "*Lassu magyar*" (slow Hungarian) dance. Three men dancing in front of the gypsy musicians. Their movements show traces of the old male solo dances. Afterwards, in the quick phase, the men will dance in pairs with the women. Bonchida – Bonțida, Transylvania, Roumania, 1969.

lads were persuaded to join the army by drinking, revelry, music and the *verbunkos* dance. In the eyes of the national elite (noblemen) this dance was a symbolization of the military past, the courage, and of the struggle for independence. The Slovaks selected the herdsmen's dances of the northern mountainous region for their own national dance, the *hajduch* and *odzemok* with which they associated the legend of the outlaw *Jánošík* who fought against the Hungarians and Austrians as well. Roumanians who lived in three separate countries (Moldavia, Muntenia and Transylvania) and who sought unification with one another have chosen the collective ritual male dance, the *căluș*. This dance represented for them the heritage of the Romans and the alleged historic foundation of their desired unity. (Proka 1954, 1979, Oprișan 1969). Recent historical events and distant historical myths played an equally important part in the establishment of national dance consciousness and in the choice of dance types as the actual political and social efforts.

In the later phase of this process, in the mid-

dle of the nineteenth century, after the male dances a national couple dance was chosen as well. The attempt to introduce a national trait into social revelry was the goal with this. With the Hungarians the improvised individual *csárdás* became popular, which, according to the description of a contemporary composer "was similar to the ever-changing flame-whirling, symbolising unbound freedom". (Mosonyi 1860: 186–187). The Slovaks chose the northern variant of *csárdás*, the jumping couple dance or *friška*. The Roumanian intellectual class created the *Romana* and the *Hațegana* dance from the Transylvanian whirling couple dances.

Choreographers, professional dancers, actors and composers worked for the artistic elaboration of the national dances. The national dance appeared as a characteristic performance component in the travelling theatrical companies, the gradually developing national theatre programmes, national opera as well as in ballet and in the themes of concert music. Organized by civic and other associa-

tions, balls became popular events in cities and villages alike during this period. At these balls an attempt was made to replace the western, mostly German dances (cf. Martin 1983, Vályi 1956, Kaposi – Pesovár 1983: 24–26).

A peculiar paradox was that by adapting folk dances for ballroom use they were necessarily stylized and this occurred somewhat based on the model of western social dances.

The new dances that evolved by stylization were soon *popularized* as a consequence of widespread institutional promotion. Through the activities of dancing-masters and dancing-schools the national dances were fitted into local folklore. By the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries the unificatory impact of the national dance types in each national language-territory had its result and the dance types developing during the period of national reform were consolidated. Subsequently they have been regarded at home and abroad as the most significant and even exclusive representatives of the national dance cultures.



7. "Gyors csárdás" (quick *csárdás*). The standardized national dance performed with additional improvisations in local style. Apátfalva, County Csongrád, 1956.

The view, that the peoples of Europe are not conscious of the fact, how closely related their cultures are to one another, has been frequently expressed. This statement is even more valid within smaller regional units and holds true in the case of dance as well. Today the peoples of Eastern Central-Europe are not yet aware of the fact how far their specific national dance cultures have common roots and how similar was the way by which their national dances were evolved. Public opinion considers these dances to be individual and unique and originating from the distant and hazy past of the nation. In reality the differences in the peasant dance culture of the various peoples were created by the different rhythm and phases of the development of smaller or bigger regions. The differences deriving from retarded development were emphasized by the national elites, they filled them with ideological meaning and put them into the service of their own political objectives during the period of national awakening. The ultimate goal of the political and cultural efforts of the period was the achievement of national independence and the demonstration of the distinct cultural standing of independent national communities. Stressing one-sidedly distinctness was justified as long as national independence had not been achieved. But the objectives of national independence have by and large been accomplished. Today we can look back upon the enthusiastic youth of the development of national cultures as adults. In my view we have reached such a phase in the history of research when, instead of further cultivating historical myths, research has to bring to light the real historical interrelationships in the interest of unprejudiced national self-consciousness.

* The text of György Martin's (1932–1983) lecture was written for the working session of the Ethnologia Europaea held at Mátrafüred, and was read by him on October 15, 1983. Two weeks later, on October 31, 1983, György Martin suddenly passed away. He could not prepare his paper for publication. The text was arranged by Tamás Hofer, with the assistance of Bertalan Andrásfalvy and Mrs. Eva V. Huseby-Darvas. The bibliography and the references

to literature were compiled by László Felföldi, a co-worker of György Martin, on the basis of Martin's other works on dance history and he selected the pictures for illustration from Martin's material left behind. (The references might give some orientation to the reader but they don't represent Martin's deep familiarity with Roumanian, Slovakian, Polish folk dance research and with East Central European dance history.) The bibliography refers to some of György Martin's own comparative and historical works that are accessible in foreign languages. These studies might indicate the scope and significance of his contribution to Hungarian and European folk dance research.

Tamás Hofer.

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