

Ethnic Consciousness and Cohabitation in a Slovak-Hungarian Village Community

Zita Škovierová

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The article is a microsonde into the social relations of a Slovak-Hungarian village community. Determinants influencing the 20th century ethnic consciousness and cohabitation of ethnically mixed region in southern Slovakia are being analyzed. The changes of ethnicity and mutual relationship of Slovaks and Hungarians were mostly influenced by extralocal factors (historical events, political changes, influence of surroundings). Intralocal factors (family, kinship and other informal groups) were consolidating the cohabitation of its population. In traditional community ethnic influences intermingled with religious ones. Village authorities and ambitions of individual people played an important role, too.

Zita Škovierová, PhD, research fellow, Department of Ethnology, Comenius University, 818 01 Bratislava, Slovakia.

Imeû, a village in the Danube lowlands, is situated 20 km northwards of the Slovak-Hungarian state border (Komarno district). Inhabitants of this area were well up to the 20th century the bearers of middle European culture of the so-called Panonian type. After Turkish invasions the devastated land was colonized by Slovaks who proceeded to develop peasant culture. Due to strong Hungarianization since the late 19th century a great majority of local Slovaks were Hungarianized. More Slovaks were coming from northern areas and settled there. Cultivation of corn, root-crops, vine, cattle and sheep breeding were the main subsistence sources in the first half of this century. In their region Imeû inhabitants excelled in cultivation of tobacco, vegetables and in domestic craft. After agricultural collectivization which ended in 1959, a minority of the inhabitants were involved in farming, while the majority of them worked in industry or in the sphere of services in nearby towns. Since the 1970's cultivation of vegetables is an additional job of all families and a favourable source of higher family incomes.

Finding this locality for my research was

more incidental than deliberate. I was attracted by the village which is claimed Slovak and yet my colleagues who did not speak Hungarian had problems to communicate with its inhabitants in Slovak when carrying out their research. The second curiosity was the cancellation of Hungarian school and maintenance of Slovak school. I wanted to find out what caused this paradox between the attitudes and behaviour of Imeû inhabitants.

I followed the factors influencing the ethnic consciousness and declaration of ethnicity of its inhabitants and their cohabitation. They may be divided into extralocal (external) and intralocal (internal) factors. The former comprise historical events, political changes and measures on a general level which happened without direct action of local community members (sometimes even against their will). Objectively existing phenomena of wider (regional) application belong there too. The latter group of factors includes undertakings of formal institutions on the local level (state administration, educational system, church) and also undertakings of informal, small social groups. I also enclose here factors connected



Fig. 1. Traditional type of village clay house with a thatched roof. Photo: Slovak Institute for Monuments' Preservation 1960.

with the individual personality, his social status and character.

Significant break-through events which principally influenced ethnic consciousness and life in ethnically mixed localities were historical events and political measures. Disintegration of multinational Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was the first historical turning point. In 1918 the Czechoslovak republic was formed. The Trianon treaty divided the territory of Hungary and Czechoslovakia at the Danube river. Annexation of this part of Czechoslovak territory by Hungary during Horthy's occupation in 1938–1945 was next interference. After World War II the exchange of some Hungarians from southern Slovakia with Slovaks from Hungary in 1946–47 followed and the so-called re-Slovakization action "the return of re-Magyarized people in Slovakia to the Slovak nation" (Šutaj, 1992: 182).

Ethnical and cultural influence of inhabitants from surrounding villages also formed ethnocultural orientation of Imeû inhabitants. In the past Imeû was one of the villages which mostly interfered with an area where the pop-

ulation spoke Hungarian. Neighbouring villages as well as wider environment were pre-vaillingly inhabited by a population of Hungarian nationality. Hungarian as the main communicative language provided greater possibilities of mutual contacts. Through mixed marriages this influence was transferred into the investigated village. Work contacts and visits of cultural events in surrounding villages had a similar effect.

In Imeû the forms of job migration were already highly developed in the first half of the 20th century. Especially landless people and small farmers who had no means of subsistence took advantage of migration for job. They migrated particularly to estates where they carried out mostly agricultural, gardening and seasonal work. There they generally met Hungarian speaking population. Less often they were able to meet Slovak workers from northern regions who lived and worked there in summer. After-war and prolonged job migration to more distant Slovak or Czech enterprises did not seriously affect the migrants – coming home they again spoke Hungarian as it

Fig. 2. Family cooperative ties are very firm in Imeû: Women of three generations clean and prepare home bred poultry for storing (1993).



was more in use in the village. At present the majority of inhabitants work in the nearest surroundings and due to economic recession they have increased cultivation of vegetables – they stay under the influence of local environment.

Local administration was subordinate to village nationality and ruling political regime. Accordingly the village was alternately pro-Hungarian and pro-Czechoslovak and it was governed by issued laws and regulations in contact with inhabitants, depending on the characters and ambitions of local cancellors and to what extent they followed the laws and regulations which contradicted the interests and needs of the local public.

There were two church communities in Imeû: Roman Catholics and Calvinists. In 1930 1 777 inhabitants lived in Imeû, out of which 82 per cent were Catholics and 17 per cent Calvinists. Canonical language was always Hungarian in both churches. In the 1950's bilingual masses were established in the Catholic church but at present they are again carried out only in Hungarian. In 1947 some Calvinist families were deported to Hungary, hence in 1991 Calvinists formed only 6 per cent of its population. Two rows of benches in the church are permanently vacant as a sign of solidarity with deported families. Lately both church communities are less reserved

and in some spheres they even cooperate. They coordinate the time of masses, participate in other religious masses and ceremonies to attract more followers.

At the beginning of this century there was only a Hungarian church school in the village in which after the constitution of Czechoslovakia Slovak language was taught 2 hours weekly. In the 1920's a state Slovak school was established there. However the church dissuaded believers from attending the state school. In 1944 the church schools were cancelled and there were two state basic schools which taught Slovak and Hungarian. The Hungarian school was cancelled due to small number of pupils and up to now nobody asked for its re-establishment. Since 1971 several pupils attend this kind of school in the next village. Nearly all children attend Slovak school regardless of their parents' nationality (they regard the teaching process here to be on a good level).

There is only one kindergarten in the village and the parents apply in a written form for the language in which education of their child should be carried out. Imeûlians expect the school and kindergarten to teach or improve the acquisition of Slovak language. Parents consider fluency in Slovak language an important condition for broader professional assertion of their children. Excellent acquisition of



Fig. 3. Common work at threshing corn in the 1940's.

Slovak language represents for them greater life surveillance and they say: "Who knows what's going to happen..."

Stratification of the village community according to property and social status was closely linked with religious faith in the first half of this century. Calvinists belonged to the rich strata of Imeûians. In 1930 they formed hardly one sixth of the inhabitants and they owned two fifths of the cataster. Especially poor Slovak Catholic families migrated for job. The misery of Catholics was increased by a greater number of children and division of inherited property by equal share to each child. Calvinists used to restrict natality.

Ethnic distinction of inhabitants was also very closely linked with religious faith. At the beginning of this century Slovaks were mostly Catholics and Hungarians were Calvinists. Under the influence of the strong Hungarianization in Austro-Hungarian Monarchy many Slovaks reported Hungarian nationality though they could not speak Hungarian very well. This might be the reason why Calvinists considered themselves "genuine Hungarians". They used to call local Catholics "Tôts" (Slovaks) irrespective of the language they spoke. In time of the estate reform in the 1920's it was convenient to report Slovak nationality. After the annexation by Hungary, with the exception of one family, they all reported Hungarian

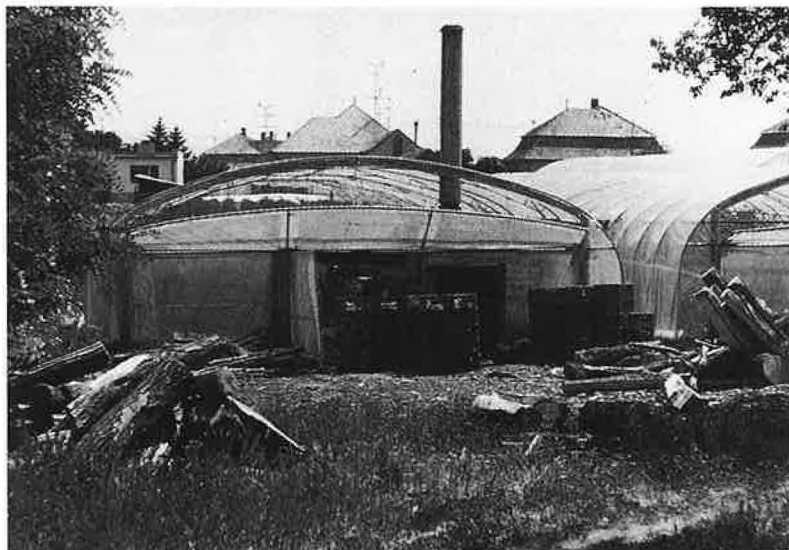
nationality. After deportation of some Hungarian families in 1947 about 60 Slovak families came to the village from Romania and Hungary but they did not settle there.

In 1991 the number of inhabitants was 2 282, out of which 48 per cent declare Slovak and 52 per cent Hungarian nationality. According to statistical data in the last decades and the opinion of the majority of the population, the village is being gradually Hungarianized.

At present ethnic consciousness of the inhabitants is mostly indifferent. Many inhabitants cannot clearly define their ethnicity or they come from a mixed marriage and acquired plural ethnic consciousness. Generally accepted communicative language is Hungarian. It is difficult for a stranger to find out what ethnicity the villagers declared as they all speak Hungarian. Villagers do not consider this fact important or necessary.

In ethnically mixed marriages it is essential to distinguish whether both partners have the same religion or different. Up to the 1950's they preferred to marry a partner of the same religion. The ethnicity factor was mostly secondary in comparison with religion. Catholics were looking for a marriage partner in their own village and also in its vicinity, as well Hungarian as Slovak. When they were of the same religion, they were tolerant towards eth-

Fig. 4. Many vineyards and gardens behind family houses were changed into profitable plastic greenhouses for cultivating vegetables (1992).



nically mixed marriages, especially when they were both poor. Calvinists were strongly endogamic in their religion. As they had narrow possibility of partner selection within the village, they focused on southern Calvinistic localities with Hungarian population. Till the 1930's there was no marriage partners of the other religion. Later when the Calvinistic family did not have a male offspring, they accepted a Catholic son-in-law, but the socially handicapped to secure the dominant position of the wife's family – in religion, language and ethnicity. After 1945 ethnically mixed marriages were more favoured as they feared a possible deportation to Hungary. At present ethnically mixed marriages are quite common. Marriage partners of different religion are more frequent too and religion succession model according to sex is applied: girls inherit mother's religion and boys their father's.

Little attention was paid to ethnicity in the family relations – at present "ethnically pure" families do practically not occur. Today the villagers very often do not know what nationality their relatives report and they only assume it according to the origin of their ancestors, religion and influence of relatives-in-law. That the family was being Hungarianized can be assumed from e.g. the fact that Hungarian speaking people of middle and older age use Slovak terms for denoting relatives in the gen-

eration of their parents and grandparents. The attitude of Slovaks toward their ethnicity is more lax. They know their "Slovak roots", but are tolerant to the decision of their offsprings from mixed marriages to declare Hungarian nationality of the children. Hungarian nationality of their children is more frequent in families where one of the partners is a Calvinist.

Exaggerated declaration of ethnicity is rejected in Imeû and a pragmatic view is preferred: "What difference does it make to be Hungarian or Slovak when your bowl is empty and your backside naked." Memories of activities of their ancestors in demonstrating their own ethnicity and in politics are not transferred within the family. It is of no importance to them and they sometimes even wish to forget them: E.g. during the Hungarian occupation of southern Slovakia all Imeû population declared Hungarian nationality. There were "no Slovaks" with the exception of one family, whose breadwinner did not hide this fact and therefore he had a lot of troubles with Hungarian authorities. When I verified this fact with his grandson he knew nothing about it, he was surprised and proud of it.

But the behaviour of some concrete persons is well known because the local chronicler recorded it together with the description of historical events in the chronicle. Offsprings of these people as well as other villagers knew



Fig. 5. Old family cellars in private vineyards (1992).

this fact and referred to the Chronicle. This fact attests the influence of written records on historical and ethnic consciousness of the public.

Family traditions are more respected in the families of Hungarians-Calvinists. Some of them know their pedigree back to the fifth generation and also important events in their lives. Calvinists have also greater respect of family and memories (but it can be due to their contemporary minority feeling in the village).

Groups of neighbours in the investigated village had less space for traditional neighbour activities than in other villages. Stratification according to property formed a certain barrier in developing equal neighbour relations. Property had greater influence on neighbour relations than ethnicity. Nowadays neighbour activities are of the same character as in other villages. Also some traditional activities in the groups of neighbours are maintained and involve all villagers (e.g. keeping the custom of presenting natural produce for wedding banquet).

It is true of cooperative groups' activities in the between-war period that their relations were more influenced by property and social status of their members than by ethnicity. Many activities, which were done in other localities in the form of reciprocal help, were here replaced by cheap labour of agricultural labourers who adapted their language and cul-

ture to their employers. Many cooperative chances vanished due to collectivization of agriculture and improvement of household equipment. A renewal of cooperative relations came in the 70's in aspects of family business with cultivating vegetables in individually owned gardens. During the last two years the cooperation (especially reciprocal exchange of manual labour among cooperants) even increased due to economic recession and fewer possibilities of disposal with financial means. Cooperative groups are formed from relatives and neighbours, friends and colleagues. The criterion of ethnicity is not applied in cooperative relations. Common interest – to achieve greater prosperity – has become dominant in cooperation and it suppresses other factors of forming social relation.

Following the investigation of the effect of factors on life and ethnic consciousness, I would like to underline the role of personality (local authority). Both eye-witnesses and the chronicle state that it was the local Catholic priest who had the greatest merit on Hungarianization of Imeû in the 1930's. He preached only in Hungarian, imposed wearing of "Hungarian folk costume" to church, forced Slovak Catholics to send children to Hungarian church school. Before the arrival of Horthy's army he aggravated tense relations in the village to such an extent that the mayor of the village was killed and the teacher of the Slovak

school fled away and thus rescued himself (Kronika: 23–26).

The question is to what extent this information from the inhabitants is objective, and whether these events have not been, in the due course of time, so-called “folklorized”, though it could be unconscious distortion caused by a longer period of time. On the other hand it can be simple to find and label a man who was responsible for the whole situation in the village and blame him. Unfortunately, at present it is impossible to verify the events by both sides.

It is a matter of fact that especially in the first half of the 20th century population was less informed about happenings in society and citizen rights. The representatives and local authorities could more influence the behaviour of the inhabitants (by informing or not informing, by misinformation and by their own example). This was true in the case of teacher, priest, notary, registrar, chronicler etc.

The change of ethnicity respectively ethnic consciousness of an individual during his life forms a second problem worth of deeper study. In the investigated village break-through situations occurred several times during the last seventy years when the inhabitants for different reasons asserted so-called situational ethnicity (Okamura 1981). When the social and political situation was stabilized they returned or did not return to previously declared ethnicity. The reason for manifestation of another ethnicity than the one an individual was innerly identified with, was his personal ambition (possibility to gain property, effort to achieve a function, to be accepted by members of some social groups). Another reason was their fear of repressions if they did not comply actual political regime. I have also met people who changed their ethnicity so that they could peacefully do their jobs or make use of their talent and skills (e.g. at organizing cultural undertakings) that is in all political regimes.

Slovaks in Imeû “succumbed” Hungarian surrounding in this century. They spoke both languages, what predestined them to adapt to a partner who spoke only Hungarian (in a mixed marriage). In the past and even nowadays Hungarian language provides greater possibility of communication in the nearest vi-

cinity. Aged people who speak only Hungarian did not feel it necessary (nor had the possibility to do so) to learn and speak Slovak.

Old settlers – Slovaks and also those who later settled or married here, were mostly poor. This fact caused their submissive position towards other inhabitants. Marrying a Hungarian partner improved their economic position and social prestige of newcomers but their Slovak ethnic identity gradually ceased.

Changes of borders and political systems caused changes of national identity of Imeû inhabitants. Changes in declaring nationality on the principle of political and economic convenience were common in the whole area of southern Slovakia. This trend occurred in the late 19th century as well as in this century (Šutaj 1992: 165). Hence the factor of ethnicity is not determinant in establishing social (family, kinship, friendship, cooperative, etc.) relations in the community and their function, but rather religion, social status and character of partners are preferred.

At present Imeû inhabitants, both Slovaks and Hungarians, are afraid of the further political development. They consider the present mutual relations between Slovaks and Hungarians as satisfactory and tolerant and a nice example of their cohabitation. It is not a secret that they disapprove to be a constant object of political quarrels. It seems to them that too much attention is paid to the problems of minorities what deteriorates the attitudes of inhabitants from other regions towards them. They have a certain ethnic or rather regional complex of inferiority. A young Slovak woman expressed her feelings: “When visiting the Czech republic I, Slovak citizen, am blamed for the disintegration of the Czechoslovak republic; in Slovakia we are regarded as Hungarians (coming from the southern regions); and in Hungary they label us by a nickname “Tóts” (meaning Slovaks). We are not hurting anybody and nobody likes us!”

When summarizing the factors affecting ethnic consciousness I can state that the cohabitation of ethnics and ethnicity (especially its changes, official declaration and manifestation) were most radically influenced by socio-economic and political changes, macropro-

cesses with wider social validity. Activities of informal groups were guided towards finding such a model of behaviour which would secure further survival of local community members and if possible, tolerant, were peaceful cohabitation. Complicated and manifold family kinship and neighbour alliances among the inhabitants of the village helped consolidation (e.g. people could not remember a conflict among villagers which would be motivated by ethnicity unless this attitude was incited and supported by tense social situation).

Local representatives and people of natural authority had a certain impact on the life of ethnically mixed local community. This happened especially in the period of political changes or tense political situations. Historical changes also renders an opportunity to fulfil personal ambitions.

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