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# Foreword

The thirty-five tales in this collection represent a selection from the repertoire of Mrs. Zsuzsánna Palkó, a Hungarian peasant woman from Kakasd, a village in the county of Tolna, not far from the Austrian and Slovenian borders. But this village was not her native land. Like the other residents of Kakasd and thirty-seven other surrounding villages in Tolna and Baranya counties, she was a new settler in the region. Like the others, she came from the multiethnic Bucovina province, annexed by Romania in 1918, after the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire. As a member of the Bucovina Székely subculture she was relocated to this region in southwest Hungary in the migration of 1946-1947.

Because of their isolation from the motherland, Bucovina Székelys preserved a unique, archaic Hungarian cultural tradition; therefore, soon after their arrival, the newcomers attracted the keen interest of folklorists and ethnologists. The opportunity arose to study the Székely settlers in the process of economic, social, and cultural adaptation to their new homeland, different in every respect from their native land. In the company of other folklorists, I myself first conducted fieldwork in Kakasd in 1948, beginning an almost lifelong association with its people. I began as a novice folklorist, an apprentice, who learned the trade through continued visits with the villagers of Kakasd. Each visit—those made during the first eleven years and those made later from 1981 to 1987, after a pause of seventeen years—brought new insights. As time passed, old generations succumbed and new generations emerged, posing new cultural enigmas and puzzles, showing the inexhaustible vitality of tradition and the futility of the scholarly illusion that one can gain full knowledge of a people even in a lifetime.

The settlers of Kakasd (pop. ca. 5,000), Roman Catholic natives of Andrásfalva (one of the five Bucovina Székely villages), came to inhabit fertile farmland. Herds of grazing cattle, rich pastures, well equipped farmhouses, full pantries, barns, and sheds awaited the new arrivals, but no resident was there to welcome them. The former occupants—descendants of migrant laborers from Germany who populated an area devastated during the 150 years of Turkish occupation—had settled here, in the eighteenth century, in what was later known as *Schwäbische Türkei* (Swabian Turkey), but were accused of collaborating with the Nazis during the Second World War and deported back to Germany. When the Székelys arrived, authorities distributed wealth among them according to family size, not according to their former economic standing in the Bucovina. They came almost emptyhanded, running through war zones between the German and the Russian fronts. Countless personal experience stories recount their

adventures; these tales are characterized by the famous Székely deadpan humor. Anna Sebestyén recalls a brief example: When the frightened, hungry, aimless wanderers were passing through West Hungary, villagers treated them to hot soup and potatoes, asking: "Where are you going, brother?" "Towards ruin!" "Where is that?" "Where we are going."

As a Hungarian subculture, the Székely sustain a proud, historically shaped sense of ethnic identity. Their habitat—the valleys, plateaus and ranges of the southern Carpathian Mountains in Transylvania—was ceded to Romania in 1918. Yet the Székely's Hungarian roots are extensive and well remembered. Originating in a nomadic tribe of cattle breeders, the Székelys became an important military contingent for the kings of Hungary during the Middle Ages. Earning privileges and land, their sib organization later developed a specific social order based on units called *széks* (sites), composed of six extended families divided into two branches. To defend their own land, they formed a military unit with its own rules, leaders, strategies, and uniforms. Under feudalism Székely society developed a land-holding aristocracy, while those with small or no holdings lost their ranks and freedom from taxation. Poor have-nots regressed to serfdom.

In the eighteenth century the Székelys supported uprisings against the Hapsburgs. In retaliation, Vienna dissolved their military organization and took away their privileges. But since the defense of the southern borders was crucial, the government ordered the formation of a 15,000-man Székely border guard, under the jurisdiction of the Austrian army. The Székelys resisted the recruiters. On the morning of January 6, 1764, military units stationed at the village Mádéfalva opened fire on the protesters, killing 200. Despite other economic factors, this incident remains in folk memory the sole cause of mass emigration from Székelyland (*Székelyföld*).

Many refugees fled to Moldavia, then under Turkish sovereignty, and established scattered villages on fertile riverbanks, near lush grazing grounds. Others eventually returned to Székelyland. Finally, in 1774, the Austrian government offered amnesty to the deserters, liberation from serfdom and free land to those who would settle the uninhabited Bucovina (North Moldavia), newly annexed from Turkey. About 800 Székely families settled in the five villages, named Fogadjisten ("God-Receive-Us"); Istensegits ("God Help Us"); Józseffalva ("Village of Joseph", after Emperor Joseph the Second); Hadikfalva (after András Hadik, the Governor of Transylvania responsible for settling the deserters); and Andrásfalva ("Andrew Village", after Hadik's given name). Soon the settlers found themselves surrounded by other exiles: Germans, Romanians, Gypsies, Jews, Poles, Ukrainians. They all built their own communities and interacted with the other groups, exchanging goods, skills, and ideas, broadening their cultural knowledge and world views. Isolated from their homelands, expatriots of diverse countries preserved their archaic folk traditions while borrowing from each other and creating new forms of folkloric expression resulting from new experiences in the multilingual, multiethnic Bucovina. The Bucovina Székelys' exposure to cultural diversity for more than two centuries is largely responsible for the richness and the peculiarities of

their exquisite oral art.

By the time the Székelys left the Bucovina, life had grown very difficult for most. The distribution of property determined the social structure. Due to economic decline and population growth, living conditions slowly deteriorated. My informants recalled that four well-to-do Andrásfalva farmers owned 60 to 80 acres, twenty families owned twelve, and thirty possessed eight. The majority, victims of crop failure and other calamities, lost their holdings and had to earn their living from sharecropping on the estates of the landed Moldavian aristocracy during the seven-month agricultural season. During the winter, they found other ways to complement their meager incomes. Men and women peddled goods, bartered produce with other ethnic groups, hauled timber, and sold dried fruits, cucumbers, and onions. Women made rugs to sell. Marketing, hauling, and working in lumber mills often took people back to the Transylvanian homeland, keeping a nostalgic attachment alive. Andrásfalva's poor district became increasingly crowded as more and more people found themselves unable to buy arable land.

Drought, famine, and cholera epidemics took their toll on the population and contributed to the success of the Hungarian government's resettlement action in 1883, which brought the exiles back to the motherland, to a site on the lower Danube gained by draining the river's floodplain. Four thousand people arrived and turned the wilderness into a human habitat. They built their villages and farms, but within four years they had lost everything to the flooding Danube. Penniless, they had to return to Andrásfalva and accept the charity of neighbors and relatives. Repeated attempts were made to return to the homelands, mainly to Transylvania, before the outbreak of World War I in 1914. Some of the resettlement sites remained viable in the early decades of the century; nevertheless, as early as 1906 many Székely left to seek their fortunes on the Canadian prairies.

After the war, conditions in Andrásfalva deteriorated further. In addition to suffering a general depression and shortages of basic necessities, Hungarians in the new Romanian state were relegated to minority status. No wonder that when Bucovina Germans were relocated to Germany during World War II, the Székelys accepted the Hungarian government's resettlement proposal. In 1941 inhabitants of the five Székely villages vacated their homes and moved with all their belongings to a beautiful fertile area in the Bácska, a multiethnic region incorporated into the newly created nation of Yugoslavia after World War I, but returned to Hungary by Hitler in 1939.

During World War II the Hungarian government settled the Székelys on the land of hostile Serbs; in the words of György Andrásfalvi, nephew of Zsuzsánna Palkó, "they settled us on the bear's back—the bear shook himself and shook us all loose." On October 8, 1944, the Bácska became a battlefield, and the Székelys had two hours to flee their villages with hastily packed belongings loaded on their wagons. The Székelys badly needed new homes, but they felt guilty about occupying the abandoned houses of German farmers in Kakasd. Furthermore, the Székelys feared that they would soon

have to run again.

The migrants from Andrásfalva adjusted to the new land in Kakasd under extremely difficult conditions. They had to learn new agricultural techniques, adjust to new Communist-style cooperative farming methods, and develop a family entrepreneurial system that incorporated cooperative farming, contract herding, raising pigs, and working in the nearby coalmines, the state farm, and an enamel factory. After initial mismanagement leading to crop failure and clashes with authorities over the harsh Communist ideological system, the Székelys learned to cope. Particularly after the mid-1960s, when liberalization of the agricultural system opened a free market economy, the Székelys became affluent. Moving from the old German houses, families built comfortable modern homes and developed technologically efficient farms. At the same time, they maintained their clannish, extended family ties and continued to distinguish themselves from non-Székelys. The features they see as markers of traditional Székely identity are taught as primary education to children at home and in early schooling; these same traits are also foregrounded in educating the general public about Székelys through staged cultural displays. Among the most cherished features are the archaic Bucovina Székely dialect, the elaborate Christmas mumming drama, the farewell lament for the dead, certain pieces of the traditional costume: woven rugs, embroidered towels, pillowcases displayed in the front rooms of Székely homes and, above all, storytelling.

Storytellers were always held in high esteem as artists, public entertainers, and performers of the magic tale, the most elaborate form of oral prose narration. I have collected many tales in Kakasd, from many people: men and women, young and old. Some were specialists in diverse tale genres; some original talents possessed large repertoires while others told only a few tales; some narrated only occasionally; others told stories at public ceremonies of various kinds. I was lucky to arrive at the right time to capture the exceptional art of Zsuzsanna Palkó as it evolved and received center stage during the last fifteen years of her life.

I was able to trace storytelling as far back as eighty years prior to the Kakasd settlement; throughout this period narrative art was a practice highly esteemed among the Bucovina Székelys. Almost everyone was able to recite a tale or list a few favorites and cite cherished narrators; yet villagers unanimously pointed to the district of Andrásfalva, where the poor resided, as the hotbed of the magic tale. The poor families, who travelled in boxcars to the Moldavian estates and spent seven months together as a work team, lived together in barracks. After long working hours, they cooked their evening meal and then shared leisure until they fell asleep. There could not have been a better diversion from back-breaking agricultural labor than telling folktales: stories leading them away from harsh reality to a world that miraculously fulfilled otherwise impossible wishes. Traditional peasantry developed the folktale into a unique oral prose genre fulfilling the need for aesthetic delight. What literary fiction offers to reading, movie- and theater-going, TV-watching urbanites, the orally performed folktale offers to small groups of illiterate and semiliterate people isolated from the technology of mass

communication. For the Andrásfalva poor, as for other agricultural laborers elsewhere in preindustrial Europe, the sharecropper's work schedule offered the opportunity to learn and develop storytelling skills, trade stories, compete, and entertain fellow workers at night, after the evening meal. While telling a story, an expert narrator would call out "soup" from time to time to see if everyone was still alert and listening. If the answer "bone" came from many voices, the story continued, but if the answers became fewer and the audience seemed to be lulled to sleep, the teller stopped, only to continue next night, after finding out at what point in the story the audience fell asleep. The storytellers were all men, addressing an audience of both men and women, but women were not accepted as public entertainers: their specialized narrative art was confined to the nursery. Sometimes children managed to sneak in unnoticed, but they were not welcome at this serious adult entertainment, partly because it was not "for their ears", partly because children, unable to sit still for long, disturbed the fun of the adults.

I have traced the careers of many good storytellers of the past. Their memory was very much alive during the first period of my fieldwork in Kakasd. I could even trace repertoires because stories were handed down in families and considerably altered by the individual taste of the recipients. I was able to identify the community corpus of the Székelys of Andrásfalva and Kakasd, living in active use, in latency, or recently revived. In addition to my texts published in 1955 and 1960 and my unpublished recordings made from 1981 to 1987, there is a third source that fills the gaps and completes the body of community heritage: the collection of Ádám Sebestyén. These three complementary sources document fully the intricacies of the storytelling network, as well as the creativity and variability of storytellers over time; there is much to be studied by future generations of scholars. Sebestyén, a Székely farmer, was born in Andrásfalva in 1921. Although he had only two years' grade-school education, he followed his father as lay church singer and master of rituals at weddings and funerals. In his dedication to Székely distinctiveness, he became the chronicler of his people's history and recorder of oral poetic tradition. His systematic and extraordinarily valuable collection was published in four volumes (1979, 1981, 1983 and 1987) containing 466 texts from 50 narrators.

This representative material reveals the lasting impact of a storytelling dynasty: the Zaicz family. József Zaicz, Mrs. Palkó's father, was a farm laborer who worked on the land of wealthy Andrásfalva farmers and told stories to his employers. He often boasted that he knew 365 stories, one for every day of the year. His son János was equally well-liked; even when crippled by old age, he was welcomed to a good meal in exchange for his delicious stories. He was more than just a storyteller. Through the years, his magic-shamanistic powers and knowledge were often mentioned in conversations. His powers are cited even today, when modern technological inventions are mentioned. János was a wise man, a prophet: a visionary who could see into the future. He believed in the Revelations of St. John and continually drew parallels between biblical prophecies and recent events. People believed that many of János's predictions came true, such as that

people would engage in wars causing mass destruction; that "iron birds" (airplanes) would ply the skies and "iron horses" (cars) would race on the streets; and that see-through glass (nylon) dresses would be invented. People still believe that other of János's predictions are bound to be fulfilled, and that in the end the earth will perish by fire. János was an avid reader and an eloquent speaker, respected by educated villagers. At wakes, he led the rosary and the singing of hymns. József Zaicz's grandson, György Zaicz—a small, hunchbacked man whose pride in his ancestral village led him to change his family name to Andrásfalvi (from Andrásfalva)—inherited his grandfather's talent for telling stories. György was the only male member of the Zaicz family of Andrásfalva raconteurs whom I knew.

Mrs. Palkó, daughter of József, knew all the tales. She heard them throughout her life but did not tell them publicly until she was nearly 70 years old. She was a plain, modest woman, dressed always in black, wearing a black headsquare; yet her blue eyes sparkled from her wrinkled face. She never learned to read and write, she never went to school, but she helped raise her younger sisters and brothers. As a woman, she could listen to the tales, but she had no opportunity to capture an audience. Her rise to recognition could happen only under extraordinary conditions. When the Székelys settled in Kakasd the social hierarchy of old Andrásfalva collapsed. Prestigious rich families lost their status with the new distribution of the land. The poor people were singing: "Thank God, the world has turned; from poor people, big farmers have grown." Public storytelling, previously confined to the poor district of Andrásfalva, now traveled to the most prominent social occasion: the wake.

It was an essential element of respect for the dead that family members, neighbors, and friends gather in the house of the deceased and spend the night with the body before burial. Storytelling was a major event; the narrator's task was to keep all the mourners respectfully awake from dusk till next morning's dawn. Wakes of important people were highlighted by the performances of the most noted storytellers; for children and young people, however, anyone could be asked to tell tales. At the time of the settlement, however, none of the Bucovina greats were functional. Márton László, author of *The Book of the Dead*, settled in another community and died in 1949; János Zaicz was ill, unable to speak; he died the same year. It was time for Zsuzsánna Zaicz, the daughter of József Zaicz, to assume her father's role.

She was born in 1880, the third of ten children. When she was one year old, the family moved to the settlement on the lower Danube; six years later they lost everything to the flooding Danube and returned to continue seasonal work in Moldavia. When she was eight, she started to work in the sugar beet fields. After turning thirteen she worked in the households of well-to-do families in the country and in the nearby city, taking care of children, cleaning house and helping in the kitchen. She also worked harvesting wheat and rye at the threshing machine and serving clients at the general store. She could not expect a dowry from her parents; she had to provide her own. At eighteen she married István Dobondi, who died of tuberculosis after three years of

marriage; their two children also died within one year. Five years later she married József Palkó, the foreman of a sharecropping band whom she met during seasonal work. After a good life with her, raising eleven children, József died in 1927.

Life became a struggle for the widow, and she was determined to win. She worked wherever she could. Like a man, she got into the horse-drawn wagon, hauled wood and a variety of goods which she sold or traded. She accepted day labor, went hacking, wove runners, hired out for spinning. As her children came of age, she took her older sons to help her on errands. When the family moved from Andrásfalva to the Bácska in 1941, the children went ahead with their possessions while she stayed on to sell the house at a good price. In Kakasd, she moved in with a daughter's family. That daughter died a year later, so she took up residency with her oldest son's wife, but moved out again when he did not return from the war, "so that the young widow could get a chance to remarry."



Linda Dégh dressed in the traditional native costume in 1986.

At the time I met Mrs. Palkó, only four of her children were still alive. Erzsi Fábíán, her sickly youngest daughter, needed her most. The Fábíán family worked nine acres; with five young children—aged 12, 8, 6, 3 and nine months—there was much to

do and Mrs. Palkó's was the greater share. She did all the cooking, cleaning, and laundry; she took care of the cow, the pigs and the poultry; she cut wood and hay; she took on herself all the responsibilities she listed as woman's work in her tale "Peti and Boris" (number 28, below). I never saw her idle or resting, even while she was telling a story. Sitting on the low stool in front of the iron stove, she fixed her eyes on the pans so as not to burn the food that was cooking; she wiped the children's noses and washed their hands. Telling her tale, she would hold one child on her lap while rocking the baby in the cradle. She was always smiling, cheerful; she had a way with children.

In the tiny, crowded, steamy kitchen the children were quiet, well behaved, polite, governed by their grandmother's calm words and many tales. These children knew all her tales; it was their privilege to remind Grandmother of what she had not told me yet. I usually came in the evening, after dinner, when I did not disturb the family's work schedule because it was now time to relax. Erzsi sat on one of the two beds, mending socks or embroidering shirts; her husband Antal sat on the other bed with male visitors. Visiting women brought their low stools and distaffs; while listening they would spin or knit. There was no electricity yet available in the section of the village where the Fábians lived. I sat at a small table with the only tiny gaslight on it, barely sufficient for taking notes and operating the battery-run tape recorder that was an extra sensation, drawing a curious audience—everyone wanted to hear his or her own voice emerge from the machine. A number of ambitious village children begged for the privilege of carrying the tape recorder for me.

Mrs. Palkó left her home only if her three daughters-in-law needed help with the laundry, pig-slaughtering, or major housecleaning. Her hands were too full with running the Fábian household; she could do no more for her own pleasure than attend church services, funerals, and wakes, as is expected of old women, close to eternity. She was deeply religious, at peace with the world.

As a storyteller, she was modest, unlike the men who would usually boast and exaggerate their knowledge of tales and claim to have invented them. She never claimed authorship but always made reference to her source. Mrs. Palkó did not see herself as a great artist. When she was awarded the distinguished title, Master of Folk Arts, by the Hungarian Minister of Culture in 1954, she was surprised. "I did not deserve this," she said at the ceremony, "my father and my brother told stories all their lives and they did not get any recognition."

Aunt Zsuzsi's repertoire numbered 74 stories: 45 magic tales, 19 jokes and anecdotes and ten stories belonging to diverse genres. Among known storytellers there are many, men and women alike, whose repertoires greatly exceed this number; many told more than a hundred tales and some knew as many as 300 and even 500 (Faragó 1971). Nevertheless, her artistic embellishment of content and style, her thematic originality, her way of blending experienced reality and poetic fantasy mark her as one of the greatest known traditional storytellers. What makes her narration particularly attractive is its variability. She specializes in magic tales, elaborates the plots meticulously in di-

verse ways, characterizing her actors and detailing situations without stagnating or making repetitions dull. She has many voices: she takes the women's side, pouring out her own feelings, but she is no less convincing as she pursues the dangerous journey of the male hero. She accompanies her stories with commentaries that reveal personal beliefs, opinions, personal positions concerning the order of the world and how it should be. Her sense of humor emerges in her anecdotes, particularly those that criticize the objectionable behavior of girls, young women, and men. When talking about bodily functions, she sometimes uses what urbanites would view as four-letter words. Yet her audience did not consider such terminology coarse in any way. Her speech reflects the typical usage of Hungarian peasant dialects, which lack refined alternatives. Actually, she disliked vulgarities and the obscene jokes popular at older women's work parties and men's gathering at the "father's store" (the pub). I saw her once send a young man away after he came to the door directly from the pub, visibly drunk, and began telling a spicy anecdote.

Aunt Zsuzsi died in 1964, at the age of 84, but her tales, now in print, are continually nurtured by posterity. For the Kakasd Székelys folktales are identity markers, sources of great pride; narrators take great pains to preserve the indigenous archaic dialects of the ancestors. Mrs. Palkó's language is consciously preserved by today's star narrator, Mrs. Mária Fábian, a nurse in the Kakasd kindergarten, who teaches her pre-school wards how to tell tales in the time-honored fashion by preserving Székely terms and gleaning "foreign" (Hungarian) words from the tale (Kovács 1980).

It has been difficult to choose only 35 tales from Mrs. Palkó's extensive repertoire. Because her tales are of consistently high quality, the major principle of selection is variety. The stories that follow present a representative breadth of genre: women's tales, hero tales, jokes, legends, pious tales, and realistic tales. A second principle is distinctiveness: I have favored characteristically Hungarian tales and left out those which vary little in plot or subject from tales well known internationally. For example, Mrs. Palkó's "Rupcsen-Hencsen" is very similar to—and probably derived from—the Grimm Brothers' *Rumpelstilzchen* (AT 500); and "Pihári" is derived from a standard book-tale treatment of "The Youth Who Wanted To Learn What Fear Is" (AT 326); in spite of their excellence, these two tales were omitted in order to make way for such uniquely powerful masterpieces as "The Twelve Robbers" (tale no. 19, below) and "Margit" (no. 35).

So much should suffice to introduce readers of English to the cultural background of Kakasd and to make the following selection of Aunt Zsuzsa's stories enjoyable reading. A headnote prefaces each tale, describing its place in Hungarian and Western traditions, providing specific cultural information, and commenting on Mrs. Palkó's unique narrative touches. A glossary at the back of the book explains unfamiliar concepts, terms, names and sayings and presents a catalogue of formulaic phrases.

If oral tales are by nature international—traveling easily and naturally across linguistic borders—literary translation is always a problematic venture. Vera Kalm's translation, however, is remarkably smooth, preserving the spirit of the original insofar as possible.

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