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## Series Editor's Preface

There has been no more important relationship between folk artist and folklorist than that between Zsuzsanna Palkó and Linda Dégh. Extraordinarily humble and modest, Mrs. Palkó would probably have concealed her great narrative gifts from all but her village circle—if it had not been for Linda Dégh, whose years of fieldwork in Mrs. Palkó's village nurtured both a consummate body of scholarship and a very special friendship. Dégh's painstaking collection of Mrs. Palkó's tales attracted the admiration of the Hungarian-speaking world. In 1954 Mrs. Palkó was named Master of Folklore by the Hungarian government and summoned to Budapest to receive ceremonial recognition. The unlettered 74-year-old woman from Kakasd had become "Aunt Zsuzsi" to Linda Dégh—and was about to become one of the world's best known storytellers, through Dégh's work.

Mrs. Palkó would tell stories literally from sundown to sunup to wide-eyed listeners, but she had never yet visited a place where thousands fell asleep each night listening to radios. She had performed magical healing rituals (Dégh 1989:126-28), but she had never experienced the underground marvels of a subway ride. In her tales she had shown her listeners castles that stood on rooster's feet, but she herself had never seen a full-length mirror: "First she thought that her neighbor was coming to meet her, and then slowly she recognized herself" (Dégh 1989: 188).

Although her words had conjured up countless enchanted castles, Mrs. Palkó had never seen a modern city. Just as she would take an unfamiliar story like "Prince Sándor" (tale no. 12 in this collection) and transform it into her own personal masterpiece, she took on Budapest and remade it as a magic world. As a judge of character, Mrs. Palkó was acutely realistic (Dégh 1989: 204); she could make the most improbable incident seem real in a personal way. With similar artistry, she made Budapest an enchanted city in order to make it real. In Linda Dégh's unforgettable account of the peasant woman's entry into Budapest, a great artist calls upon her own verbal magic to make sense of a place she has never been before:

Her fantasy, which knew so well how to infuse life into a world never seen, was revived by reality. She arrived by night, by car, seeing the lights of the city ("It was as if the stars had come down from heaven to light my way; there must have been hundreds of thousands"). . . . Whenever a new view opened before her, she identified it with the concept she had of it in her mind: "This is the palace of the king;

in just such a one King Lajos lived." "Just such a flower garden was the one owned by the King who cast out *I Don't Know*." "What a beautiful equestrian statue! Such a beautiful horse! Maybe the little prince owned such a one." "You have a telephone like in the King's Palace?" (Dégh 1989: 187-88)

Without Linda Dégh, Zsuzsanna Palkó probably would not have had the opportunity to turn Budapest into a magic kingdom. Vladimir Propp would recognize Linda Dégh as the donor who helped Mrs. Palkó cross the threshold to another world.

Yet, somehow, like the Man Who Had No Story (AT 2412B), Mrs. Palkó sent everything except her Székely tales to the world beyond Hungary. One of the greatest ironies conceivable to folklorists is a great storyteller known only through the words of others. Yet, beyond the Hungarian-speaking world, we know nearly everything about Mrs. Palkó but her stories. Linda Dégh's loving and meticulous studies acquainted readers with Mrs. Palkó's personal history, family relationships, work in and out of the house, moral and religious philosophy, traditional medical practices, reputation as a village wisewoman, and status as a master storyteller. Dégh's *Folktales and Society* (1989), the most important study of traditional narrative yet published, devoted far more attention to Mrs. Palkó than to any other storyteller and made her a familiar figure among folklorists worldwide.

Yet Mrs. Palkó's growing fame did not make it any easier for Linda Dégh to make the tales known. Through Dégh's insistence, four of Mrs. Palkó's tales were translated from Hungarian to German to accompany her study *Märchen, Erzähler, und Erzählgemeinschaft* (1962). When that landmark work was translated into English as *Folktales and Society* (1969a)—much to the disappointment of Linda Dégh and the thousands who have read the book—not one of Mrs. Palkó's tales appeared with the text. The revised English-language edition of 1989 also lacked Mrs. Palkó's stories.<sup>1</sup>

The present collection, published more than forty years after Zsuzsanna Palkó was named Master of Folklore and more than thirty years after her death, bears unimpeachable testimony for the central importance of story and presents compelling evidence that even folklorists must continually remind themselves of story's worth.

Dégh's research into Mrs. Palkó's Székely community—which viewed storytelling as responding to and expressing a full range village life, performance settings, and individual personalities—radically refigured the ways in which folklorists view traditional tale-telling. American contextual studies of the late 1960s and the 1970s followed Dégh's lead in emphasizing the circumstances of narration and the social roles of the tellers within their communities.

Yet, like folklore publishers, many of the narrative scholars who followed Dégh stressed the notion of context to the exclusion of the text, producing a number of articles and monographs that never threatened a theory with a tale. Folklorists seemed to want to know everything about storytelling except the stories.

In contrast, Linda Dégh's scholarship has never allowed its readership to forget either the texts or their social properties and potentials. On two continents, she has

performed at least two lifetimes worth of work dedicated to demonstrating the interdependence of the tale and its surroundings. Whenever she has found theory straying too far from the facts, she has gently led us back to the stories, reminding us that they are a narrative scholar's reason for being.

A case in point occurred when Linda Dégh first came to the United States from her native Hungary to accept a professorship in folklore at Indiana University. She could well have consolidated her career as the world's leading expert in the contextual study of European traditional narrative, but instead she embarked on a new career as a specialist in American belief legend. When Dégh arrived at Indiana, the standard folklorist's judgment on American legendry was that, like American culture in general, it was rationalistic, shorn of supernatural traits, rooted in realism, distinctly nonmagical. Rather than simply accepting that opinion, Linda Dégh tested it at length. She and her students undertook one of the most intensive narrative fieldwork enterprises in the history of American folklore, documenting thousands of versions of numerous legend types focused on the supernatural. The incontrovertible evidence, published in the early volumes of the journal *Indiana Folklore*, refuted the scholarly stereotype of a fully rational American folk (see, for example, Dégh 1968, Dégh 1969b, Dégh 1980). Delight in, fear of, fascination with the supernatural pervade these texts and the explanations and attitudes of the tellers: American society is no stranger to nonrational attitudes. For those who would doubt, Linda Dégh listened to, collected, and published the stories, the ultimate proof of her claims.<sup>2</sup>

Since redefining American folk legend (see particularly Dégh 1971), Linda Dégh has produced a series of explorations into new and old manifestations of folklore, always focusing closely on the effects of a changing world upon folktales. Among her most recent works is a book titled *American Folklore and the Mass Media*, which examines märchen and legends in advertising as well as the ways in which oral folktales, storybook fairy tales, and the contemporary media represent women's careers (Dégh 1994). A late twentieth-century folklorist's texts are no longer exclusively oral, and Linda Dégh's most recent research finds folktale texts in the midst of television commercials and news items from *Time Magazine*—contexts far removed from the Székely village where Linda Dégh first met Zsuzsanna Palkó in 1948 and, lacking even the most primitive taperecorder, first set down Mrs. Palkó's words with pencil and paper, in shorthand.

But in 1994, as in 1948, Linda Dégh's greatest work comes not from the "texts" that she reads on TV screens and magazines, but from her intensive fieldwork, her skill as a listener and observer of storytellers. One of the chapters in her recent book examines the stories of an Indiana woman named Lisa Wells—a member of a Pentecostalist church community who recounts tales affirming her beliefs. Lisa Wells may at first seem to live a world apart from Mrs. Palkó. Yet it is interesting to note the similarities between the two—both are deeply religious women with great oral gifts; both became not merely the "informants," but rather the long-time friends of Linda Dégh. In both cases,

Linda Dégh spent years listening to her narrator friends before publishing their stories and her studies of them.

As far as Linda Dégh and world technology have come since her first fieldwork in Kakasd, she continues to return to the Hungarian village where she first met Zsuzsanna Palkó. There, she has found powerful affirmation of the value of her work as a folklorist: the two volumes of tales she collected there have become a village treasure, "widely read in Kakasd, not so much because of Mrs. Palkó, but because she was the voice of the storytelling tradition of the Andrásfalva Székelys" (1989: 292). If, until now, Linda Dégh has been unsuccessful in getting the world at large to hear Mrs. Palkó's tales, she has succeeded brilliantly in a task of even greater importance: she has helped keep these tales alive for those who love them best and need them most, the community that created them. One of the happiest ironies in folklore studies is that of Linda Dégh's role in Kakasd. She began by studying Mrs. Palkó, the guardian of a great oral tradition; but she has now succeeded Mrs. Palkó as guardian. Story remains central in Linda Dégh's life, as she continues to influence the world as much with tales themselves as with her studies of them.

A major premise in Mrs. Palkó's tales, as in Linda Dégh's scholarship, is that tales do not lie. Some of the magnificent tales that follow end with a story within a story: after many dangerous adventures, a woman—like Fairy Ilona (tale no. 20)—returns home incognito, disguising her identity because she has been wrongly accused of crimes. A storytelling session begins, and the woman is invited to tell a tale; in the guise of fiction, she presents her own, true story. In growing astonishment, the listeners slowly recognize that this "made up" story is real; the truth is recognized and the long-suffering heroine is rewarded. Like these heroines, Mrs. Palkó put her most important life experiences into her stories—leaving no clear or useful distinction between autobiography and story, truth and fiction.<sup>3</sup>

Mrs. Palkó's tales do not lie: they are everything that Linda Dégh told us they were, decades ago. Those who find them first here, retold in a new language, will ask themselves why they have had to wait so long. This remarkable collection, a gift to every English-speaking lover of stories, is also the long overdue reward of Zsuzsanna Palkó and her most avid listener.<sup>4</sup>

Carl Lindahl,  
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## Notes

1. Aside from an earlier translation of "The Serpent Prince" (Ortutay 1956), tale no.7 in this collection, the only tale of Mrs. Palkó's available in English has been "Lazybones," first published in Linda Dégh's *Folktales of Hungary* (1965: 142-47, 319-20) and reprinted in Dorson's *Folktales Told around the World* (1975:114-18).

2. Further information on Linda Dégh's career and scholarship can be found in the introduction to Burlakoff and Lindahl (1980: i-iii) and in the contributions of Grider (1979), Kish (1980), and Voigt (1980).

3. For discussions of the autobiographical nature of Mrs. Palkó's tales, see particularly Linda Dégh's introductory notes to tales no. 8, 19, and 35, below.

4. I thank the University of Houston for awarding me a Limited Grant in Aid to support editorial work on this series, and Katherine Oldmixon for her expert editing. Special thanks are due as well to Vera Kalm, whose extraordinary diligence and skills as a translator have brought these tales from one world to another with great vividness and power.

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