10. THE SPLENDOUR THAT WAS...

(Hungarian art before the sixteenth century)

The ornamental articles of metal, horn and leather found in the graves of the *Magyars' ancestors* show a remarkable degree of artistic interest and talent. One can detect a strong Caucasian (Alanian)—Iranian—Mesopotamian influence upon the basic Turkic-Ugrian motifs.

The richest collection of such articles is the so-called "Nagyszentmiklos Treasure". These articles are believed to have belonged to one of the pre-settlement Princes. They show the Magyars' highly developed artistic taste, an interesting synthesis of cultural influences of the migration period. This characteristically Magyar style is different from that of the Central European neighboring peoples.

The graves of the Avar-Magyars of the VIIth-IXth centuries in the present Hungarian settlement area also show a high degree of decorative artistry, akin to the famous Scythian metal ornaments with Mesopotamian-Iranian inspired figure symbolism.

The earliest Hungarian settlements in the Carpathian area were often built on the sites of Roman towns. The settlers frequently used stones, carved capitals of columns and other material taken from the impressive remnants of Roman buildings.

The influence of the western Christian art style, called *ROMANESQUE,* dominated the architecture of the first churches and castles, built in the Xth century, such as the Arch-abbey of Pannonhalma and the royal castles of Esztergom and Szekesfehervar. The *Byzantian* influence was also considerable in ornamentation, but sometimes also in style, as was the case of the first Gyulafehervar cathedral in Transylvania. The best surviving examples of the later Romanesque style are the churches of Jak, Zsambok and Lebeny (of the XIIIth century).

Some fragments of Romanesque and early Gothic fresco painting are found in the ruins of the Esztergom castle and in the undercrofts of some village churches.

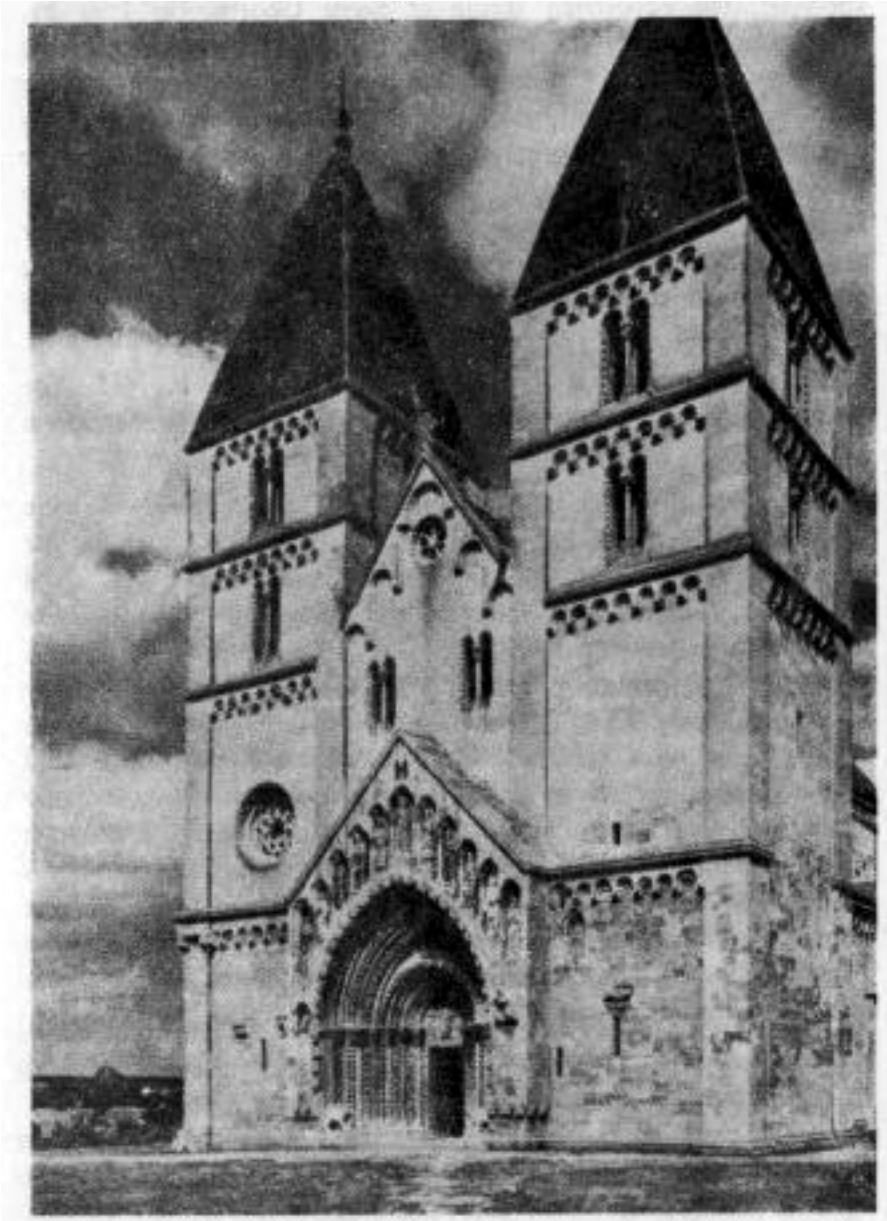
Early French-Burgundian *GOTHIC* reached Hungary during the reign of Bela III (1172-1192), who married a French princess.

Gothic *SCULPTURE* survived in some places after the Mongol devastation (1241) mainly as a decorative element and relief-carving. The first sculptors in the modern sense were the Kolozsvari Brothers, who made the first freestanding bronze statues around 1370. Only one of the monumental statues has survived, the equestrian statue of Saint George (in Prague) They were probably the creators of the silver "herma" of Saint Ladislas (in Gyor). The large number of pre-Renaissance stone sculptures found recently during excavations in Buda castle show a remarkably high degree of artistic taste and workmanship. They prove that Hungarian artists of the time of Louis the Great (1342-1382) possessed consummate technical mastery and originality of expression in creating true portrait-sculpture; and this in an era (long before Donatello) when sculpture was still little more than an ornamental extension of architecture.

Gothic fragment (Buda castle, XIIIth-XIVth century).

The characteristic gothic art of *miniature painting* left fine examples in the "Illuminated Chronicle" of Miklos Medgyesi (1370).

Some beautiful examples of the High Gothic period have survived in the areas not devastated by the Turks, such as the cathedrals of Kassa, (1395), Kolozsvar and Brasso. The royal castles of Visegrad and Diosgyor and later Buda were built in late gothic-early Renaissance style during the reign of the Anjou kings (XIVth century). Late gothic painting flourished under Sigismund (early XVth century). Well-known Hungarian painters of this period were Thomas Kolozsvari. Jakab Kassai, Pal Locsei and the greatest master-painter and wood carver, who only signed his work with "M.S." Beautiful examples of decorative gothic sculpture can be seen in the Bartfa and Kassa churches together with some remarkable woodcarving by some of the above mentioned artists. While most gothic structures show French influence, some churches in the west of the country were influenced by the Austrian-German gothic style.



The Abbey of Ják.
(Built between 1230-1256)

Woodcarvings and panel painting, forms particularly suited to the Hungarian taste, has survived in many village churches, often the work of anonymous folk-artists. Hungarian *goldsmiths* developed the "filigree enamel" technique, creating a singular style of their own which they used on chalices, hermae and book-covers (Suky-chalice, XVth century).

King Matthias (1458-1490) was a lavish and knowledgeable patron of the arts. Hungary experienced the full impact of the *RENAISSANCE* under his reign, especially after his marriage to the Italian princess Beatrice. Many Renaissance artists worked in Matthias' court and directed the rebuilding of Buda castle in "flamboyant" French gothic style with Renaissance ornamentation; they also worked on the Cathedral of Our Lady (the "Coronation" or "Matthias" church). An increasing number of talented Hungarian artists worked

under these Italian masters and gradually took over. At the same time, Hungarian artists went to Italy to develop their talent, for instance the well-known “Mihaly of Pannonia”.

Saint Elizabeth cathedral, Kassa.
(Built between 1385-1402)

At the height of the Renaissance, in Matthias’ later years and during the period before Mohacs (1526) both the aristocracy and the people used Renaissance inspiration in building, painting and wood paneling. Examples are found in the carving of some Transylvanian churches and in woodcarving in the so-called “Bathori Madonna”. In industrial arts and crafts the synthesis of Italian and Hungarian inspiration became more and more evident.

The inspiration of Renaissance art — so close, to the pomp-loving artistic soul of the people — spread well beyond the “flamboyant” gates of Buda castle. It soon conquered the imagination of the peasant, for whom

it seemed to revive the reflection of a long-forgotten eastern exuberance of colors and shapes. In its many facets, folk-art still preserves this Renaissance inspiration to the present day.

The Virgin Mary and Elizabeth.
(By M.S., around 1500).

During the Turkish wars, artistic activity existed only in the non-occupied areas. In the western frontier area Italian influence prevailed (Siklos), while in the north German-inspired gothic coexisted with Italian Renaissance until the arrival of the Catholic-Austrian inspired Baroque.

In Transylvania, under the independent Princes, a late Hungarian Renaissance style developed, the *'TRANSYLVANJAN RENASCENCE* a colorful synthesis of western and Hungarian urban and folk artistry. In the

large cities of Transylvania, and in the country castles and even in village architecture, the copious use of flower-motifs gave this style later the name of the “Flowery Transylvanian” style. The Renaissance ornamentation was enriched even more by Turkish motifs, blending with Magyar folk-motifs into a distinctive Magyar-Transylvanian folk art.

Renaissance art, born in princely castles, reached the poor villages and has lived since in the Magyar peasants’ royal hearts. Most of the great creations of these periods were destroyed by the Mongols and the Turks. By a cruel turn of fate, the areas left untouched by these destroyers were allotted to the succession states in 1920 under the Treaty of Trianon. Thus, Hungary today possesses but a few pathetic relics of the splendor that was Hungarian art during the first seven centuries of the country’s existence.

11. WHERE EAST IS WEST

(The people, customs and folk art of the Transdanubian region)

Settlement, towns

Transdanubia — the region "Beyond the Danube" (in Hungarian: "Dunantul") is the area enclosed by the Danube and Drava rivers and the foothills of the Alps. It was once a province of the Roman Empire called Pannonia. The ruins of the Roman cities still attracted the Magyars who settled there after the VIth century: they often built their towns on the sites of Roman centers and used stones from Roman temples when building their cathedrals. The ornate sarcophagus of Saint Stephen was, for instance, made from an ancient Roman tombstone. This treatment compares interestingly with the Turks' use of the sarcophagus. They threw the King's body out of it and used it as horse-trough.

Transdanubia had the only "open frontier" of the former Hungarian Kingdom, which was enclosed by the Carpathians and the large rivers in the south. This geographic factor has brought about a stratification of regional characteristics among the Magyars born and educated in Transdanubia. They have always represented the search for western culture, Christianity (Catholicism), love of art, science and western technology. In politics they usually sought the ways of peaceful Cooperation and understanding as opposed to the fighting spirit of the Great Plains Magyars or to the astute and proudly independent spirit of the Transylvanians.

We shall mention some towns and regions of particular historic or cultural interest.

PÉCS, in the south of the region, the largest and probably the oldest town in Transdanubia. It had been a Celtic settlement before the Romans, who named it "Sopianae". Saint Stephen founded one of the first bishoprics here and the cathedral was built on the ruins of an earlier Christian basilica. The first Hungarian University was founded here in 1367. Near Pecs lies the old castle of *Siklós* with its gothic chapel and Renaissance ornaments. The castle-fort of *Szigetvar* bears witness to the heroic battle in 1566 when 1000 defenders held up Sultan Suleiman's immense army for weeks. *Mohács* on the Danube was the scene of the great military disaster in 1526.

Further to the north lies *SZEKESFEHERVAR* the old royal city. Saint Stephen called it Alba Regia and established his royal capital here. This city and its magnificent basilica remained the coronation and burial place for some 36 kings. Parliaments met here until the XIVth century. At the end of the 160 years of Turkish occupation nothing remained except the ruins of the old basilica, blown up by the Turks. They had ransacked the royal tombs and thrown out the bodies. To the north is the small town of *Zsambék* with its beautiful XIIIth century Romanesque abbey.

ESZTERGOM lies on gently rolling hills on the south bank of the Danube. In Chariemagne's time it was the easternmost outpost of the Empire, called "Oster Ringum". This name was later magyarised in its present form. After the settlement of the country this city became the seat of the ruling chieftains and remained the Arpad kings' administrative capital during the Middle Ages. The hill is crowned by the massive basilica, Hungary's largest church, built in the XIXth century. The left aisle incorporates the so-called "Bakocz chapel", the only intact Renaissance structure in the country. The town itself contains the Christian Museum in the Primate's Palace, rich in early works of Hungarian and Italian masters.

GYÖR is situated on the banks of the Danube at the confluence of two smaller tributaries. Built on the site of Roman Arrabona, it became one of Saint Stephen's early bishoprics. Among the few remaining treasures of the city is Saint Ladislas' silver herma, an invaluable example of XIVth century Hungarian Gothic art. South of Györ lies *Pannonhalma,* the Benedictine Arch-abbey, founded in the Xth century.

In the northwest of the region, near the historic fortress-town Komárom lies the small township *KOCS.* During the XVth century, the wheelwrights of the town. began to build a horse-drawn vehicle with steel spring-suspension. This "cart of Kocs" (pron. "coach") as the Hungarians called it ("kocsi szeker") soon became popular all over Europe. Practically all western languages borrowed the Hungarian town's name to describe this new type of vehicle: "coach" ("Kutsche", "coche" etc.)

On the western border lies *SOPRON,* built on the site on an ancient Celtic centre. This is probably the only city in Hungary never destroyed by an invader. Near Sopron lies the town of Fertöd-Eszterháza with the sumptuous castle built by the Eszterházy princes in the XVIIIth century. The great composer Haydn spent many years there as court musician. Around *Kaposvár* a characteristic folk-art style has remained in some villages. The Lebeny Benedictine abbey was built in Romanesque style in the XIIIth century.

In the southwest area lies the city of *SZOMBATHELY,* the Roman Sabaria. It had been an important Christian centre before the Hungarian settlement. Nearby, at *Jak,* stands the largest remaining Romanesque building in Hungary; the twintowered abbey built in 1256. North of Szombathely, near the border lies the town and castle of *Köszeg* where the Turks' huge army was held up for a month by a small garrison of defenders who thus frustrated the entire Turkish campaign and saved Vienna (1532).

The *Bakony* Mountains lie north of the lake Balaton. The dense forests once used to serve as hiding places for the "betyar", the outlaws who play an eminent part in the folklore of this area. *Zirc,* in the heart of the region, is a Cistercian abbey, founded in 1182.

Veszprém, the picturesque (cultural and religious) centre of the Bakony region, was one of the first bishoprics founded by Saint Stephen.

In the *Balaton* Lake area one finds many places of cultural and folkloric interest. The Benedictine abbey of Tihany has preserved, in a Latin document (1055), the oldest recorded Magyar language words. The tomb of Endre I has remained intact in the crypt of the abbey. Keszthely, on the western shore of the lake, is the site of Europe's first agricultural college.

Population, folk-culture regions

The population of Transdanubia is predominantly Magyar. After the settlement this region was inhabited by the most important tribes. The few remnants of autochthonous pre-settlement population were soon assimilated (some of them had already been related to the Magyars anyhow). The German settlers invited by the Arpad kings formed the only exception in this otherwise homogeneous population. The eastern half of the area suffered from the 150 years of Turkish occupation but the western part remained more or less undamaged.

Within the area, we can distinguish certain *folk-culture regions,* small districts with characteristic folk traditions. They are the results of certain geographical, social and historical conditions, which imposed isolation, or a certain type of occupation on the population.

South of Szombathely, near the Austrian border, is the area of about a hundred villages called *GOCSEJ.* This region, formerly isolated by swamps, has kept many old customs, songs, dances and artifacts connected with their mainly pastoral occupations, and a characteristic dialect.

A smaller group of villages near the western border is inhabited by the descendants of frontier guards, possibly Pechenegs (Besenyö: a race related to the Magyar), settled here in the IXth century as frontier guards. This occupation is remembered by the name of the area: *"ÖRSÉG* ("Guards"). A watchtower-like superstructure on some houses is a reminder of the inhabitants' original occupation.

The *SÁRKÖZ* district, near the Danube in the southeast, is a fertile area, inhabited by prosperous peasants who spend their surplus revenue on colorful costumes and artifacts —they could do worse with their money. We shall look at the Sárköz folk art later in this chapter.

One region merits our closer attention: the *"ORMANSAG",* consisting of about forty villages situated on the plain stretching along the northern banks of the Drava river. The floods of the unruly river had created large marshy areas around the slightly elevated hills on which the villages were built. The peasants have developed a unique method of protection against the floods. From the earliest times they have built their houses on flat, heavy oak-beams placed on the surface instead of foundations dug into the ground. The house itself had solid timber walls with an adobe cover, held together by crossbeams parallel to the foundation beams. The outbuildings were built the same way. When the floods began to threaten the village, they placed rollers under the foundation beams, harnessed teams of oxen before the house and moved it to higher ground.

The most important — and tragic — social development began at the end of the XIXth century: the size of the arable land, which formed the property of the former serfs (liberated in 1848), was limited and there was no way of enlarging it. As the young peasants were unwilling to leave their village and marry elsewhere, the heads of the families began to impose the disastrous policy of "egyke" ("only child") upon the community, and this soon became the accepted social rule. It became customary. to have only one child per family and to prevent the birth of the others by abortion. When this single child grew up, he or she was married to another single child and the two family properties were united. Sometimes the "egyke" died before marriage. As a result, whole families died out and their properties were then bought up by new settlers, mainly Germans.

There is a moral in this somewhere for the advocates of "zero population growth"!

Another — happier — result of the villagers' long isolation was the creation of a characteristic folk-culture. The families' preoccupation with the happiness of their few children resulted in the encouragement of playful and artistic occupations for them. The village often rented a house (there was no shortage of vacant houses . . .) as a "playing house", a sort of "youth centre" where the children could play and the young adults could meet. Thus there was no need to go to another village to look for a spouse. Adolescents' entertainments included such tempting games as "falling into a well": a lass or lad had to be "pulled out of the well" by the means of giving a kiss to the "rescuer" for each fathom given as the depth of the well. Consequently, Ormánság seemed to have the deepest wells in Hungary — and the least number of young people leaving their villages to marry elsewhere. There may be a lesson here too.

The period of isolation also created a treasure of folklore. Stories about the "betyars" are still popular, especially the ones about Patko Pista, who disappeared leaving behind a number of lovers and legends. As young lads in humorous disguises invade the play practical jokes on people (such as taking a coach to pieces and reassembling it in some inaccessible place). At Year's Eve girls play guessing games, hoping to foretell the future, especially their future husband's name. (They need not bother: their parents probably know it already…)

Many customs are connected d funerals: a sadly symbolic trait among these dying people. Professional mourners are engaged at funerals, who praise the dead in long, wailing songs. The relatives themselves are not supposed to show grief. After the funeral a lavish wake is held. The folk attire is characterized by white: older women and the mourners often wear white. These customs seem to be evocative of ancient Asiatic rituals, just as the custom of the movable house seems to be nomadic times. The predominance of white in folkwear has resulted in exceptionally high standards of cleanliness.

Folk art

Transdanubia, Hungary's West, has produced folk art just as genuinely Magyar as the eastern regions, but this art shows a harmonious synthesis of the characteristic Magyar elements and of the effects of west: here Magyar East met Magyar West.

Western medieval (Gothic) art in geometrical patterns used in ornaments. The left its deep impression here, too, as everywhere the Magyar people. The Italian-Renaissance flood colors are found on folk dresses everywhere. The arcaded porches of the farmhouses and the herdsmen's carvings both show Renaissance design. Because of the closeness of the Hapsburg-Catholic influence, the effect of the Baroque is more marked than elsewhere and can be seen in ornamental furniture carvings in the south. Even some Turkish influence can be detected in folkwear ornamentation, though the Turks were hardly their favourite people.

Some of the memorable forms of folk art are: *CARVING,* which used to be herdsmen's art and flourished mainly in the Bakony region and in Göcsej. The materials were wood, horn and bone, and the objects were mostly those used by the shepherd: staffs, musical instruments, and vessels.

The *POTTERY trade* in some western towns dates from the times of the settlement and has followed the medieval system of guild-towns: the entire population of each town practiced a particular craft.

The *Sárköz* district is the richest centre of *DECORATIVE FOLKWEAR.* Their special type of weaving (pillowslips, bedspreads, and tablecloths) covers the entire cloth with patterns showing birds, hearts, stars and geometrical patterns. The people are also accomplished embroiders, their main color scheme being white on black (the combination preferred by the equally aristocratic Matyos in Northern Hungary).

For their dresses the Sárköz peasants use expensive material: brocade, cambric, silk. The most characteristic part of their dress is the fourfold silk shawl. The color scheme and shape of the headdress indicate the age and status of women. The shift (of Renaissance design) is made of very fine material called "száda".

At *Kapuvar* (in the northwest) even some men wear traditional costumes. The girls wear blouses instead of shifts. A shawl tied to the shoulders is worn under a velvet or silk blouse. The skirt (brocade or velvet) is folded in large pleats. The apron is iridescent silk with lace trim. Three to four bead strings are worn around the neck.

The originally Slovak village *Buzsák* is famous for its fine embroidered pillowslips.

Ornamental art is often used on festival occasions: with a symbolic meaning. In the Sárköz, the "tree of life" — an artistic carving of a tree — is given to a young bride. This motif is of Mesopotamian origin. When a young woman dies, all her fine dresses are buried with her. At Csokoly the shroud and the funeral pillow show the woman's age and status. When a young, unmarried girl dies, elements of the wedding ceremony are combined with the funeral customs and she is buried in a bridal dress. Some expensive articles are only used once a year, such as the "Christmas cloth" or the

Folk customs

Transdanubia has preserved a rich folklore in spite of the western influence and the Turkish wars. This miraculous survival of old tradition, going back to pagan times, can be understood if we remember the particularly strong Magyar character of the population of this region. This ancient folk element resisted German influence and Turkish oppression with the help of the natural environment, which favored the isolation and preservation of small settlements and cultural regions. We shall mention here some of the characteristic Transdanubian folk customs.glazed dishes used at weddings

Minstrelsy ("regölés") still exists in the western counties. Around Christmas and New Year, boys or men form groups and go from house to house to sing their good wishes. (Cf. Chapter 6). The minstrels carry strange musical instruments: a stick with a chain and a pot covered with taut, thin skin with a long reed stuck in it. When drawn with a wet finger, this produces a strange, droning noise. Other instruments (bells etc.) are sometimes added. The "regös" often dress up as animals: bulls, stags and goats.

The charming custom of the *Whitsun-Queen* procession is undoubtedly of pagan origin. (Cf. Chapter 6). In some areas there is also a "Whitsun-King" election or rather competition among the lads for the title. The winner holds the title for two days with such privileges as free drinks and first dances at weddings and balls.

The Mohacs *"buso"* procession claims to celebrate the anniversary of a Hungarian victory somewhat overlooked by orthodox historians. It is said that, shortly after the defeat at Mohacs (1526), the population of the town hid in the swamps from the Turks. Eventually they came out of hiding wearing frightening masks of demons and monsters and chased the Turks out of their town. So today the people dress up at carnival time and parade in the streets wearing frightening masks..

Sárköz folkwear

There are many lighthearted customs at carnival time, such as the *"mock-wedding"* of Zala county, an elaborate comedy during which a boy and a girl, selected by their respective friends and wearing masks are "married" in a mock procession and ceremony. They remove their masks at the dance following the "wedding". Only then do they recognize each other. Though there is considerable verbal license during these games, no rough play is allowed.

Vintage festivals are popular around Lake Balaton, which is surrounded by world—famous vineyards. The process of gathering the grapes — "szüret" in Hungarian — became a word synonymous with good cheer and celebrations. Sumptuous meals, dancing and drinking conclude each day of the rather tiring work of grape harvesting.

12. THE SONG IN HIS HEART

(Lyric folk poetry and folksong)

Hungarian folk poetry is almost always connected with singing and there is hardly any folk music without an accompanying text. This inter-relationship between poetry and music has imposed its mark upon the *structure* of the lyric folk poem.

A breath-unit could not easily extend over more than four syllables, the basic unit of the folk poem is the line made up of four syllables, often followed by another four-syllable or a shorter unit. The first verse of an ancient folksong (recorded in Transdanubia by Bartok) illustrates the point:

“Felszallott a pava

Varmegyehazara,

Sok szegenylegenynek

Szabadulasara.”

"Fly my haughty peacock

Fly to yonder prison,

Where the captives languish,

Set them free, 0 peacock..."

The rhythmic division is greatly facilitated by the fact that in Hungarian stress falls on the first syllable.

The oldest and still frequent. meter is the eight-syllable line, divided into two four-syllable units:

"Megerem meg azt az idot

Sirva megy el hazam elott…"

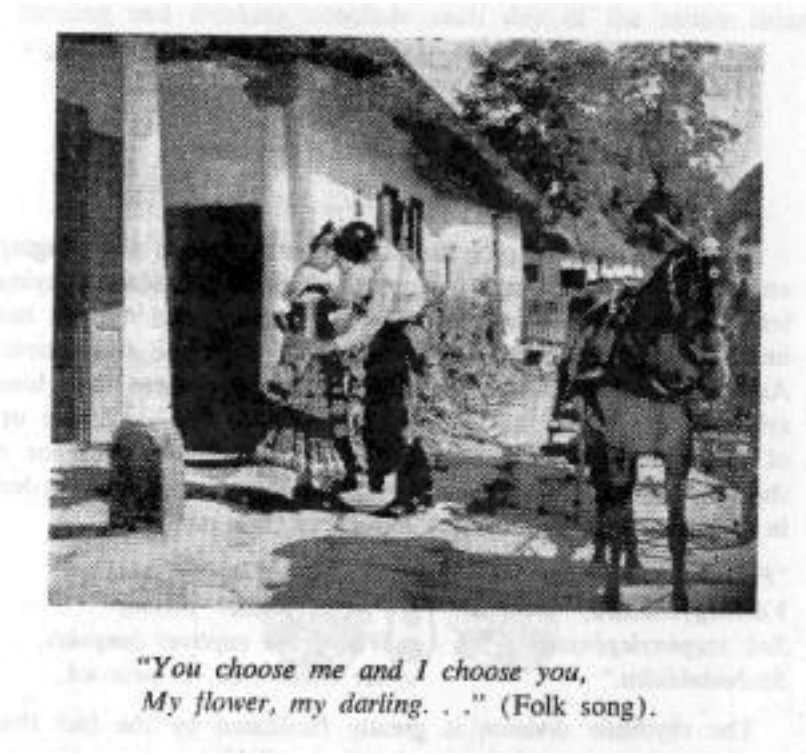
"I shall live to see you one day.

Pass my house bitter-weeping...”

The strophe usually contains four lines. The rhyme is arranged in couplets but it is sometimes omitted when the rhythm alone is sufficient to carry the musical frame.

The most frequent *theme* is, of course, love. Happy, contented love, however, rarely inspires the folk-poet. When it does, the poem is short, simple and usually made up of quick, short breath units the love of the mother and the mother’s love for her child is also a source of inspiration — a rare occurrence in folk poetry. The sorrow of hopeless love is more frequent. Often it is the peasants’ rigid moral code or the parents’

insistence on choosing their children's future spouses, which causes the lovers' unhappiness.



"You choose me and I choose you,
My flower, my darling. . ." (Folk song).

The sorrow of parting remains a recurring theme of many folk poems' Compulsory military service in the army of the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy, usually in some non-Magyar province of the Empire, had little appeal for the peasant boys. Emotional patriotism is a frequent motif, mostly in the context of a farewell song or with melancholic references to the Magyar people's sufferings The two great freedom wars have created folk poetry of a more exuberant nature

The Magyar peasant loves *nature,* the soil, which is rarely his, the animals, which he seldom owns He envies the freedom of the birds and the color of the flowers satisfies his eternal longing for beauty. He feels that he is one with nature and the animals the billowing waves of corn and the forested hills can interpret his dreams, joys and sorrows.

The recurring reference to the phenomena of nature leads us to the understanding of the deeper motivations of the Magyar lyric folk poem. The peasant observes nature's eternal logic and knows that the plants and animals obey the unchanging laws to love or to live. The devious tragedies of human destiny do not follow the simple' ways of nature. So he asks: why? He becomes a philosopher and pours out the philosophy of his heart in a few moving words.

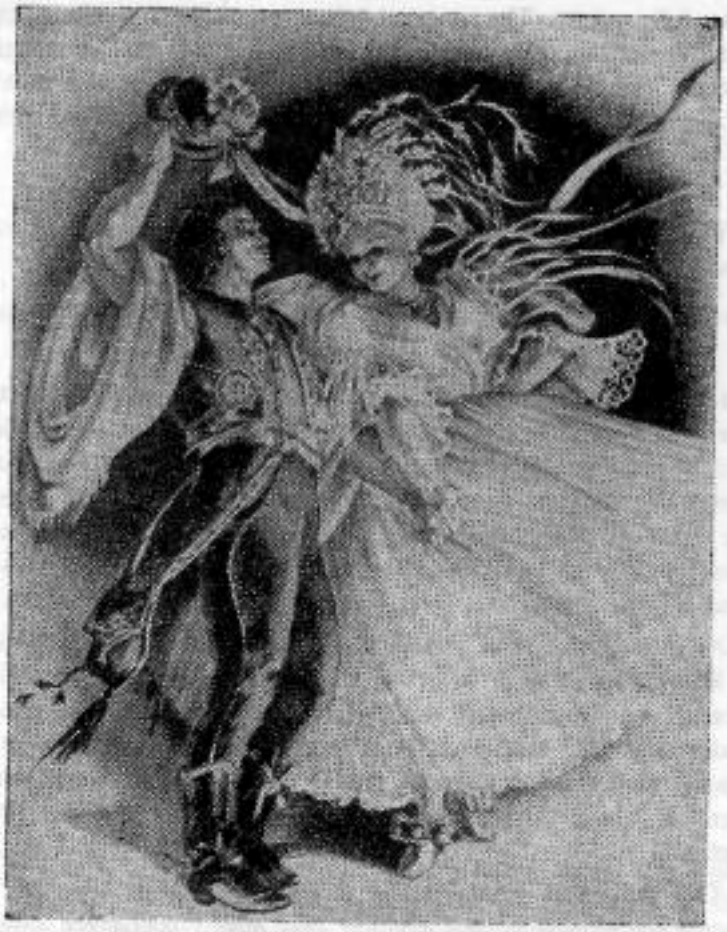
Thus his beloved river Tisza teaches him the melancholic lesson of the passing of time:

"*Down went the Tisza — never shall it turn back — My Love went away — never shall she return..."*

It is easier to bear his sorrow when he finds an image taken from his environment and uses it as a simile and a consolation. This is why many folk poems begin with a picture of nature, sometimes without any apparent connection with the theme. On a second look, this seemingly irrelevant image may present a surprisingly apt, symbolic parallel: *"there is no forest without boughs — my heart is never without sorrows…"*

About 100,000 folk poems and songs have been recorded in Magyar-speaking areas of the Carpathian basin. This incredible treasure is, unfortunately, hardly accessible to those who cannot understand the language. Folk poetry, more than any other branch of literature, loses its flavor in translation. Fortunately, there is always the melody, which offers an eloquent. Interpretation.

The Appendix contains the complete English text of the poems mentioned in this chapter and added specimens offer a cross-section of Hungarian lyric folk poetry. The reader is advised to listen to one of the many excellent recordings of these songs, comparing their musical content with the lyric theme indicated by the English translation.



"Snow-white my Rose is, snow-white she is wearing,
Turn to me, o turn to me, my bride, my darling."

(Wedding folk song)