

Family as an Object of Research and as a Motive for Reflection

ANNA SÁSOVÁ, ANNA BRLOŠOVÁ, JÁN BRLOŠ:
Hrušovské rodiny [Families of the village of Hrušov]
Hrušov: Obec Hrušov, 2021, 584 p.

GÁBOR KOLOH:
„Szántani lehet, de vetni nem muszáj”. Az ormánsági egykézés történetei (1790 – 1941)
[“Maybe ploughing – no need to sow”. Stories of the restricted reproduction in the region of Ormánság (1790 – 1941)]
Budapest: ELTE, Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont, Történettudományi Intézet, 2021, 378 p.

DITA ANDRUŠKOVÁ:
Rodina v ľudovej kultúre Záhoria [Family in the folk culture of Záhorie the region]
Skalica: Záhorské múzeum v Skalici, 2022, 175 p.
and the exhibition of the same name in the Ethnohouse at the Východná 2023 Folklore Festival.

BOŽENA SLANČÍKOVÁ-TIMRAVA:
Rozsobáše [Divorces]
DAB (Andrej Bagar Theatre) in Nitra, directed by Matúš Bachynec; dramaturgy Martina Mašlárová; premiered on October 28, 2022.

BOŽENA SLANČÍKOVÁ-TIMRAVA:
Deti [Children]
SND (Slovak National Theatre) in Bratislava, directed by Michal Vajdička, dramaturgy Daniel Majling; premiered on June 4, 2023.

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The dual title of this, perhaps unusually combined review demonstrates how the theme of family is a living subject in scholarship, as well as in popular and artistic work. Let us recall, therefore, that the issue of kinship and family research has established the foundations of cultural anthropological research in world science. In Slovakia, in the complex and difficult situation of the nascent field of ethnography, the topic of family as a subject of ethnographic research gradually established itself at the end of the 19th century. This happened in parallel in the service of the formation of ethnic identity, and thanks to discussion by the historians of law on the *zadruga* among the Slavs, as well as thanks to the mediating mission of the journal *Slovenské pohľady*.

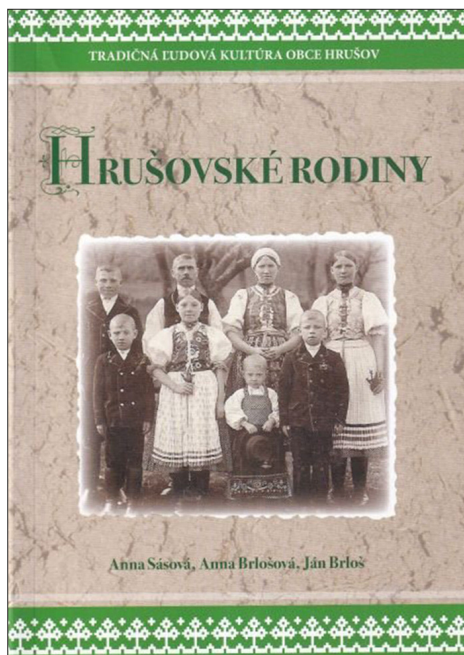
Perhaps in a roundabout way, through the material of family customs, which are an indisputable part of family life and an expression of its relationships, as demonstrated by Krištof Chorvát in the journal *Slovenské pohľady* (Chorvát, 1894 – 1895; 1895 – 1896), and thanks to the clear-eyed, unclouded literary image in the works of authors of the belle-letters

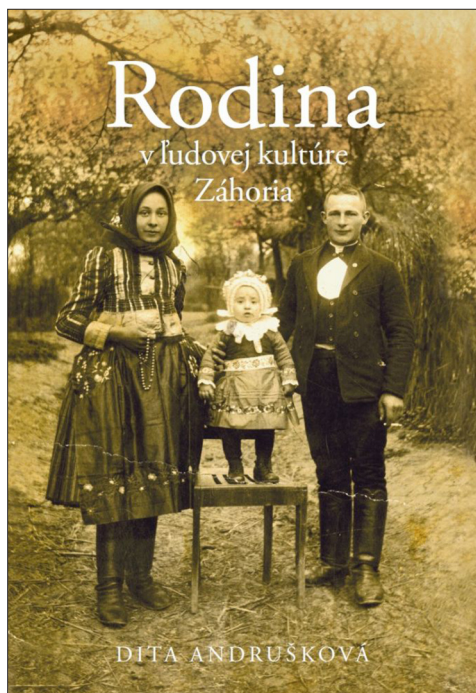
of the period of realism, writers such as M. Kukučín, J. G. Tajovský, or B. Slančíková-Timrava (Šmatlák, 1999: 213–217; 233–277), (although their authorial license is translated) we could know very credibly portrayed images of the family, as more or less functional parts of a living social organism.

Sympathy, empathy, but likewise, the systemic enforcement of power attitudes, social manipulation, tensions, hostility, all belong to the researcher's perception of family and kinship relationships in the researcher's knowledge purview. These perceptions are complemented and confronted with personal life experiences. The depersonalized graphs, triangles, and circles, connected by (inter-) generational (power)lines may appear exact. But as such, they hide many untold stories and destinies.

Ethnology works with its own methods, primarily qualitative field research. These are methods that correspond to the thematic focus, but function especially through interviews, from standardized to narrative, as well as participant observation in different samples of the population, research of secondary sources of various kinds, etc. Ethnology also works with the sources of historical demography, history, or sociology, constructs, and interprets the image of life in the family, that is, the group that is commonly referred to as the basic unit of society. In both past and present socio-political argumentation, it has become symptomatic that conservative political discourse overuses the environment of the family and its functions (Škorvanková, 2021; G. Lutherová, Voľanská, 2023, in press).

In recent years, several books have been published that unravel the relationships in the lives of families and present the social context necessary to understand and interpret them. In this joint review of the chosen works, I would like to illustrate the diversity of themes and approaches in the ethnological study of the family, along with the contemporary artistic presentation of the image of the family by dramatic means in contemporary artistic expression.





First a result of rather detailed research on specific families, a new, and at the same time the final monograph in the series of Hrušov monographs (Traditional Folk Culture of the Hrušov village) has been published. Its text part was prepared by Anna Sásová, Anna Brlošová and Ján Brloš, along with the contribution of other co-authors who contributed to the graphic design of the publication (maps, schemes, photographs).

The impressive series of Hrušov publications ends symbolically with the dedication “to ourselves”. The content of the monograph is a collection of various types of materials, lists and descriptions of individual Hrušov families, or even clans, meaning related families of the same surname, over several generations. Find your own people, learn something about others, read about the area, marvel at the complexity of the tables, and delight in the pretty pictures of smiling people in family

groups! It is in such an aim that this book has its greatest power. If genealogical research was perhaps also a goal of the work, in that case it lacks sufficient biographical data (dates) to qualify.

The terms of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) were probably not a constraint; we assume that everyone included in the book, ancestors, and descendants alike, are there because individuals trusted the researchers and wanted disclosure. The authors have not commented on their methodological approach, and the result is that individual families are not treated evenly, perhaps because of the condition of documents, memories, or actual interest in collaborating with the researchers. Descriptions of the families are supplemented by the above-mentioned family photographs. Surprisingly, the photographs of older date are technically more legible than many of the more recent ones. Mostly, however, they again lack dating, which would also help to identify individuals. For the uninitiated reader it is difficult to find one's way around, since he or she would not know Hrušov and the Hrušov people as intimately as they themselves, or as the authors of the book. The chapters on the other ethnic population, or the new settlers, present an embarrassing treatment. On the other hand, it is worthwhile that they have been remembered in the pages of the book.

This publication is primarily a popularization book, with a lack of critical approach to primary sources. The work with secondary sources is also rather loose. However, the publication undoubtedly would make sense when it finds itself in the libraries of Hrušov families and their descendants, as an extended family, kinship, or neighbourhood album.

Secondly, family themes also connect us with historical Hungary. Laws, especially those affecting inheritance and the division of property, have played, and continue to play, a role in many aspects of family life. The natural environment and related economic systems in differing regions of Europe, as well as the economics of family households and the resulting family structures, have also had an impact on the embodiment of the family unit (Mitterauer,

1986; Švecová, 1997). These circumstances in specific regions also influenced reproductive behaviour, the analysis of which is quite abundant in our literature (Filová, 1968; 1975; 1975a; Sigmundová, 1983; Botiková, Švecová, Jakubíková, 1997; Majo, Voľanská, 2015; Botiková, 2015; Aláč, 2017; Voľanská, 2017).

The Historical Institute of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Budapest (ELTE) is beginning a series of publications that trace historical landmarks through a regional perspective. G. Koloh's work on the history of single-child families in the Ormányság area between 1790 and 1941 was published here (2021). The author chose a symbolic idiom in the title, "Maybe ploughing – no need to sow". The work is mostly historical demographic in character. But there is also a historical-anthropological chapter, which is specific compared to others, especially in the nature and manner of evaluation of sources. In the other chapters the author concentrates on the analysis of civil records and other demographic data, while in this chapter he notes similar, written sources. Given the time span, he has little other option – i.e. civil records, records of meetings of ecclesiastical bodies, presbyteries, medical publications, and the local press. However, he reads them in such a way that he can interpret from them such themes as choice of mate, violence in families or abortion practices. After all, even church minutes used to be full of gossip and accusations! G. Koloh has added one more source that had not been used in our texts to a restricted reproduction until now, namely annual school reports. Here the names or enumeration of school children were given. This is a very important viewpoint which may explain that the single child system did not necessarily mean the number of children born in a family, but the number of those who survived, possibly to adulthood. Given the generally high infant mortality rate, the annual school reports, combined with the civil registration data, are a corresponding indicator of a practical strategy of constricted reproduction in the community.

The author has supported his book with a respectable body of secondary literature, the list of which occupies more than 15 pages of his book. We can read here the list of the complete life work of Rudolf Andorka, the articles by Sándor Balázs Kovács, Tamás Faragó or Ildikó Vasary, as well as several general works on demographics by authors of world literature. This is also why I am sorry that from the territory of present-day Slovakia the author is only familiar with the sociographic work of Gy. Bónis from 1941. He has not taken notice of the works published more recently, if not those in Slovak, because of the language barrier, at least in English (Majo, Voľanská, 2015). Although in his case it is a regionally focused publication, the issue of restricted reproduction always deserves a broader comparison, if only because we still cannot fully explain this phenomenon satisfactorily and comprehensively.

Third: Among the series of "family" thematic monographs presented here is the work of Dita Andrušková, devoted to "Family in the folk culture of Záhorie". At first glance, it would seem that the author is returning to the context I pointed out in the introduction, namely interest in the family overlaid with descriptions of family customs in writings from the late nineteenth century. Andrušková's research, however, is already on a different footing, even in terms of the application of her results. The museologist and ethnologist selects and identifies objects and visual documents that cover the spectrum of family relations through the theme of customs. Through these, she then returns to the museum's depositories and displays to underscore the significance of her findings in the documents which, thanks to her, tell their stories. The chapters systematically trace the biodromal cycle of human life from the late 19th century to the 1970s, revealed by research using ethnographic methods. Neither the author nor the publisher underestimated the usefulness of its graphic appearance when preparing the publication. Both aesthetically impressive and factually accurate, we encounter photographs of people and objects that belonged to the family's life cycle, from simple kitchen tools such

as a slicer for fried pastry, called *Divine Grace*, which was carried to “the corner” of the puerperal bed, to the ornate details of bridal sashes, bonnets, and holiday shirts. The author pays balanced attention to the subjects, just as she does not show preference for joyous events over sad events within the customary-ritual cycle. Given its genre – the book is a catalogue for an exhibition – only the introductory chapter is annotated, but there is no lack of an extensive list of references and descriptions of other sources.

The book was opened to visitors at this year’s festival in the village of Východná (2023), in the form of a banner exhibition, which is essentially a different – and, given the size of the photographs, very impressive – way of presenting its contents. The exhibition was installed in the *Etno-house*, which during the festival provides a welcome opportunity to present the work of ethnologists from different institutions, fields of work, and regions of Slovakia. The image of the family in the folk culture of the Záhorie region may thus inspire some visitors to search through their family albums, boxes of photographs and perhaps help other museums to enrich their collections. Or at least in the aforementioned “ourselves-to-self” relationship, it will bring a moment of remembering, and a revival of forgotten stories.

And now fourthly, at this moment we already enter another position of discovery and interpretation, which is intended for a different kind of experience, perhaps even catharsis and that is: theatre. Without claiming to evaluate the artistic qualities, although I was strongly impressed by both performances, I want to mention these recent new theatre productions to complete the circle outlined in my introduction in relation to our critical realist literature and the image of the family within it. The original texts of Božena Slančíková-Timrava, as we know, were regionally anchored in south-central Slovakia, in the Novohrad region, in the farm cottages of the local rural inhabitants (Kodajová, 2017; Borcovanová, 2017). They then sound even more impressive in their staged form. There they do not lose their regional character, while perhaps not so precisely delineated on the map, but on the contrary, still carrying a timeless legacy of human existence in the relationships within the family and a wider kinship and neighbourhood community.

The production *Rozsobáše* [Divorces] at the DAB [Divadlo Andreja Bagara/ Andrej Bagar Theatre] in Nitra is an adaptation of five dramatized and hitherto not staged short stories by B. Slančíková-Timrava (Katera; At the Kanat Family; Time Will Come; No Joy; The Mighty). One of the talents of this writer is that she followed very closely the interpersonal relationships as well as the individual fates of her heroines and heroes. She understands them accurately and presents them to the reader, in this case the viewer, through the adaptation of the director, Matúš Bachynec, presented without glitter, critically, even sarcastically, somewhere in the tension between the humorous and the tragic poles. The “traditional family” was not ideal, relationships were falling apart, a broad veil covered secret unions, love and dislike, constant social control, and intergenerational violence. All that we see on the stage, which creates the illusion of a rugged cultural landscape, are narrow strips of fields, as Martin Martinček conveyed it to us in his photographic work. The plot is advanced by the narrator, and by outward signs by Timrava herself, who has understanding but does not hesitate to judge.

The production is challenging in its tone. One should not go to it expecting a light comedy. You will laugh, but you will have a difficult time. I do not have a report on how the teenage school troops are reacting to the show. In the end, the audience may be satisfied with the first level, the surface content of the play, which is about family life, wealth and poverty, the tangle of desires, misunderstandings and the impossibility, the difficulty, of breaking out of them. But the broader context brings us to a deeper understanding, answering, or at least opening up, the

questions “why?”, not just “how?”. The viewer becomes aware of the relationships at play, from the economic to the emotional depths, how they condition each other... One example is the psychological oedipal motif in the relationship between mother and son. This is a general theatrical archetype, but in *Timrava* it is reinforced by the situation of the woman – a widow, somewhere in a village at the end of the world. The mother’s only hope and security for a dignified old age is the son, and it doesn’t matter whether he is an honest man or a pig thief...

The programme (Rozsobáše, 2022) for the production draws on historical, literary and, last but not least, ethnological literature and is instructive for understanding the legacy of the author of the draft and the creative team that made *Rozsobáše* in Nitra possible.

The production at the Slovak National Theatre, *Deti* [Children], is also loosely inspired by the short stories *At the Kanat Family* and *No Joy*. Here, too, three or four “traditional” families are intertwined in their changing relationships. Additionally, throughout the plot, they are shifted to the present, marked by migration, the rise of consumerism and the balancing of the opportunities provided by an urban way of life with those of the rural world. The absurdity of relationships prevails in this case at specific ceremonial occasions as they follow one another in the family: the funeral, the wedding, the birthday celebration, Christmas, and the final catharsis in the form of Good Friday.

Playwright Ondrej Majling and director Michal Vajdička have not only put their efforts into portraying the psychological characteristics of the individual characters, whose images, however comedic they may seem, are inherently tragic, but also into the social context of family relationships, again, in which we would hardly look for a complex ideal. This is confirmed by the ethnological texts published in the programme, which not only accompanies the performance but also preserves its message after the final curtain.

Perhaps one good observation from all the works presented and partly evaluated is that the traditions of the family are an important framework, full of tensions and changes that continuously shape this community of blood, affinity and adoption, ancestors, and descendants, whether they are still together or separated, and do not leave it petrified. This is where we see meaning, whether we read about it in scientific or professional writing, look at a museum display, or observe the relationships on the symbols that are the image of our world.

The review does not draw conclusions. Its aim is to show the diversity of approaches to the family in both the scientific and applied, cultural spheres. The family transcends itself. It exists at every moment as a structure, and at the same time it functions as a system that is dependent on external circumstances, but likewise at the same time shapes them. It both confirms and dissolves relationships, both internally and externally. It changes, but our concept of its stability gives us daily security. Thanks to the diversity of approaches, and not only in our science, the ethnological study of the family is a rich and important source of knowledge.

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MAREK DEBNÁR, ANDREJ GOGORA:
Digitálne trendy v súčasných humanitných vedách
[Digital Trends in Contemporary Humanities]
*Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa v Nitre, Centrum digitálnych humanitných
vied pri Filozofickej fakulte, 2019, 130 p.*

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Digital Humanities (DH) is an expanding field that uses digital technologies, resources and methodologies to advance humanities, research and teaching. It has the potential to address many of the changes occurring in the academic ecosystem, such as evolving practices of authorship and collaboration. DH is also causing a gap to emerge between those who use new digital tools to aid relatively traditional scholarly projects and those who believe that DH can change fundamental aspects of academic practice (Gold, *Ed.*, 2012). As the field has developed, debates have emerged about what it means to be a ‘digital humanist’, with some arguing that coding and technological infrastructure building are essential requirements for the field. The other group leans towards interdisciplinary collaboration and the use of DH as one of the methods in their research – adapting not the research to the method but the method to the research. Overall, the rise of the DH is significant for the humanities and their scholars, including ethnology and anthropology, because it introduces new research methods and pedagogies and has the potential to reshape academic practice. Gold (*Ed.*, 2012) describes that DH for one group of scholars represents a powerful political force that reshapes the fundamental underpinnings of academic practice. Patrik Svensson (2012) explains the discourse of the ‘big tent’, this is an inclusive conception of DH where there is an ongoing effort to embrace all humanities under this metaphorical tent and to unify the research of these disciplines and systematize it based on common technological requirements so that all fields are compatible and interdisciplinary research can take place. Marek Debnár and Andrej Gogora are the authors of the scholarly monograph *Digitálne trendy v súčasných humanitných vedách* [Digital Trends in Contemporary Humanities] (2019) which provides the reader with a brief introduction to the discipline in Slovak discourse in the form of historical development followed by explanations using concrete examples.

The phrase “digital trends” in the title of the book refers to a rather dynamic development in the humanities that is currently receiving increasing attention. A significant part of the text is therefore devoted to a detailed historical overview of the use of digital technologies in the humanities, including a chronology of what is currently referred to as ‘digital humanities’ or