PART I:

DEALING WITH FOOD IN INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANISATIONS WORKING WITH CULTURAL HERITAGE I

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FROM FIREPLACE TO TABLE: THE HERITAGE OF THE MUSEUM OF ETHNOGRAPHY'S FOOD COLLECTION

Abstract

This paper seeks to answer the question whether, and if so, to what extent, the Museum of Ethnography's food collection represents Hungarian peasant food culture, for which it was created to preserve. The backbone of the collection is formed of objects related to 'archaic' cooking processes. Thus, one finds here not only the usual utensils for cooking and baking, but also implements used around the fire. Among groups of objects organised by function, the foremost are those for food preparation, storage, and consumption. But, to what extent are they suitable for the study of food tradition/heritage?

Collection structure of the Museum of Ethnography

The object collection of the Museum of Ethnography[1] was formed according to the categories defined by ethnography and material culture research at the beginning of 20th century.[2] In accordance with the Museum's collection profile, the Hungarian and international material was divided into different sections, and within these broad categories thematic collections were formed, and these are still in existence today.

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1 Reference to this study: Zsuzsa Szarvas: From Fireplace to Table: The Heritage of the Museum of Ethnography's Food Collection. In Anikó Báti and Patricia Lysaght (eds.): *Living Eating Habits, Revitalized Foodways and the Concepts of Tradition and Food Heritage*. Budapest: ELTE RCH Institute of Ethnology – Museum of Ethnography, 2025. pp. 119–134. DOI: https://doi.org/10.61380/978-963-567-084-0-5

2 Bátky, Zsigmond – Györffy, István and Viski, Károly eds.: A magyarság néprajza I. Tárgyi néprajz ('Ethnography of Hungarians 1. Material Culture') (Budapest: Egyetemi, 1933).

Historically, the collections that encompass the Museum's Carpathian Basin material have been divided into units variously by material type (textile, ceramic) or theme, while regional collections have been organised by continent. With regard to the collection as a whole, though the greater part focuses on material culture as represented by handicrafts dating to between 1850 and 1950, objects representing contemporary lifestyles have also, over time, appeared with increasing frequency in the collection, accompanied by a growing shift in emphasis from the objects themselves towards the stories associated with them.

Included in the Hungarian material, the collection dealing with traditional forms of *farming and food procurement* (fishing, animal husbandry, pastoralism, crop cultivation, food gathering) includes several tens of thousands of tools and decorative objects representing a pre-mechanised rural lifestyle. The 'Crafts and Trades' unit of the *Technology Collection* features tools and equipment associated with various guilds and cottage industries. Other topics important in the history of technology are those represented by the Transportation Collection, comprising objects associated with the movement of people and goods and the transmission of news and other signals, while the Construction Collection, preserves all manner of objects associated with building processes. The largest unit of the collection of *household* articles (comprising a total of some 30,000 artefacts) is the Ceramics Collection, which preserves various products of the folk potter's craft. In the Furniture and Lighting Collection are gathered a variety articles used to furnish, illuminate, and decorate homes and primarily reference the Hungarian population, but also including other regional nationalities. A third grouping, the Food and Nutrition Collection, houses the accessories used for storing, processing, and conserving food, along with a miscellany of other household items not categorisable elsewhere. Forming yet another separate unit is the 50,000-piece *Textile and Costume Collection,* regarded as one of the finest thematic assemblages in Europe. This includes folk costumes and household textiles, variously decorated in an extraordinary range of motifs and colours. Beyond items associated with rural peoples, pastoralists, and artisans, are those belonging to the material culture of the ordinary people in a broader sense, including the urban bourgeoisie and intelligentsia. Falling under the heading of *Folk Rituals* are the Ecclesiastical Collection, containing objects related to religious life, and the Collection of Folk Customs and Toys, containing objects related to everyday and festival events. A third grouping, the Musical Instrument Collection, preserves a wide range of folk musical instruments. Covering parts of the world beyond Hungary – Africa, Asia,

Oceania, Indonesia, Europe, and the Americas – are the Museum's *Regional Collections*.[3]

What is the Food Collection?

When museum experts organise a body of artefacts into official collections, categories are defined based on the materials of which they are fashioned and the functions that they serve. In this context, the Food Collection may be seen as an odd assemblage of the leftovers of this process, since it comprises food processing, serving, and conservation artifacts, as well as storage items made of materials not included in any other collection.

It thus contains no ceramics or textiles, since artefacts made of these materials have each been placed in a separate collection. At the same time, because it is often difficult to delineate between various groups of objects on the basis of functionality, many items clearly related to food and diet have also been placed in other collections. What can be said of the artefacts in the Food Collection, however, is that they are all related to the traditional food culture of the various religious, ethnic, and social groups living in Hungarian-speaking territories.

The backbone of the collection is formed of objects related to 'archaic' cooking processes. These are mainly tools for open fireplaces (iron stands, fire dogs, bells, kettles, etc.), typically from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Thus, one finds not only the usual utensils for cooking and baking for the periods in question, but also implements used around the fire. Among groups of objects organised by function, the foremost are those used for food preparation, storage, and consumption. In terms of materials, the collection includes objects made of metal or wood, from simple wooden implements, to cups, plates, and other table-setting items made of tin, indicating the presence of a developed metallurgical industry in the 19th century.

3 Fejős, Zoltán ed.: *A Néprajzi Múzeum gyűjteményei* ('Collections of the Museum of Ethnography') (Budapest: Néprajzi Múzeum, 2000).

History of the collection and its connection to ethnological food research

In the history of ethnological research, János Jankó (1868–1902) was the first Hungarian to include food among his research interests. The main focus of his collecting was the documentation of typical elements of a regional culture in architecture and domestic furnishings, including food-related objects. His work testifies to the fact that he did not consider the study of food itself as a subject to be researched in the context of material culture. This is surprising, because it was the role of kitchen utensils within the theme of domestic furnishings that had attracted his attention. It was in his monographs, as part of chapters on customs, that he discussed everyday eating habits under the headings of nutrition and feasting, without, however, linking them to material culture. These short chapters in his published work organically connect the subject of food to lifestyle as a whole, but not to material culture.[4]

In 1902, János Jankó was commissioned to write a guide for the organisation of collections of ethnographic museums, but his untimely death meant that the task was taken over by Zsigmond Bátky (1874–1939), a renowned researcher of folk architecture and fireplaces. Jankó had originally intended to carry out the task by drawing typical objects from the ethnographic sections of the existing ethnographic department of the National Museum, and then providing collectors with a brief description of the objects. Jankó also wanted to lay the foundations for a future typology of objects, which his successor considered premature due to the shortcomings of the collection.

Bátky's approach to food research was also shaped by his evolutionary perspective and his background in geography. In his view, cultural differences represented stages of development, and this could be demonstrated through the analysis of material culture. Recognising the importance of historical change, he saw as the future of ethnographic museums their transformation into cultural history collections. His guide, while detailing the conditions for effective collecting, does not set out coherent systems of objects, but rather the importance of the series needed to chart developmental processes. From the presentation of specifically ***kitchen utensils***,

4 Jankó, János: *Kalotaszeg magyar népe* ('The Hungarian People of Kalotaszeg') (Budapest: Atheneum,1892); Jankó, János: *Torda, Aranyosszék, Torockó magyar (székely) népe. Néprajzi tanulmány* ('The Hungarian (Szekler) People of Torda, Aranyosszék, Torockó. Ethnographic Study') (Budapest: Fritz, 1893); Jankó, János: *A Balaton-melléki lakosság néprajza* ('The Ethnography of the Balaton-mellék Population') (Budapest: Hornyánszky, 1902).

Bátky logically derived the system of food objects from the construction. Essentially, he saw such objects as accessories to the fireplace. He considered the most important group of kitchen utensils to be those providing the means of heating and feeding the fire. The guide's classification also laid the groundwork, albeit covertly, for later classification systems: in addition to the tools of the fireplace, it shows utensils for cooking, storage (with those for storing cooking utensils specially emphasised), and consumption, including tableware.[5] He continued in this vein in the chapter on food in his basic ethnographic work, *The Ethnography of the Hungarians*, elaborating on and detailing the presentation of the system of object groups, but this lacks comparative thinking and the search for a link with food culture.[6]

In his article on ethnographic museology, László K. Kovács (1908–2012), in the section relating to food, suggested the following thematic order for the arrangement of the objects relating to food in the Ethnographic Museum's collection:

1. food (preparation, preservation, consumption, festive and ritual meals, food in times of scarcity)
2. drinks (subdivided as in food)
3. spices (groups of vegetable, animal and mineral origin)
4. cooking utensils
5. serving and eating
6. pot holders

Finally, in 1966, Judit Morvay's (1923–2002) guide identified the groups of objects that form the basis of today's classification in relation to folk nutrition Ethnographic Museum's collection.[7]

The most important results of food research in Hungary are summarised in the Hungarian Ethnography series – in the *Lifestyle* volume by Eszter Kisbán, which

5 Bátky, Zsigmond: *Útmutató a néprajzi múzeumok szervezéséhez* ('A Guide to Organizing Ethnographic Museums') (Budapest: Hornyánszky, 1906).

6 Bátky, Zsigmond: 'Táplálkozás' ('Nutrition'), in Bátky, Zsigmond – Györffy, István and Viski, Károly eds.: *A magyarság néprajza I. Tárgyi néprajz* ('Ethnography of Hungarians 1. Material Culture') (Budapest: Egyetemi, 1933), 37–123.

7 Morvay, Judit: *Népi táplálkozás* ('Folk Nutrition') (Budapest: Néprajzi Múzeum, 1962).

deals with the processes of cultural change based on the interaction between elite and peasant society. This historical tableau, based on demography, food statistics, price lists, various travel accounts, and other historical sources, shows the consistent social processes behind the changes in food culture.[8] What is missing, however, are the lessons that can be drawn from the objects connected with food. This is because collections of this type (such as the food collection of the Museum of Ethnography) have little to say about questions of periodisation, the material culture of the bourgeoisie or the elite, the problem of the landscape structures of culture, or even the phenomena of table etiquette in general. It is thus clear that the Museum of Ethnography's food collection, by its very nature, offers little in the way of contributions to food studies.

Currently the objects in the food collection in the Museum of Ethnography are arranged according to the following scheme:

1. Preparation
    - Preparing the raw material
        - Tools for cleaning (knife, sieve, grater)
        - Tools for crushing (mortar, pestle and mortar, potato crusher, nut crusher, coffee grinder)
        - Tools for cutting (knife and pine knife, meat cleaver, meat slicer, pasta cutter, cabbage cutter, cabbage slicer, chaff cutter)
        - Tools for chopping and grating (grater, slicer, leather grater)
    - Food preparation
        - Drying (baskets)
        - Smoking (hooks, gamos, smoking sticks)
        - Acidification (barrel, cabbage stone)
        - Kneading (tub and foot for tub, wooden bowl, sourdough wood, sourdough mixer,)
        - Stretching (stretching board, stretching staff)
        - Cutting, slicing (cutting board)
        - Shaking (slicer, pasta shaper, pasta cutter)
        - Stuffing (sausage and sausage stuffers)
        - Pressing (cheese press, vinegar press)
        - Shaking (spatula)
        - Fire tools (fire scrapers, fire shovels, embers catchers)

8 Kisbán, Eszter: Táplálkozáskultúra ('Food culture'), in Balassa, Iván ed.: *Életmód*. 4. Anyagi kultúra ('Lifestyle 4. Material Culture') (Budapest, Akadémiai, 1997), 417–583.

Baking
- Utensils for open fire (spit, grill, horn grill)
- Utensils (pot, pan, pancake griddle, frying pan, coffee roaster)
- Lids (baking bell, lids)
- Moulds (baking moulds, waffle irons)
- Rotators (baking forks)
- Holders (iron tripods, fire dogs)

Cooking
- Pots (pots, pans, frying pans, kettles, cauldrons)
- Lids
- Holders (tripod, casserole holder, grill holder, casserole dish, pot holder)
- Mixers (mixing bowl, mortar)
- Strainers (colander, slotted spoon)

2. Consumption

Serving (saucer, bowl, ladle, tray, grass holder, jug)
Tableware (plate, bowl, cutlery, cup, glass, pipe, pipe flask)

3. Means of storage

Equipment for storing raw materials (fat, butter, fruit, sugar, curd, cheese, salt, spices, flour, meat, bacon, sausage and milk).
Food storage equipment (bread holders: grids, bowls, baskets, pickle holders, tobacco holders, water holders: basins, buckets, bowls, pails, spouts).
Storage tools for kitchen utensils (spoon holders, knives, match holders)

4. Accessories

Measuring instruments
Flour mill
Scales
Wooden spoon
Liquid level measurer
Dipping bowls[9]

9 Rékai, Miklós: 'Táplálkozásgyűjtemény' ('Food Collection'), in Fejős, Zoltán ed.: *A Néprajzi Múzeum gyűjteményei* ('Collections of the Museum of Ethnography') (Budapest: Néprajzi Múzeum, 2000), 299–316.

Fig. 1. Fire dogs in the Food Collection, Museum of Ethnograpy, Budapest. (Photo by Edit Garai, 2024)

Fig. 2. Baking bells in the Food Collection, Museum of Ethnograpy, Budapest. (Photo by Edit Garai, 2024)

Fig. 3. Meat cleavers in the Food Collection, Museum of Ethnograpy, Budapest. (Photo by Edit Garai, 2024)

Fig. 4. Drinking bowls in the Food Collection, Museum of Ethnograpy, Budapest. (Photo by Edit Garai, 2024)

Thus, the food collection, in terms of its scheme has the main characteristics of how the other collections of the Museum of Ethnography are arranged, with the 'peculiarity' of its being partly a remnant collection. Its foundations were there from the beginning, but the many reorganisations and restructurings that the collection has undergone over the years have brought in some objects that are not connected to food – for example, tools for cleaning, and personal hygiene, and a number of other unrelated objects. Thus, the food collection's existing shortcomings, its black holes, so to speak, do not currently allow it to be regarded as a real source base for various studies on peasant food culture.

The composition of the collection is not really suitable for contemporary research either. Despite the presence of contemporary objects, there is no coherent concept of collecting and assembling behind them.

This is not to say, of course, that the objects in the food collection cannot serve as a basis for object biographies or the study of a particular group of objects in connection with food culture. The new Collection Exhibition of the Museum of Ethnography provides good examples of using the artefacts of the food collection in order to present life stories of different objects. Here two such objects are considered – a pan for *challah*-making and a pressure cooker.[10]

The pan for making *challah*

The pan for making ***challah*** or braided egg bread, is an indispensable tool in a traditional Jewish household, as it is used every week to prepare for one of the most important celebrations, the Sabbath. At the time of its acquisition by the Museum of Ethnography, its owner was around sixty years old. She had been through the hell of the Auschwitz concentration camp, and had continued her observant Jewish life after returning to her hometown, Munkács.

Between 1991 and 1994, ethnographer Miklós Rékai conducted ethnographical fieldwork in the city of Munkács in the Eastern Carpathian Foothills, among the remaining members of the once-flourishing Jewish community that lived there. In one of the households included in the research, two identical diamond-shaped pans were used for baking the ***challah/berkhes*** (egg bread) for the Sabbath. The owner

10 The life stories of these two objects were studied by Krisztina Sedlmayr for the Collection Exhibition of the Museum of Ethnography.

Fig. 5. The pan for making challah *in the Collection Exhibition, Museum of Ethnography, Budapest. (Photo by Marcell Szász, 2024)*

donated one of them to the museum, keeping the other, and shared her life story and her knowledge of the traditions of her community with the researcher.

The pan was made in the 1930s. The informant's aunt – Auntie Hencsi – had always used this pan for making *challah*. Its shape is unique to the Munkács region and is similar to the specimen pictured in the *Magyar néprajzi atlasz* ('Hungarian Atlas of Ethnography').[11] She had been running a household since the 1950s, and she had inherited the pan from someone else. The family may have bought it originally from itinerant Gypsy craftspeople. At the time of the acquisition, she no longer baked *challah* for each Sabbath, but earlier she had used the pan weekly for this purpose for decades: 'Today you can buy really good *challah* in the store, too', Jewish housewives told the researchers.

The last *challah*-bake in which the pan donated to the Museum was used, was documented by the ethnographer and his photographer companions. The photo series shows the kneading of the dough, the ritual separation of the dough offering, or the *taking of the challah,* the braiding, rising, and the baked bread. Not long after the acquisition, Auntie Hencsi and her husband left Munkács and emigrated to Israel, to the city of Petah Tikva, where many Hungarian Jews had settled.

In the preface to his book, Miklós Rékai explains why the life of the Jewish community of Munkács was an exciting field of inquiry for him. He states: 'As I was connecting with the community as an ethnographer, I was mostly interested in how the set of religious rules of Jewish life contributed to maintaining the group's identity in the face of circumstances that had fundamentally changed [...] this report on contemporary Munkács focuses primarily on the rules and realities of dining.'[12]

Pressure cooker

Helping working women in the household

It does not happen too often that we know the exact date of a mass-produced object. According to its well-preserved user manual, the pressure cooker, or 'speed cooker',

11 Barabás, Jenő ed.: *Magyar Néprajzi Atlasz* ('Hungarian Atlas of Ethnography'), 4. kötet (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1989), 40.

12 Rékai, Miklós: *A munkácsi zsidók 'terített asztala'* ('The laid table of the Jews of Munkács') (Budapest: Osiris, 1997), 7–8.

in question, was made in the Budapest Aluminium Factory in 1958. The pot has a 4-litre capacity, its seal is functional, and cooks or steams food under 2 bars of pressure. The new object type thus assists its user by shortening the time spent on household labour. Its first owner was given the pressure cooker for Christmas in 1958. The grandmother did a lot of good cooking for her family, and her adult children bought the pressure cooker for her at the houseware store located on the ground floor of their apartment building, in the hope that it would make feeding the family of nine somewhat easier for her.

The accomplished housewife, who grew up in Brassó (today: Brașov, Romania) approached the new utensil with some distrust. It was first tested after the Christmas holidays. However, the traditional chicken soup shot out from the overfilled pot through the safety valve and covered the kitchen's surfaces, while the soup in the pot remained cloudy. Grandma never used the pot again.

The gift was set aside until it was passed down to her daughter. As a working woman, with little spare time, she greatly enjoyed using the pot and it got plenty of use until 1979. She cooked in their apartment on Váci Road, even on weekdays, for her husband's sake, who only ate home-cooked food. From the 1960s and 1970s, a number of new tools, appliances, and services, were available to make housework less onerous for the housewife.

The pressure cooker shortened the time it took to prepare foods requiring lengthy simmering, such as beef stews, stuffed meats, game, pig trotters, smoked pork knuckles, smoked ribs, tripe, beans, and lentils. The second owner typically used it to steam meats, but it was also great for cooking the family's favourite fresh corn-on-the-cob dish in mere minutes.

The third owner has been running a household since the early 1980s. She was given the pressure cooker when the family who used it moved to a new home. She found it very useful as previously she had only a smaller pressure cooker with a two-litre capacity, which she received as a wedding gift. The family history of grandmother's overfilled pressure cooker was inadvertently re-enacted with a pot of pig trotters' stew in 1983, leaving indelible marks on the walls of the apartment's kitchen. After that incident, the third owner's husband soldered the pot's valve shut.

She kept using the pressure cooker for another twenty years, into the early 2000s, when it was taken from their Budapest home to the family's weekend cabin on the

Fig. 6. The pressure cooker in the Collection Exhibition, Museum of Ethnograpy, Budapest. (Photo by Marcell Szász, 2024)

banks of the Danube river near Ráckeve. Then her daughter, representing the fourth generation of home cooks, began cooking in it. At the same time, both their households were equipped with newer types of pressure cookers.

The family history of the pressure cooker being passed down between four generations of women associated with the object is conveyed by Ildikó Pirok's detailed and engaging writing. Her narrative details how the new object type was first met with distrust, the initial mishaps around its use, and its later acceptance, its usefulness, its 'golden age', and finally, its retirement. The backdrop to this story is the changing role of women during the 20th century, the challenges of finding a balance between working outside the home and running a household, all presented in a charmingly cheerful manner. It is this story that makes this pot special among the functional objects in the museum. The household item, popular for several decades, now represents the study of everyday urban life of the recent past as a new field of research in ethnography in the Collection Exhibition.

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