

PART V:  
ETHNIC, LOCAL AND  
TRADITIONAL FOOD:  
MEANINGS IN A COMPARATIVE  
PERSPECTIVE



# ANIKÓ BÁTI

## FOOD AS MESSENGER. ON THE EXAMPLE OF SLOVAK CUISINE IN HUNGARY

### ABSTRACT

Food culture has always had a significant role in determining identity and community cohesion. In the process of social discourse about the past, inclusion, and locality, local communities select, reconstruct, and construct their shared food heritage. Elements of traditional peasant life, such as pig slaughtering, take place in a community space, following a re-created scenario. This paper focuses on recent changes in food culture and highlights the heritage practices of food and eating habits in the case of a multi-ethnic settlement in Hungary.

### INTRODUCTION

Food and eating habits act as a message that is easily understood by everyone.<sup>1</sup> They are a link between the past and the present. In my study, I wish to present the activities of Slovak tradition bearers in Hungary in the context of food culture, highlighting their food-heritage<sup>2</sup> programme – the pig slaughter – as an example of the preservation and transmission of knowledge that works well for community building.

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1 Anikó Bati ORCID: 0000-0002-7615-4044. Reference to this study: Anikó, Bati: Food as Messenger. On the Example of Slovak Cuisine in Hungary. In Anikó Bati 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. 353–366.

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2 Carr, Gilly – Sørensen, Marie L.S. and Rose, Dacia Viejo: 'Food as Heritage', in Lightfoot, E. – Liu, X. and Fuller, D.Q. eds.: *Far from the Hearth: Essays in Honour of Martin K. Jones* (Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2018), 145–151. <<https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.38309>> accessed 28 April 2025; Di Giovine, Michael A. and Brulote, Ronda L.: *Edible Identities. Food as Cultural Heritage* (Farnham, Surrey – Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2014).

Csömör, an ethnically and religiously diverse village near Budapest, in Pest County, Hungary, is only one kilometre distant from the 16th district of the city. It is one of the largest villages in Hungary. Its population has doubled in the last twenty-five years (currently over 10,000 inhabitants) as a result of migration to the area due to its proximity to the capital, Budapest. The coexistence of Slovak and German nationalities, and the increase in the number of Hungarians over the centuries, has led to specific cultural interactions. At the same time, both the Slovaks and the Germans have each preserved their language, their traditional costumes, and their Roman Catholic and Evangelical religions, respectively, as well as many elements of their traditional eating habits. It is a fascinating task to explore how food and food preparation interact in community organisation and in the shaping of identity.

The work of the tradition bearers of the 'House of Our Tót Traditions'<sup>3</sup> in Csömör, which is the focus of this study, is remarkable for its role in local community life. There are a number of other civil society organisations in the village that build on cultural resources, but the 'House of Our Tót Traditions' is notable for its organisational activities, programmes, and network of contacts. In addition to hosting spectacular festive events such as weddings and Easter sprinkling,<sup>4</sup> the group has also revived the tradition of pig slaughtering, involving staged performances in original folk costumes and using traditional tools. It has 120 members. It has been working continuously since 2006. Its programmes are based on the Slovak traditions of Csömör. However, its members are not only Slovaks from Hungary, but can include anyone interested in community life. From taking part in cultural competitions to the making of traditional jam, the members organise almost 100 events a year. The traditional group is made up of people of all ages, dressed in colourful folk costumes, all of whom can learn the traditions again and, driven by nostalgia, experience the revival of some of the elements of the peasant way of life.

As research fellows at the Institute of Ethnology, HUN-REN (ELTE from August 2025) Research Centre for the Humanities, in Budapest, my colleague, Katalin Juhász, and I are investigating food and heritage practices in relation to local and ethnic identity in Csömör, with a focus on these Slovak tradition bearers of the

3 The adjective 'Tót' is the equivalent of the Slovakian ethnonym that is used here among the Slovaks living in Hungary. Gyivicsán, Anna: *Anyanyelv, kultúra, közösség. A magyarországi szlovákok* ('Mother tongue, culture, community. Slovaks in Hungary') (Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány, 1993), 55.

4 Easter sprinkling tradition in Hungary: on Easter Monday, the boys used to sprinkle the girls with water – nowadays they do so with perfume – as a health magic tradition. In return, the girls give them decorated eggs.

'House of Our Tót Traditions'.<sup>5</sup> The central question of our work is what motivates their efforts to preserve and create traditions, and how does the fading peasant past become an identity-forming factor in the life of the local community – which is growing in numbers and becoming more colourful.<sup>6</sup> As participant observers, we attended several of the traditional group's annual events and interviewed members of, and visitors to, the programmes. Using Christopher Ray's culture-economy model, we analyse how cultural resources are used to build community and to strengthen local identity.<sup>7</sup>

## THE SLOVAK MINORITY IN HUNGARY

In the Middle Ages, the Slovaks lived in a large part of the northern, high mountainous, forested region, of the Kingdom of Hungary. Their main occupation was animal husbandry. From the end of the 18th century, due to several waves of immigration and resettlement, Slovaks and other ethnic groups arrived in present-day Hungary, in the parts of the country reconquered from the Ottoman Empire, thus in previously depopulated but economically more favourable villages. The village of Csömör, for example, was settled by Slovaks and, in the same way, by Germans, also.<sup>8</sup> Later, as a result of internal migration, settlements with a majority Slovak population were established in the central and southern parts of Hungary.

5 Báti, Anikó – Juhász, Katalin – Zentai, Andrea and Vargha, Anita: 'Szlovák hagyományrekonstrukció és örökségesítés Csömörön' ('Heritagisation and the Reconstruction of Slovak Traditions in Csömör'), *Ethno-lore* 36 (2019), 81–122.

6 Báti, Anikó: 'Traditional Food as Cultural Heritage in Hungary', *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 68/2 (2024), 481–498; DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.1556/022.2024.00005>> accessed 28 April 2025.

7 Ray, Christopher: 'Culture, Intellectual Property and Territorial Rural Development', *Sociologia Ruralis* 38/1 (1998), 1. 3–20. <<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9523.00060>> accessed 28 April 2025; see further: Bendix, Regina: 'Tourism and Cultural Displays: Inventing Traditions for Whom?', *The Journal of American Folklore* 102/404 (Apr.–Jun., 1989), 131–146; <<https://doi.org/10.2307/540676>> accessed 28 April 2025. See more: Eitler, Ágnes: 'Az örökség narratívája. Egyéniségek és intézmények, motivációs- és hátráltató tényezők a népi kultúra színpadra állítása mögött' ('The Narrative of Heritage: Individuals and Institutions, Motivating and Hindering Factors behind the Staging of Popular Culture') in Ament-Kovács, Bence and Eitler, Ágnes eds.: *Örökségképzés, kulturális emlékezet, identitás* (Budapest: BTK Néprajztudományi Intézet, 2023), 403–444. (Néprajztudományi Könyvtár 1). <<https://doi.org/10.61380/978-963-567-071-0-09>> accessed 28 April 2025; Eitler, Ágnes and Ament-Kovács, Bence: 'Discourses of Heritagization in East-Central Europe', *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 68/2. (2023) 273–285; DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.1556/022.2024.00020>> accessed 28 April 2025.

8 The Slovaks were in the majority in Csömör until the beginning of the 20th century, when the language change to Hungarian accelerated in parallel with the population increase due to the Hungarian settlement. By 1941, only 6.5% of the 4,000 inhabitants identified themselves as Slovaks, and everyone spoke Hungarian. From the 1980s, the population of the settlement began to grow

In Pest County, Slovak villages do not form a coherent block as they are surrounded by Hungarian villages. This has had a conservative effect on the Slovak minority's language use and culture as a whole, so that archaic features have been preserved for a long time in these contexts. In Csömör, the heritage of some aspects of the Slovak cuisine is derived from the regions of origin of this ethnic group.<sup>9</sup> Thus, cabbage, sauerkraut and potatoes, as well as seasonal vegetables, were important ingredients in their cuisine. Until the middle of the 20th century, meat consumption was relatively low among them. Smoked pork, sausages and bacon were used only as seasoning in everyday dishes. Fresh meat on Sundays and holidays consisted mainly of poultry. The first course, soup, was often seasoned with sour cream and tomato juice. Pasta dishes also consisted mainly of potato noodles. Dumplings, too, were also served as a soup garnish and as a main course. A larger group of courses is made up of dishes and menus adopted from Hungary. These reflect the influence of the surrounding Hungarian and German cuisines – such as pasta made from wheat flour.

As a result of cultural interaction, new ingredients – such as tomatoes in Csömör – have been adopted and incorporated into their Slovak cuisine. For example, Slovaks from Békéscsaba, 200 kilometres southeast of Pest County, who live in the paprika-growing area, jokingly mock the sausages made by Slovaks from the Budapest area: 'This is no sausage!', they say, because they make their own famous sausages, known all over the country, with the much more spicy paprika.

With the nationalist movements that began in the 19th century, the cultural values of minorities in Hungary began to change. This effect was reinforced by the socio-economic and political events that affected the whole country. Changes in language-use and cultural identity were brought about by the institutional system of the state, by the language of administration and of education, and by religious practice. However, despite these factors, few people moved to Czechoslovakia after the First World War.<sup>10</sup>

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again, thanks to the migration of people from Budapest. Today there are almost 11,000 inhabitants in Csömör. See Horváth, Lajos: *Csömör története* ('History of Csömör') (Csömör: Csömör nagyközség Önkormányzatának Képviselő-testülete, 2000).

9 Stolicna, Ratislava: 'Food as an Ethnic-Identity Indicator of the Slovaks in Hungary as Exemplified by Bread', in Lysaght, Patricia ed.: *Food and the Traveller. Migration, Immigration, Tourism and Ethnic Food* (Cyprus: Intercollege Press, 1998), 200–206.

10 Most of the Slovak-speaking territories of the pre-war Kingdom of Hungary were recognised as part of Czechoslovakia.

Intellectual and material traditions can be interpreted in many different ways in the local culture of Csömör. Since the second half of the 20th century, there have been folk music and other groups concerned with the preservation of traditions in Csömör.<sup>11</sup> The colourful folk costumes, and some customs such as Easter sprinkling and wedding ceremonies, already institutionalised as a result of cultural competitions, still remain as cultural events forming part of the staging of folk culture.<sup>12</sup> In folklore groups, people of different faiths have carried out their traditional activities, and still continue to do so, as a united local community. As a result, local identity has become the defining element of individual identity, replacing religious identity.

As part of the political regime-change after the fall of communism (1989), national minority self-governments have been established in Hungary, since 1993. This gave a new impetus to the organisation of local communities for the purpose of identity-building. Thus, central calls for proposals were launched for minorities. These not only provided resources but also addressed the relationship between culture and community. As a result, traditional groups, not only in Csömör, but in all the surrounding settlements inhabited by Slovak minorities, staged elements of traditional peasant life and spectacular displays of folk costumes. The groups have established close links with each other. They have also adopted each other's ideas for revival programmes. One example is the slaughter of pigs carried out in every Slovak village in Pest County every winter.

The basic source of Slovak identity in present-day Hungary is knowledge of their settlement history in the country in the 18th and 19th centuries, the fate of the settlers, and the folk culture they brought with them and which they shaped in their new homeland. This common past is documented in a number of village houses,

11 In the first half of the 20th century, the majority of the inhabitants of Csömör lived from agriculture and intensive horticulture. Proximity to the capital and good transport links not only provided new employment opportunities, but also helped to spread urban culture and lifestyles into Csömör village. At the same time, the ethnic and religious identities of the minorities remained strong.

12 In the 1920s and 1930s, thanks to their favourable income situation, the people who lived from agriculture were able to spend more on clothing. This led to the late flowering of their peasant, rural, and urban culture. The folk costume enriched the image of the settlement. Until the 1950s and 1960s, the majority of Slovak women and girls wore traditional folk costumes. Even today, there are about 20 elderly women who have dressed in folk costume all of their lives. See more: Fülemile, Ágnes: Folk art heritage and tradition in Hungary, in Götz, Eszter ed.: *Hand/Craft/Art. National Salon 2018. Folk Art'* (Budapest: Múcsarnok Nonprofit Kft., 2018), 45–61.; Fülemile, Ágnes, Social Change, Dress and Identity: Observations on the Disintegration of Peasant Culture as Exemplified by Rural Women's Clothing in Hungary from the First World War to the End of the Kádár Era Socialism, *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 65/1 (2020) 107–186. <<https://doi.org/10.1556/022.2020.00007>> accessed 28 April 2025.

historical publications, and cookery books. The spirit of gastro-nationalism is alive and well among Slovaks in Hungary. Today, this knowledge is passed on, not only orally, but also by means of local history and ethnographic events and through school education.

#### PRESERVATION OF TRADITION/TRADITION CREATION AND FOOD HERITAGE IN THE 'HOUSE OF OUR TÓT TRADITIONS'

The reconstruction and renewal of traditions and the creation of new traditions play a special role in the fashioning of the local traditional food heritage. Different generations have different attitudes towards Slovak food. Among the oldest generations, there are still some who have partially preserved and passed on the traditions of the peasants – in their eating habits, for example. Some elderly women frequently prepare nutritious Slovak dishes for their families. Their children and grandchildren also like the old local flavours, but they no longer eat these kind of dishes regularly, since they no longer meet today's nutritional standards. This generation has gradually moved away from the traditional peasant way of life. For them, community life, which reflects the norms and customs of the past, is just an opportunity to experience local customs.

Food also serves as a channel of communication for the Slovakian community in Hungary, and, as a kind of an 'experience of the past', it has become an easily-deciphered and a marketable product of gastronomic tourism, both within the local community and beyond. The traditional group, the 'House of our Tót Traditions', sells Slovakian food at their events in the so-called 'Tót Kitchen', but they also organise canning, jam making, cake baking and pig slaughtering in the village house. The latter (pig slaughtering) is described in more detail here. The products are sold. In this way, the public, including schoolchildren and younger generations, are taught the process and the way of making traditional dishes, thus replacing the organised family setting in which these skills were formerly learned.

The practice of pig slaughter and self-sufficiency in meat consumption survived in most Hungarian villages until the end of the 20th century, but since the 1990s the practice has declined throughout the country. Families have access to a wide range of shops where they can buy pork. At the same time, pig-slaughtering skills are no longer taught to young family members, and many rural households lack tools for meat processing.



Fig. 1. A traditional kitchen with open and closed wood-fired ovens and stoves in House of our Tót Traditions. (Photo by Anikó Báti, Csömör, 2022)



Fig. 2. Traditional costumes appropriate to their work are worn by all generations of the traditional group. The leader gives a toast on the morning of the slaughter of the pigs. (Photo by Anikó Báti, Csömör, 2022)



*Figs. 3, 4. They document their work by filming and photographing it, and teach the younger generation the traditional method of scalding pig's hair. (Photo by Anikó Bati, Csömör, 2022)*

The aim of the regular pig slaughter, called *zabijacska* in Slovak, which has taken place at the 'House of Our Tót Traditions' since 2012, was to enable the group to provide the pork and sausages consumed at its events. The venue was the village house as a 'stage'. At the instigation of the leader of the group, they collected work clothes, tools from the stove, and pots and pans, wooden spoons and sausage stuffing machines, all of which could be used to reconstruct the work processes and methods of pig-slaughtering of past times. The old cooking and baking utensils are not stored and displayed as dead museum objects, but are used for the same culinary tasks as in the past. Thus, today, pigs can be slaughtered, without using plastic bowls or other modern equipment, just the old ones from past times.

The division of labour among the tradition bearers is different from that in a family when the slaughtering of a pig takes place. Under the leadership of the group leader, the work is done by the members of the group who are willing to do so, but not by everyone. There are about 30 people who are active in this regard – those who are free at the required time and want to take part in the event, in whatever task they feel like doing. The leader is responsible for everything. Proper dress, appearance, stage decorum, order of work, personal safety, the documenting of the session, and the selling of the products, are all her concern. The pigs are slaughtered nowadays by an amateur butcher who learnt the skills of butchery, processing and seasoning, from his grandfather. The traditional division of labour between the sexes is also present here: the men do the meat processing and sausage making, while the women cook the evening meal. Many of the younger members of the group help with the washing-up and cooking, while others assist with the serving of the meals or the selling of the products. They are the ones who do not want to do the hard work that the slaughtering entails. They do not like the smell, the grease, or the touch of raw pork, or they do not eat meat at all.

Children who want to take part in the traditions are also involved in these activities, with or without the presence of their parents, depending on their age. As part of the school's traditional activities, the children prepare soup noodles and stuff sausages in pfor the pig slaughter. There are also spectators (10 to 15 people), of all nationalities, from the village, who come to watch passively from a distance and who buy the stuffed cabbage and sausages, but they do not stay long. The sausages are now in demand, as 200 kgs of meat are prepared the day before the pigs are slaughtered, so that the sausages can be sold from the morning of the slaughter.



*Fig. 5. The temporary exhibition in the village house shows different generations of sausage stuffing equipment. (Photo by Anikó Báti, Csömör, 2022)*



*Fig. 6. The butcher and the leader of the traditional group show how the different generations of sausage stuffing equipment were used in the past. (Photo by Anikó Báti, Csömör, 2022)*

The pig-slaughtering event has taken on more and more functions. Apart from the production of food, it is also an opportunity to educate and entertain people, to compare old and new tools and techniques used in the preparation of meat, and to sell products and dishes. Today, the slaughtering is a traditional event, mainly for the local population, but certainly not for the Slovak people only. However, it is not a gastronomic festival in the sense of a tourist destination in itself.

The tradition bearers deliberately document the slaughter activities online with photos and films.<sup>13</sup> In this way, they broaden the circle of people to whom the local traditions are addressed. On the other hand, the images also record the living practice of traditions in the way they are organised, planned, and implemented. However, staging also implies limitations. In the course of the planned and staged event, only those details of the session that are considered spectacular are presented in detail to the audiences. For example, the beginning of the public part of the pig slaughter is marked by the actors changing into their traditional costumes at the start of the process.

However, the slaughter, organised as a spectacle and as a community event, can no longer, in the absence of personal links and regular reinforcement, replace the transmission of traditional knowledge within the family. It is only at the weekend that members of the tradition bearers' group dress up in their traditional costumes and perform traditional peasant customs on the 'stage,' so to speak. During the week, consumer society norms prevail and food is bought rather than produced.

The way pigs are slaughtered in Csömör, the tools that are used, and the working process involved, are not specific to the area, as pig slaughtering is also carried in a similar manner in other parts of the country. In the 20th century, based on practices learnt from German professional butchers, the way pigs are processed was standardised throughout the country. But, actually, this process fits in well with the tradition bearers' programmes as part of the traditional peasant way of life, and act as an easily understood signal that brings the ideal of peasant self-sufficiency within reach, and which is associated with a number of popular dishes.

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13 See also <[https://www.facebook.com/csomoritotok/?locale=hu\\_HU](https://www.facebook.com/csomoritotok/?locale=hu_HU)> accessed 28 April 2025.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the customs, norms and objects of rural living are no longer very much alive in the everyday life of families, so that in many cases the elements presented here cannot be regarded as an organic continuation of earlier practices. Events that strengthen identity and build community, are organised beyond of the household and involve the entire local community. This represents the rural idyll and functions as a central element of the cultural economy, while also enhancing the value of the locality. Traditions have different meanings for members of each generation of the group and different meanings for locals outside of the group. For some, they are authentic Slovak traditions, but the older people know that not everything was as the group presents it today. For outsiders, on the other hand, the whole programme is interpreted as a custom linked to the village of Csömör, with little emphasis being placed on the national or religious background. Unlike the folk costumes and festivals, the process of slaughtering, and the tools used, are no longer ethnically specific to Csömör. Tradition bearers have managed to adapt the procedure in such a way that, in the face of globalisation and urbanisation, it is successfully staged as a community-building event that evokes the peasant past. In this process, food is presented as an easily understandable message that is communicated between the performers and the audience.

The leader of the Slovak tradition bearers plays an important role. She is also the organiser and leader of this process, which goes beyond the individual and kinship, and which is not only a tourist attraction, but also part tradition-preserving and part tradition-making.<sup>14</sup> The interpretation and the steps of heritage building, i.e. how the local heritage is created, can be well understood through her work (e.g. the procurement of elements from the past, the financial and human resources necessary to prepare the training and the presentation of the customary act).

The group of tradition bearers studied has carried a piece of the past of peasant and national culture, still accessible in memory, into the present, and incorporated it into their present living conditions through the representation of heritage. They have socialised a piece of the past, further strengthening their own local and Slovak ties

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14 See more: Eitler, Ágnes, *Az örökség narratívája. Egyéniségek és intézmények, motivációs- és hátráltató tényezők a népi kultúra színpadra állítása mögött*, ('The Narrative of Heritage: Individuals and Institutions, Motivating and Hindering Factors behind the Staging of Popular Culture') in Ament-Kovács, Bence, and Eitler, Ágnes, eds., *Örökségképzés, kulturális emlékezet, identitás*, (Budapest: BTK Néprajztudományi Intézet, 2023.), 403–444. (Néprajztudományi Könyvtár 1). <<https://doi.org/10.61380/978-963-567-071-0-09>> accessed 28 April 2025.

and their sense of belonging. This can be used to build a sustainable future based on local resources.

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