

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF TRADITIONAL GIFT SHOPS IN SLOVAKIA

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Less than a hundred steps separate the Main Square from the Hviezdoslavovo Square. Nevertheless, a visitor of the old-town of Bratislava walks past a restaurant that promotes Slovak specialties, two fast-food restaurants, and a couple of gift shops which offer T-shirts and bags of the various colors presenting the capital of Slovakia as “Party-slava” or “Bar-tislava”.

Given the fact that I have spent all my childhood and adolescence in Bratislava, it does not come as a surprise that I found many people who thought the character of the place has rapidly changed in the last decade. A great portion of small local stores has been replaced by the gift shops that nowadays line the city. Thinking about the town as a place that today highly attracts tourists through its souvenirs, I wished to look at tourism in Slovakia and find out to what extent the gift shops represent authenticity and “tradition” in their products and goods. Simultaneously, I was interested in what it actually means to “be authentic” and according to what criteria the authenticity of the object is judged. However, during my stay in Bratislava, as a result of the circumstances of fieldwork, I reformulated the core of my thesis. Although I will briefly address the foreigners and their visits in the gift shops, the main anthropological focus here will be on what motivates Slovaks to sell and buy commodities made in Slovakia.

The objectives of my project changed after realizing the limitations of time. As recognized during my fieldwork, tourism, and its purchases in the gift shops are affected by various factors, such as the location of gift shops, weather, or the reason behind the visit to Slovakia itself. These factors led to a deeper understanding of tourism in Slovakia; but such an understanding could not be explored in full depth over the period of two weeks. Hence, the research conducted over this period of time rather reflects the views of natives. Moreover, the views of natives stimulated my interest to study the country of my origin from an anthropological viewpoint and challenge the biases that I may have as a Slovak studying Slovak culture.

The great measure of my ethnographic encounter was conducted with the cooperation of the Centre for Folk Art Production, more commonly known in Slovakia as *Ústredie ľudovej umeleckej výroby* (ÚĽUV). Since 1954, ÚĽUV runs under the aegis of Ministry of Culture and is responsible for the documentation of traditional crafts, folk production, and care of collections (ÚĽUV 2014). It issues professional publications and journals regarding craft. Furthermore, ÚĽUV is responsible for the organization of exhibitions, festivals and presentations. Through its crafting classes it promotes folk art to the general public. As stated on ÚĽUV's official website (2014), the main purpose of organization is to conserve, document and promote the knowledge and skills of folk art production and thus preserve them for future generations.

Over the period of one week, I assisted as a volunteer in one of the ÚĽUV's shops. The store is located at the periphery of the town center and is designed as a small gallery. It was explained to me that 'every three months the gallery-shop represents the folklore from different regions' (Andrea). So the goods presented change depending on the region it represents. For example, until the mid-20th century agriculture and livestock prevailed as a form of labor in the region of *Liptov*. The culture of *Liptov* was influenced by pasturage. The way people dressed depended upon the region where they lived, what environment they were surrounded by and what material was available (Liptov 2014). This understanding of separate regions plays a crucial role in the ÚĽUV's shops. It increases the authenticity of objects through demonstrating certain commodities that fit into particular regions. Moreover, such an arrangement of gallery-shop allows presenting of different faces of Slovakia.

Despite the fact that ÚĽUV presents its gallery-shops as authentic, traditional and 'rich for various forms of folk art' (ÚĽUV 2014), the majority of people who come to the stores are Slovaks. According to sale-assistants working in it, it is because the shop is situated outside the touristic routes and thus is known only to those who live in Bratislava.

'This part of the city does not attract tourists by any historical monuments or tourist attractions, not even by shopping malls. However, all the other gift shops offering fridge magnets are located in the heart of city center. The majority of

gift shops might be found on the squares that are very busy over the day'
(Andrea)

Apart from location, the visit rate also depends on weather. 'When the weather is beautiful the visit rate increases. Nevertheless, the majority of people are Slovaks' (Mrs. Habermanová). Why is it like that?

According to Zajonc, a Slovak ethnologist, folk production has departed from its 'archaic forms of production and consumption in the period of postwar modernization' (Makovicky 2009: 44). The folk production no longer has to conform to the 'collective norms' of village society. Instead, a craft activity has become a hobby. As stated by Zajonc, this decontextualization of folk production is the result of modernity. Modernity reduced traditional commodities from a functional to a decorative form. Traditional production has changed from 'a viable economic activity' to 'an expression of cultural belonging' (Makovicky 2009: 44).

During my time in the shop, a man entered the store and went straight ahead to the part of the room where *fujara*¹ were. He carefully chose one of *fujara* while appreciating the shape and decorative ornaments on each flute.

'Man: It is a beautiful sound and I am glad that I still know how to play it.

Me: Do you no longer play the *fujara*?

Man: No, I do not. I used to play when I was a pupil in elementary school. Now I am 50 years old and play the different types of flute. I play the Native American flute.

Me: Why do you no longer play?

Man: It is not as typical as before, only in the county of Levice. You know, this age is more oriented on money and business. I will not earn enough money by playing the *fujara*. It is not what it used to be.'

¹ *Fujara* is an over five feet long folk shepherd's overtone fipple flute, mostly cherished in the seclusion of Slovakian mountains.

As this illustration shows, the *fujara*'s importance is in its function to earn money. When the flute player was a pupil, the *fujara* was a traditional music instrument. It was traditional in the sense that it could earn enough money for the player. Nowadays, playing the *fujara* is 'an emotional experience' (Makovicky 2009: 46). It evokes the feelings of nostalgia and personal memories related to cultural appreciation. However, due to reduction of the instrument's functionality to hobby through modernization processes, the part of the traditional culture is also lost (Sahlins 2005: 44).

The cultural appreciation is present in the case of woman who came to the shop with the intention to buy a traditional folk costume. Although the common use of the national costume has disappeared with a shift from rural areas to urban centers (Piroch 1988: 65), she decided to buy her two year-old granddaughter a folk costume. When I asked her why she did not buy her a doll or a coloring book, she answered that she loved the traditional culture of Slovakia.

'I love everything that is handmade in Slovakia. I have already bought my grandsons two folk costumes that present the beauty of region of Detva' (The folk costume lover)

Apart from that, the "folk costume lover" makes *drôtené ozdoby*, the jewelry made of wire-like material. 'I make "wire jewelry" in my leisure time. I am in retirement. Hence, I make jewelry for myself and for my friends.' This example illustrates a reason behind entering the ÚĽUV's shop. As Slovak walking in to the shop with Slovak goods and production, she expresses her personal and emotional bond with Slovakia.

As I have observed during my time spent in the ÚĽUV's shop, the main motivation behind entering the store was in cultural recognition and a sense of belonging. The customers who usually bought something mostly people in their forties and fifties who experienced Slovakia in way that, today, is presented by ÚĽUV. This acknowledgment that the folk production is perceived more as a symbol of culture provoked my questions further. Who and for what reason wants to produce the objects that are unable to compete commercially with mass-produced goods?

According to a potter Juraj Maco, 'one who makes pottery, does not make it to become rich. One makes it because he is passionate about it' (Ševčíková 2013: 7). Such a view repeatedly supports the image of folk culture as hobby more than economic activity. Moreover, 'those who make handcrafted works are usually retirees. If they are not, they handcraft in addition to their jobs' (Andrea). Generally, everyone can be a contributor to the folk production; rules only exist when one wants to contribute particularly to ÚĽUV.

'Everyone who wishes can contribute. However, in order to become an official manufacturer for ÚĽUV, one's work has to be approved by art commission. The commission meets twice a week. Moreover, the craftsman is only paid for the goods sold.' (Mrs.Habermanová)

The art commission approves the manufacturer on the basis of his work, its authenticity and its traditional character. Authenticity is assessed on the basis of the material and ornaments used. Hence, authenticity is not only assessed on the criteria of function, but also on the aesthetic aspects of objects (ÚĽUV 2014). Nevertheless, it does not mean that all handmade artifacts are monotonous. Despite the fact that items are crafted in a certain way according to a specific method and certain decorative patterns remain, the artifacts maintain their uniqueness. 'Each handcrafter manifests his particular manuscript' (Ševčíková 2013: 7). Despite that the inspiration for ornaments is gained from other pieces of art of the same kind, the patterns are conformed to the manufacturer's possibilities and abilities (Chruščová 2013: 19). The manufacturer modifies the artifacts to fit into his ideas and vision. Such modification does not threaten the authenticity and traditions. On the contrary, it represents the people of Slovakia and their views on the Slovak folklore.

The second part of my fieldwork was carried out in the downtown of Bratislava in *Obchod v Múzeu*. The name of the shop may be translated to English as "the Shop in the Museum". The name conforms to the initial idea behind the store's foundation.

'I and Mrs. Ševcová were born here in Bratislava. We were born and lived here. We are Bratislavans. However, over the time this city has changed rapidly. For

that reason, we decided to establish this shop and through that to experience the city once again the way we knew it.' (The shop owner)

As a result, *Obchod v Múzeu* was established in one part as shop and the other part as museum exhibiting cash machines dating back to the beginning of 20th century, sets of old advertising posters and furniture that belonged to the standard equipment of the shop in the early century. Such an arrangement of the shop creates a unique character. It not only attracts customers by the variety of the goods but also by the exhibition that presents one aspect of life in the early 20th century.

The store has been established in a lucrative location just a few meters from the Main Square and surrounded by a large number of restaurants and coffee shops. As a consequence, the shop appeals to a high number of tourists from all around the world, including Malaysia, Japan, Greece and the United States. After accessing the shop, the tourists may come into close contact with Slovak culture through the opportunity to taste local wines and traditional Bratislava's rolls². Despite this great mixture of nationalities that visit *Obchod v Múzeu* daily and the initial idea to study the pattern of these visits, my observations will once more draw the attention on Slovaks and their motivations behind selling and buying Slovak products.

As already indicated, the idea regarding the store's establishment was based on the love for the city. While ÚĽUV built its basis on the notions of tradition and in an effort to look at the Slovak culture in a broader scope, *Obchod v Múzeu* takes the role of a tool that enables people to experience "old Bratislava".

'Before the Velvet Revolution, Bratislava was full of life. It used to be a place offering a number of possibilities to satisfy one's own social life and needs. The coffee house, restaurants or even civic theaters were everywhere. *Korzo* used to be the place where boys were meeting with their girlfriends or friends. It was a core of social life and of first contact. However, revolution brought change. The new age pushed people out of the city center to the periphery of the shopping

² Bratislava's rolls are rolls filled with walnut and poppy seed filling.

malls. As a result, the life in the city center died out. Our shop is the way to bring social life back to the downtown.’ (The shop owner)

Both shop owners declared ‘a lifelong passion for the city’ (Reed 2002: 127). Through their revelations they express certain attitudes and expose the particular attributes they assigned to the city. Bratislava ‘is not just a place, it is a kind of being’ (Reed 2002: 127). Like a living organism, it is ‘growing, declining and decaying’ (Reed 2002: 127). The remark about the lifeless city center supports this personification of Bratislava. Furthermore, the decline of Bratislava’s social life is attributed to modernity. As already expressed through the example of ÚĽUV, modernity is understood as a loss of one’s culture. In this case, modernity is seen as the cause of the city’s changed character.

As expressed by another Bratislavan:

‘Life in the city was not as consumable as it is now. There were lots of small grocery stores, local butcher's and apartment houses in which people could live. Nowadays, the city is crowded by banks and offices. It used to be local-oriented, today is everything tourist-oriented. However, what will these contemporary gift shops tell you about Bratislava or Slovakia? What will you learn about Bratislava when looking at the glittery T-shirt or fridge magnet?’ (Maria)

With regard to the views, Bratislava could be considered as a culturally significant arena for expressing the changes that are taking place in contemporary urban Slovakia. These changes might be defined by “exchange and dialogue, where global and local, tradition and modernity, past and present merge (Favero 2003:554).” Furthermore, the dialogue permits new identifications and positioning that are produced whilst being continually redefined (Favero 2003:554).

Obchod v Múzeu may be understood within this context of constant change and recontextualization. Taking into account the notions held about Bratislava and its character, *Obchod v Múzeu* can be seen not only as a gift shop established for tourists but within a larger context it can be regarded as a bridge that connects Bratislavans with their hometown. It might project a certain vision of Bratislava as well as bring back the character

of “old Bratislava” that people are missing (Reed 2002: 127). Not only does this place offer the taste of local products and of life in the early 20th century, it is also a place where people can meet up, socialize and reminisce. While conducting my encounter, a family accessed the shop with intention to buy *Pischinger Torte*³ named after an Austrian pastry chef of 19th century whose fame reached Bratislava (then known as Presburg). The woman, who was delighted by cake, revealed how she and her family used to buy the cake in Vienna when the borders were opened after the Velvet Revolution and eventually started buying it again in Bratislava because ‘this torte is not factory-produced. It is made according to a traditional recipe.’ As this story illustrates, *Obchod v Múzeu* is a space where the customers can freely share their memories and opinions with others.

By doing my fieldwork in my hometown, I have learned a lot about Bratislava, its character, people, and traditions. First, it came as a challenge to separate myself and my ideas from what I could learn and find out in the gift shops, but in the end it left me more knowledgeable. Working in ÚĽUV gave me a general view on Slovak culture, its folk art traditions and craftsmen. It presented Slovakia to me, through the eyes of the manufacturers’ and visitors’, as a place where modernity meets with tradition and past with present. Such an understanding of culture explored the close relationship between manufacturer and purchaser in terms of nostalgia, and feelings of cultural belonging the manufacturer evokes through the object. Secondly, the fieldwork allowed me to look at the gift shops within the context of urban anthropology. It allowed me to relate the passion for Slovak products and traditions with the sentiment for the town. That sentiment gave me space to explore the relationship between the buyers and the city.

³ Pishinger Torte is a kind of cake made of layers of chocolate sponge, hazelnut buttercream and hazelnut meringue. Altogether it creates a soft and slightly crunchy texture with just a hint of Baileys liqueur. All is covered with a light chocolate glaze.

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