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GENUINE OR ARTIFICIAL HOMELAND

THE FORMATION OF SLOVAK NATIONAL IDENTITY

The transformation of traditional ethnic groups into modern nations and development of national identities is a universal process. The most fascinating aspect of it is that it was different and took a different form for each ethnia. That is why the mosaic is so colourful. Below I present the basic notions on which the modern national identity of the Slovak people is founded. In the case of Slovakia the main role was played by the intelligentsia who laid the theoretical foundations for the nation and made them appealing to the people.

The first tendencies appeared at the end of the 18th century. The Enlightenment generation made the first attempt to codify the Slovak language and to formulate the concept of national history; it was then that the first Slovak associations and periodicals in the native tongue were established. European Romanticism was the first to perceive and define humankind as a community of separate nations and human culture as a product of many national cultures. Europe was atomizing, separating into individual national entities, and potential was released for the emergence of both noble ideals and national egoisms and conflicts. The Slovaks were also progressively forming a complex identity. The greatest achievements in this field were those of the intelligentsia generation of Ján Kollár, Slavist Pavol Jozef Šafárik and poet Ján Hollý.

Drawing largely on the works by German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), they began to perceive the nation

as a sanctified value, one which should be revered, protected and developed. According to them, each nation had its own unique identity (the national spirit, to use the then terminology) and formed its own distinctive culture. They respected the lower classes as those who created precious values, so they admired folk culture, which they took to be the most important attribute of the nation along with the language. They started not only to promote but also to study folk culture. Šafárik and Kollár published the first collection of Slovak folk songs already in the 1820s. These were followed by the publication of folk and fairy tales and ballads.

National identity was formed also on the basis of other elements, mostly historical tradition, images, stereotypes, symbols, myths and ideology. Slovaks were represented as a hard-working, peace-loving nation which had lived under oppression for a thousand years; in short, a historic narrative was developed for the nation in the making. All national interpretations emphasised the rich and glorious past of the nation, as opposed to the contemporary oppression and humiliation it suffered. At the same time the stronger national movements started to 'privatise' historical dynastic state entities, appropriating them for their own national states. Hungarian patriots viewed the multinational Kingdom of Hungary as the country for Hungarians and excluded Slovaks from that heritage, as a result of which the attitude of the Slovak intelligentsia towards the Kingdom of Hungary was increasingly



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ambivalent. Although throughout the 19th century they still considered the Kingdom of Hungary the Slovak homeland and saw their future in it, yet they put on 'national glasses' and began to adjust their approach according to the current situation of the Slovaks and the idea of equal rights for all nations. They particularly emphasised the merits of the Slovaks in the making of the history of the Kingdom of Hungary and accentuated those moments in the past when Slovak lands were close to gaining independence (especially the 11th century, the time of the Principality of Nitra, and the beginning of the 14th century, when the ruthless oligarch Máté Csák of Trencin captured and ruled the northern part of the Kingdom of Hungary). Gradually, critical voices were heard, claiming that

Ján Hollý (1785-1849)



the Kingdom of Hungary was 'a stepmother' rather than 'motherland', an oppressor of the Slovaks. However, the extreme approach, which negated *Uhersko* as the Slovaks' homeland, was adopted only at stalemate situations (in 1849 or during World War I).

In a reaction to the attempts to 'Magyarise' the history of the Kingdom of Hungary the patriotic Slovak society began to look to the 9th century state of Great Moravia as the foundation for Slovak history. Svatopluk I was the ruler who inspired the greatest admiration and it was no coincidence that at the end of the 18th century his first, clearly idealised, image was created. Also,

the apostles of Christianity, Saints Cyril and Methodius, were revered and memorable sites connected with Great Moravia: Devín castle or the cities of Nitra and Bratislava were held in high esteem.

We have now reached the subject of national symbols which were crucial for self-identification. The symbols were commonly understood and appealed to emotions, and in this way they could reduce or completely eradicate social, regional or religious differences within a given nationality, and at the same time they could strengthen the feeling of belonging and unity. In other words, they were an integrating force within the nation and a disintegrating one for the neighbouring states. In Slovak culture, scenes from everyday life of the rural community, especially the shepherds, were often elevated to the status of national symbols. An embodiment of heroism was mainly Juraj Jánošík, who was so highly praised by the 19th century literature that he changed from a folk hero into one of the most lasting national symbols. Another mythical figure, besides the legendary Jánošík, was the mountain shepherd. With the passage of time the characters (mainly Jánošík, the outlaw and the shepherd) started to mingle and features of one were taken over by the other. Out of this syncretism originated a world of ideal heroes, endowed with the noblest attributes and virtues. Other folkloristic phenomena were also strongly marked identity-wise. They were mostly connected with the mountain dwellers environment, and included folk costumes, songs, dances, wooden cottages,

long shepherds' pipes and the most common dishes (halushky or ewes' milk cheese). In the eyes of the romantics even nature could not be perceived as neutral; it was regarded as a precious value which faithfully reflected the character of the nation. Slovak patriots praised the most typical signs of Slovakness and so, quite logically, they had to elevate the Tatras to the status of one of the most suggestive Slovak symbols. Climbs were organized to the top of Mt Kriváň, one of the highest peaks in the Tatras. In the 1830s these expeditions were undertaken only by groups of national enthusiasts, while at the beginning of the 20th century – by hundreds of people. They were demonstrations of national unity and pride. Their itineraries and destinations resembled those of religious processions rather than standard trips.

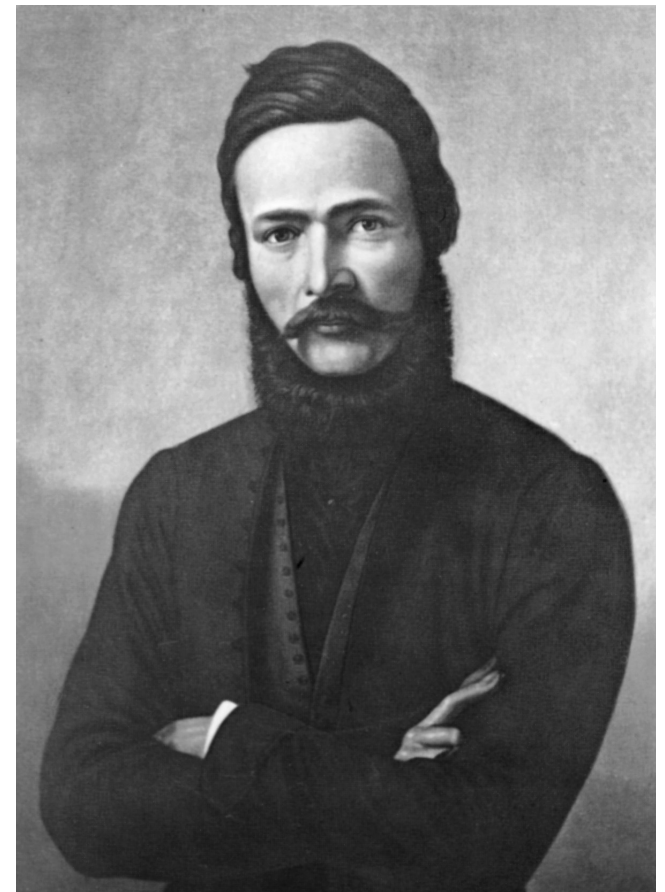
Romantic patriots associated the concept of a nation with other phenomena, as well. Territory was considered its other attribute. In the case of Slovakia, the dichotomy of home country and homeland emerged the earliest. Ján Kollár was the first to introduce the division, since he referred to the state (the Kingdom of Hungary) as a false homeland, and the nation – as the true one. In this way he encouraged a personal relation to one's ethnic territory and emphasised the need to clearly define it. It was an extremely complex issue because Slovakia had been an integral part of the Kingdom of Hungary for centuries. Romantics, however, went even further and added another thesis. They ceased to consider the traditional dynastic politics as a guar-

antee of the freedom of the nation. Instead, they saw the promise of it solely in their own national policy, representation and statehood. The connection between a nation and its territory, politics and national statehood was a completely new element in European political thinking. In the 1840s practically all national movements in Central Europe showed political ambitions. The young generation of Slovak patriots, called Štúrovce after their leader Ľudovít Štúr, was no exception here. Their achievement was the specification of the content of the Slovak national identity and improvement of the quality of Slovak culture. Representatives of that generation emphasized the nation's uniqueness (distinctiveness), broadened the store and scope of symbols, and tried to lay foundations for national art and music. They could, albeit modestly, project their activities in the public space (walks to Devín). However, such initiatives appealed only to a small section of the patriots' community, while the national movement aimed to spread their ideas and ideals to the whole Slovak society and achieve a unity of emotions, ideas and interests in this way. That is why the Štúrovce generation got involved in public affairs. Not having adequate means at their disposal, they chose the grassroots way: journalism, education, theatre and associations. First and foremost, they focused on improving the standard of life and national emancipation of the lower and middle social strata (literacy tuition, campaigns against alcohol abuse or for the establishment of small firms). Emancipation of craftsmen, peasants and merchants was seen

as a way to strengthen the national movement itself. Slovak politics took the first steps in that direction in the 1840s. Apart from numerous petitions demanding protection of the Slovaks' linguistic rights, speeches made by Štúr at the Diet of the Kingdom of Hungary at the turn of 1847-1848 are notable for their social and economic claims, which in fact were not contrary to the calls for reform made by Hungarian insurgents. Štúr was the first MP to urge legalisation of the Slovak language in lower level institutions and demanded that certain subjects be taught in Slovak at high schools. These activities were a kind of dress rehearsal before the events of 1848-1849, which simultaneously raised high expectations and posed threats.

In March 1848 inhabitants of Central Europe were drawn into politics and politics began to permeate the whole sphere of public life. In the Kingdom of Hungary, as elsewhere in the area, serfdom was abolished, the principle of all citizens' equality before the law was proclaimed, constitutional monarchy was introduced and the prerogatives of the Kingdom of Hungary were extended in proportion to those of the central institutions in Vienna. Demands made by national movements from the Baltic to the Mediterranean were radicalising, and now included independent statehood. The great movements strove to restore Germany, Italy, Poland, a radical faction of Hungarian politicians demanded independence for Hungary, while 'small' nations were trying to stay within the Habsburg empire, albeit in the

form of a federal union, which was supposed to guarantee each nation its autonomy. In May 1848 the Slovak national movement also showed separatist ambitions, but it was one of the weaker political forces. In the document titled *Žiadosti slovenského národa* (*Demands of the Slovak Nation*) the authors called for universal suffrage and transformation of the Kingdom of Hungary into a federation within which Slovakia would constitute an autonomous region. In September 1848 the Slovak national movement even started an uprising, in the course of which Slovakia publicly proclaimed its autonomy within the Kingdom of Hungary. That short-lived and unsuccessful military effort was an episode in the civil war which had broken out in the Kingdom of Hungary. In addition, a conflict arose between the imperial Vienna and



Ľudovít Štúr (1815-1856)

The seal of the Slovak National Council (Vienna, 1848)
with the Cross of Lorraine on three peaks

Below: The Cross of Lorraine at Slovak euro coin of
2 euros



revolutionary Pest. As Vienna's ally, the Slovak movement altered its state programme. Throughout 1849 it opted for Slovakia's secession from the Kingdom of Hungary and the formation of a Slovak kingdom subordinate to the imperial institutions in Vienna.

Although imperial politics rejected the federal programme, the years 1848-1849 greatly contributed to the consolidation and extension of all nations' identity. Within

the two years practically all social classes and regions in Hungary assumed Hungarian identity. A similar tendency can be observed among the Slovaks. Their memory was reinforced by the political and military experience. The Slovak cause was perceived as a state law issue and propagated across the whole Central Europe. The territory and borders of Slovakia were gradually delineated, its capital was discussed (the most often mentioned name was Banská Bystrica), the national representation was forming, and the first political organ was established. The Slovak national movement was able to openly present its goals for the first time and sought social support for them. The symbols of present-day Slovakia appeared on the political scene. The Lorraine double cross on a blue mountain consisting of three peaks, which had for centuries been a part of the emblem of the Kingdom of Hungary and represented Upper Hungary that roughly corresponded to the present-day territory of Slovakia, acquired a new meaning. The emblem transformed from a mere sign of territory and state into a national symbol of the Slovaks. It was used by the Slovak National Council, which was established in Vienna in September 1848 and which led the first military effort of the Slovaks. In 1863 the sign became the emblem of the Slovak Motherland (*Matica slovenská*) organisation. Slovak politicians sought to make it the officially recognized emblem of Slovakia but the attempts failed. It was not until after 1918 that it became a part of the emblem of Czechoslovakia. The origin of the Slovak

national flag is also connected with 1848. In spring 1918 white and red flags fluttered in many Slovak towns but since autumn that year Slovak volunteers fought under the tricoloured flag (white and blue and red), which was to become the official banner of Slovakia. Although the Slovak anthem *Over the Tatras* was composed by the students of the Evangelical lyceum in Prešporok (present-day Bratislava) in 1844 in protest over the removal of *Ludovít Štúr* from his teaching position at the school, it was not publicly performed until 1848-1849. Its fast rhythm and references to solidarity and resistance to oppression made it easy for the Slovak volunteers who fought in the imperial army to identify with it. Even though Slovak patriots took a considerable liking to other such songs, this was the future Slovak part of the anthem of the new state of Czechoslovakia.

Another important period for identity formation of Central European nations were the 1860s. After the introduction of the constitutional system, the national cause returned with increased force. In the Kingdom of Hungary Croat, Serbian, Romanian and Slovak national movements revived their autonomist programmes of 1848. Slovak politicians who had started to prepare ground in the public minds demanded that Slovakia become an autonomous state within the Kingdom of Hungary. Slovak culture began to flourish in the more favourable conditions. The emperor allowed the Slovaks to establish the Slovak Motherland which rose to the status of a national symbol as the

first officially recognised Slovak organisation. Since then economic associations were set up, many Slovak secondary schools were opened, the theatre buzzed with activity, more and more newspapers and magazines were published, and painting and music were taking the first promising steps. Slovak cultural events were held in public space. The most important of these were: the great political gathering in Martin in 1861, grand celebrations of the thousandth anniversary of the arrival of Saints Cyril and Methodius in the Great Moravian state, annual conventions of the Slovak Motherland and many other ceremonies. The centre of Slovak life became the little town of Turčiansky Svätý Martin, where the first buildings to serve the purposes of Slovak culture were erected. This auspicious tendency was curbed just after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867. The compromise resulted in a major change in the Kingdom of Hungary. Hungarian elites started to enthusiastically transform the multinational state into a national state, and Magyarisation became one of their key political aims. Owing to the generous financial support of the state, public space and schools were overridden by Hungarian symbols, Hungarian historical narrative, heroes, language, associations and celebrations. The Hungarians experienced wide-ranging cultural development, while the Slovak society and its culture found themselves in a difficult situation. The social structure was significantly disturbed: the nobility and a part of the wealthy and well-educated stratum yielded to definite Magyarisation, and the

Slovak nation began to be identified almost exclusively with the rural community. Political issues and cultural achievements of the Slovaks were held in contempt and as such were shifted to the margins of public life, losing the dynamics they had had previously. Slovak secondary schools were closed down, primary schools were Magyarised, and, apart from very few exceptions, Slovak cultural initiatives disappeared from public space. Only a small group of the intelligentsia created and promoted Slovak culture but its recipients were usually only members of the patriotic circles. The gap between the strong identity of the elite and low national awareness of the Slovak society itself widened as a result of exposure to the overwhelming cultural, linguistic, economic and political influence of the Hungarian environment. The disadvantageous situation also affected the mentality of the Slovak society. Propagation of the negative image of the Slovaks discouraged the Slovak national awareness, lowered their self-esteem and strengthened the feeling of inferiority. The mentality of 500,000 Slovaks residing in the US evolved in an utterly different way. In a free country they rapidly emancipated in terms of civic and national attitudes. No association and no periodical functioned without national symbols, and these institutions were much more numerous than in Slovakia.

The unfavourable conditions changed radically with the formation of Czechoslovakia. If the Hungarians, Czechs, Poles and Croats had already transformed into modern na-

tions in the 19th century, the Slovaks did so only in the 1920s. It was then that the Slovak society actually assumed their national identity. In comparison with the neighbouring nations, the Slovak identity was more closely connected with the folk, rural and mountain environment than with the city, aristocracy, traditions of military struggle etc. The stereotype of the thousand-year-long oppression of the Slovaks was also strong. In general, the modern national identity of the Slovaks formed slowly and with difficulty. The process was hampered both by incomplete integration within the nation and numerous external obstacles. The Slovak society and its elites, however, showed sufficient determination and resistance. It was because of these qualities that the process ended successfully.

Polish translation by Emiliano Ranocchi

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