



Anna Vetraková

AN APPEALING SYMBOL OF SLOVAKIA

An intensive process of the formation of modern national identities began at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. The components of these identities included geographical phenomena. Homeland and its natural environment started to be perceived as unique, which elevated it to the status of a national symbol. In the 19th century one of the main national symbols for the Slovak people were the Tatras.

Numerous other factors contributed to the fact that the Tatras occupied such a prominent position in Slovak culture. From the geographic and symbolic points of view they form a massive range in the Slovak mountain landscape, and as such they were attributed with various qualities: their largeness, indomitableness and magic allure were universally praised. Another reason is connected with the theory of the ethnogenesis of the Slavs. According to it, the ancient homeland of the Slavs was sup-

posed to be in the so-called Tatra (central, Carpathian and Pannonian) region¹. The Slovaks were to be the only ones to remain in that primeval place so they were indigent while other Slavs dispersed into their new future homelands. No wonder that the Tatras became an important sign of ethnic identification which distinguished the Slovaks from among other nationalities, particularly the Hungarians whose territory was predominantly flat, the puszta. The contrast between gigantic mountains and monotonous plains was used as a means to validate the Slovaks' claim for equality in the Kingdom of Hungary. That approach was further strengthened at the time of increasing Magyarisation in the last quarter of the 19th century.

The Tatras had already become a source of inspiration for Romantic artists. Symbol-

¹ Dušan Škvarna, *Začiatky moderných slovenských symbolov*, Banská Bystrica 2004, p. 22.

ism of the Tatras as a whole and of different peaks in particular featured in Slovak music, literary and visual culture. The Tatras are invoked in regional folklore, folk songs and folk tales and influence their immediate surroundings. In highbrow culture writers refer to Slovakia as 'Tatransko' and to Slovaks as 'Tatranec' and emphasise their close relation to the Slavs. That mental shortcut was extreme among Slovak nationalists, for whom not only were the Tatras and 'Tatransko' synonymous with Slovakia but were also considered 'the motherland of all Slavs'.

The motif of the Tatras can be found in the early 19th century writings by eminent Slavist Pavel Jozef Šafárik (1795-1861) or in the texts by the author of the first literary Slovak language standard Anton Bernolák (1762-1813). However, the first to have eulogised the Tatras was Catholic vicar and writer Ján Hollý (1785-1849). In his epic *Svatopluk* he describes the arrival of the

Slavs in this way: 'they progressed with their families as far as the uninhabited Tatras', and in his other work he writes that Cyril and Methodius 'came here to teach the Tatras'. Holly stresses not only the relationship of man and nature but also the close ties between the Slovaks and the Tatras.

In the 1840s the Štúrovce generation viewed the mountains as a shelter, refuge, a source of hope and 'lever' for the nation which would ensure its better future. The expectation that the Tatras would save the nation, evocation of their name and paying tribute to them were the basic elements of 'Tatrology'. The Tatras gave the name to the literary journal 'Tatranka' (1832-1847) and to the Tatrín cultural association (1844-1848), whose aim was to support and promote cultural life and education in Slovakia. With time, however, the strongly nationalistic reception of the Tatras changed and started to acquire a more individual character in different writers' texts. The transformation can already be observed in the works by Romantic poet Andrej Sládkovič (1820-1872). Yet the crowning achievement in the artistic representation of the Tatras comes at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in the text by Pavel Országh Hviezdoslav (1849-1921), which contains more realistic descriptions of nature. Hviezdoslav focused on the bond between people and their homeland, so the disappearance of the Slovak nation resulting from increasing Magyarisation is rendered by him as the disappearance

or loss of the Tatras. Besides this romantic vision, Hviezdoslav perceives the mountains as a natural phenomenon, as well, so he extols their merits and expresses his personal feelings.

The beauty of the Tatra landscape inspired painters, too. The first depiction of the Tatras in Slovakia is a fresco dating back to the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries, preserved in St. Giles' church in Poprad. The first lay artwork with a Tatra motif (Mt Lomnica) is the coat of arms of the Berzeviczy family from Velka Lomnica dated to the mid-15th century.

In the first half of the 19th century the visual arts began to explore landscapes painted from nature and the cult of the mountains. The Tatras became a popular theme for Central European painters. One of the artists who early depicted the Tatras in a romantic way as a monumental nature's element was Spiska Sobota-based Karol Tibély (1813- c.1870). However, the first to have elevated the Tatras to the status of a symbol of Slovakia in art was Peter Michal Bohúň (1822-1879). One of his best known works is 'Mt Kriváň' (1844), dedicated to Ludovít Štúr. The Tatras and Mt Kriváň feature in the portrait of a volunteer, Captain Ján František Rimavski (1849) and in the painting 'The Slovaks of Važec'.

Frequent use of the motif of the Tatras in the visual arts stimulated interest in the region. The year 1835 is generally consid-

ered groundbreaking as it was then that Gašpar Fejérpataky-Belopotocký (1794-1874), organiser of cultural life in Liptovský Mikuláš, together with six companions climbed Mt Kriváň. That first ascent was to be invoked again and again by groups of romantic Slovak enthusiasts during their so-called national walks. The first of these took place on 16th August 1841. Its participants included distinguished representatives of the Slovak national movement: Ľudovít Štúr (1815-1856), Michal M. Hodža (1811-1870) and their associates. One of them, poet Samo Hroboň (1820-1894) thus commemorated the whole group's impressions: "When they [Štúr and Hodža] stood at the foot of Kriváň, two black eagles circled over their heads, as if they wanted to welcome those two eagle-spirits of Slovakia". Climbs to the top of Kriváň were resumed in the 1860s, when the Slovaks began to put forward their demands in a more forceful way. The first to go there was a group of thirty-two patriots (including six women) on 2nd and 3rd September 1861. The event was accompanied by additional entertainments: a bonfire was lit under the summit, national songs like *Hej, Slováci! The Tatras Are Standing, And So Is the Haughty Kriváň, Lightning Flashes Over the Tatra Mountains* or *Hej, pod Kriváňom!*³ were sung. Despite breaks, mostly due to the increasing Hungarian oppression, the tradition of

² Ivan Houdek, *Národné vychádzky na Kriváň*, [in:] „Slovenské pohľady“ 1933, annal 49, p.746.

³ „Pešťbudínske vedomosti“, annal I, no. 54, 20.9.1861, p. 3.

national excursions to the High Tatras survived until World War I. The destination was not only Mt Kriváň but also other summits: Mt Rysy or Mt Končistá. An example may be the excursion of the youth from different parts of Slovakia on 30th August 1918, which seemed to forecast the onset of a new political situation. The tradition did not cease in the 20th century and up till today tourists regularly ascend Mt Kriváň during summer trips which resemble a national 'pilgrimage'.

Built in 1870-1871, the railway line from Košice to Bohumín opened new possibilities for economic development of Sub-Tatran communes and for growth in tourism in the Tatras. The first tourist trail led to Studenovodská Valley back in 1847 but there was no institution which could undertake to make other parts of the Tatras widely accessible. It was only in 1873 that the tourist Hungarian Carpathian Association and the Polish Tatra Society were established. Their aim was to create new trails and maintain the already existing ones. With the advances of balneology and development of water treatment and recreational infrastructure, the Tatras became accessible to a growing number of tourists and holidaymakers. It was possible to go there not only on holiday but also to practise winter sports: skiing and ice hockey were growing popular, and the first sledge run was constructed. The advancement of the society and political transformations influenced the perception of the Tatras as a national symbol. While in the 19th century they were regarded as a symbol of the nation

only among the small circle of nationalists, and reached the consciousness of the wider public very slowly, the foundation of the Republic of Czechoslovakia in 1918 resulted in universal sacralisation of the Tatras. The Czech elites greatly contributed to that. The Czechs regarded the Tatras as a mountain range which Bohemia lacked. They started to visit them in considerable numbers. It was owing to them that mass tourism and sports flourished, the Tatras began to feature in tourist handbooks and guidebooks and were regularly invoked in the Slovak part of the national anthem of Czechoslovakia, *Lightening Flashes Over the Tatra Mountains* [*Nad Tatrou sa blýska*].

The phenomenon of the Tatras and changes in their reception in the 20th century have been researched by numerous scholars. In his study *Tatry v slovenskom povedomí*, Ľubomír Lipták (1930-2003) deals with the subject of the formation and consolidation of national identity as exemplified by the High Tatras⁴. He examines the factors owing to which the High Tatras remained an important national symbol throughout the 20th century. According to him, the phenomenon of their popularity can be explained by the development of tourism and promotion of the Tatras, which was reinforced by major sports events (the skiing championships in 1970) and aspirations to hold the Olympic Games in the Tatras (1984, 2002 and 2006). Under

⁴ Ľubomír Lipták, *Tatry v slovenskom povedomí*, 'Slovenský Národopis' 2001, no. 2 (49), pp. 145-161.

Dubček's leadership (in the 1960s) the Slovak society was united by the proposition to build an Alweg-type monorail track. Despite widespread public interest in the project and a spontaneous all-country collection, the authorities stopped the initiative. The Alweg affair showed, however, how potent a symbol the Tatras remain for the Slovaks.

Polish translation by

English translation by Anna Mirośławska-Olszewska