



Antoni Kroh

THE TATRAS OF NATIONS

EMILIANO RANOCCHI TALKS TO ANTONI KROH

EMILIANO RANOCCHI: *Let's start with the question of the role of the Tatras in the shaping of Slovak national identity, and the evolution of the Tatras' perception since the 19th century, when they started to be perceived as a national symbol, till today, when they are even depicted on coins.*

ANTONI KROH: The Tatras, and Mt Kriváň in particular, have been and still remain the national symbol of the Slovaks. In the mid-19th century Janko Matuška wrote *Nad Tatrou sa blýska* [*Lightening Flashes Over the Tatras*]. After 1918 that patriotic song became part of the national anthem of Czechoslovakia, and is now the anthem of Slovakia. The Tatras have played an important role in the shaping of Slovak national identity. The 'Podtatranský orol' magazine came out regularly. The ones who were particularly active were referred to as *ty orol tatranský*, or 'you Tatra eagle', which meant 'you're a brave, militant Slovak'. The Tatras were an anchorage for the Slovak soul, so to say.

Not only the Slovak soul, though, because three other nations should be mentioned here: Poles, Hungarians and the Spis Germans, the so-called Zipser Germans. Smokovec was supposed to be the centre of the Hungarian national style in architecture. It's still conspicuous, albeit less and less so. The position of the Tatras in the Polish culture is extremely important, beginning from Stanisław Staszic till today.

E.R.: *Does it mean that the Tatras simultaneously and permanently entered the Slovak and Polish cultures?*

A.K.: I'm not sure if it happened at the same time: Staszic lived at the beginning of the 19th century, Seweryn Goszczyński wrote his *Dziennik podróży do Tatrów* [*A Journal of a Trip to the Tatras*] in the 1830s, while Slovak national identity crystallised in the second half of the 19th century. What seems to be of greater interest to me are the sources of the fascination. Slovaks needed symbols and Poles needed them, too. Stanisław Staszic,

the first eminent Pole to have climbed Mt Lomnica, believed that he could see the Adriatic and the Baltic from the top, the whole Slav lands, which is impossible anyway. He was proud to claim (mistakenly) to be the first Pole to have reached the summit, and considered it a symbol of Poland. Throughout the 19th century the Tatras fascinated the Polish elites, mainly because they were perceived as 'altars of freedom', in the words of Franciszek Nowicki. In the second half of the 19th century the Tatras and Zakopane played a particularly inspiring role in Polish culture. They were referred to as 'Polish Piemonte' or 'Polish Athens'. In the Slovak national movement the Tatras were an embodiment of national existence, particularly Mt Kriváň, which appears in many 19th century drawings. A group of members of the Slovak intelligentsia climbed Mt Kriváň every year; it was a form of patriotic manifestation. When the kingdom of Hungary fell and Czechoslovakia came into being, a wave of Slovak expeditions to the Tatras

summits started. Biologists, geologists, tourism activists. Professor Alfred Grosz of Kiezmark, a Tatra mountaineer, teacher in the local grammar school, was a man of many cultures: he wrote and published his texts in German, Hungarian and Slovak. His statue is now in Kiezmark, bearing inscriptions in the three languages.

The symbolism of the Tatras was of enormous importance to the Slovaks in the 19th century. They struggled for their identity at the time. There were disputes whether they were a branch of one Czechoslovak nation or a separate one; whether the Slovak language was a separate language in its own right or just a variety of Czech. In the 19th century the modern Czech language, which differed as much from the spoken language of the commoners as Slovak, was simultaneously crystallising. The Slovak literary, official and academic language took shape owing to work, hard work of enthusiastic members of the intelligentsia. The nation then accepted that language, and glory be to them for it. In general the way the Slovak nation went in the 20th century commands my deep respect because now that nation has its own language, identity and a state of its own. What was it like a hundred years ago? It was not easy. There were various conflicts and violations of human rights on the way, but there was no bloodshed, these have never been the Balkans.

E.R.: Yes, we have gone ahead a bit... So does it make sense to further compare

the role of the Tatras as a national symbol in the history of the two nations? After all, the two symbolisms differ considerably...

A.K.: I'd be wary of making a mechanical comparison because in the 19th century the Poles strove for something completely different than the Slovaks. The Poles wanted to raise the whole nation, including peasants, to fight for independence and to overthrow foreign rule, while the Slovaks endeavoured to crystallise their own identity. There can't be the equals sign here as the Poles had had their own identity since the Middle Ages. Poland's boundaries were first demarcated a thousand years ago, while Slovakia's were delineated in 1918. So I say I deeply admire the way the Slovaks have gone over the last one hundred years but that doesn't change the basic historical facts.

E.R.: So, if I get it right, the Slovaks who climb Mt Kriváň in mid-19th century are seeking something else than the Poles who set out to their Tatras...

A.K.: I would put it differently. There were precious few members of the intelligentsia who considered themselves Slovak by nationality in the 19th century, while Poland had all social strata, from the aristocracy, through nobility, university professors, professionals, small entrepreneurs to peasants. The mystical attitude to the mountains was the domain of the intelligentsia. Polish fascination with the Tatras cannot be compared to Slovak excursions to the top of Mt Kriváň, although both phenomena had

patriotic roots – 'it's mine, I'm going to see what's mine'. The main problem concerning Slovak identity at the time was a vision of the future: should we bind ourselves with the Czech republic or not, should we struggle for autonomy within Hungary or otherwise cherish dreams of complete independence? The ostentatious ascent of a group of people to the top of Mt Kriváň was very nice and a good propaganda move but it is radically different from the place occupied in Polish culture by the Podhale region and the Tatras. It was believed (Karol Potkański, ethnographer and historian, discussed it in his texts) that it was in Podhale that the essence of Polish identity, without any foreign influences, had been preserved. Hence, if we were fascinated by Podhale, we were fascinated by Poland's past.

E.R.: Exactly. So where did this conviction spring from?

A.K.: This conviction was necessary to fight against Russification or Germanisation when Poland was threatened by annihilation. Any argument was good.

E.R.: And it has remained so till today?

A.K.: And in general it has remained so till today, in a very distorted form. If an MP from Podhale enters the Parliament, it is nice and natural, if an MP wears the Lublin regional costume, it's embarrassing and ridiculous. The symbol of the highlander has survived in a greatly altered form (I put it too mildly) but it's a result of the 19th century. The first to have taken keen interest in the mountains,

Seweryn Goszczyński, came to Podhale to see if highlanders could make insurgents, if, should the need arise, they would take up arms. That was the aim of his trip, also to Kościeliska Valley. We owe this writer and brilliant reporter the mention that in Frydman local girls spoke to him in Slovak and he spoke in Polish, and they understood one another perfectly. And he wrote it down in the 1830s. The subject of the Tatras and Podhale in Polish culture is extremely broad and completely different from the place of the Tatras in Slovak culture, so it must be studied on another basis. It is entirely dissimilar. Comparing these or using the equals sign is ahistoric.

E.R.: Then what changed when the whole geopolitical context altered and when these dissimilar histories in a sense ceased to be as important as they used to or the importance emerged in a new context?

A.K.: It seems to me it was like that, to put it schematically in short; as all generalisations, it will be flawed, too. In autumn 1918 one of the most pressing issues was the question of the boundary between Poland and Czechoslovakia. Our neighbours took the view that the boundary should run along the former Austro-Hungarian boundary. The Poles opted for an ethnographic boundary. Delineating an ethnographic boundary, stating that this village is Polish, and that one isn't, is by nature strongly conflictual. The way it ran in the 1920s did not satisfy either side. In 1938, taking advantage of the dramatic situation in Czechoslovakia, Poles took back scraps of land in the Tatras: the village of Jaworzyna and

part of the Bielskie Tatras (Slovak: Belianskie Tatras). Then in 1939 the Slovak army entered Spis and partly Podhale and, to put it mildly, did not behave particularly well. Then came 1945. The question of the boundary between Poland and Czechoslovakia was open again. Czechoslovakia claimed the right to Polish Spis and Orava, and Poland did the same about the lands which were then under Slovak administration. At Stalin's demand the state from before 1938 was restored. Then there came half a century of the so called people's democracy: ostentatious friendship with longstanding grievances in the hearts. That muscle contraction, the pain, disappeared almost completely after 1989. Today, for all I know, nobody wants to spill blood to move the border this way or that way. But the memory of various problems left over from the past usually lasts two or three generations. Stereotypes and traumas are still alive but, thank goodness, are waning and I'm extremely happy that I've lived to see it. That it's possible to cross the border in any place you like. And, most importantly, that nowadays the terms Slovak, Slovakia are in common use. When I was young, everybody, including the intelligentsia, believed that Slovaks spoke Czech; it was said 'I'm going to the Czech Tatras'. What Slovaks felt at the time is easy to imagine. Guides used to say, 'a Czech group from Bratislava is coming'. It was not long ago that a Polish minister went to Bratislava and made a speech at a banquet about the Polish-Czech friendship. Then he was surprised to see the hosts sulking. Today the term 'Slovak' is as obvious as 'a Frenchman', 'an Italian', 'a Spaniard' or 'a German'.

Slovak historians like to remind the public of the suffering they experienced from Hungarians towards the end of the 19th century. It consolidates and mobilises them but, with all due respect and sympathy, now that we have freedom democracy several provocative questions might be asked. The Hungarian language was taught in village schools. Probably every state seeks to teach its citizens the official language, what's so strange about that? Whole districts, and certainly whole villages couldn't speak Hungarian - and yet it was after all the Hungarian state. Learning one language doesn't preclude learning another. Who is there to blame for the fact that there was no widespread education in the Slovak language? A man has as much freedom as he can snatch for himself - the Poles know about it full well. Even the best Slovaks became Hungarised or Germanised because they wanted to be educated - yes, it's true. But why didn't they go to Slovak universities? Because there weren't any, excluding seminaries. Such was the time.

I'm extremely glad that the issues of the Polish and Slovak borders or the Polish and Czechoslovakian borders and other historical problems are a thing of the past and hardly anybody is interested in them any more. Slovaks are a modern European nation who has a state, the Academy of Sciences, universities and high schools, efficient economy. They are good neighbours to us, one with whom we have no disputes but with whom the common ground of joint business is growing.

Translated by Anna Mirosławska-Olszewska