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SENSE AND SENSATION



They managed to turn their existence into a sensation. It is a very rare feat. They forced everybody to name a place after themselves and in this way created a separate place which had not existed before. The latter happens as seldom as the former, usually – even more seldom. In other words, they managed to achieve two probably most sensational things in the world: to become known so that they could not be passed over, and to create a space out of their name, despite the fact that nobody knows exactly what that name means and how it originated. That complete and general consent to use an inexplicable name is the best example of the magic of names: the more mysterious a name is, the more appealing it gets and the greater potential it carries.

The Hutsul miracle goes much deeper. Those who surround them do not just have an attitude towards them (anyway, some attitude is simply necessary). A characteristic phenomenon where the Hutsuls are concerned is a yearning to participate. A yearning to belong to a people one does not belong to by birth.

It is rare among those who are outside that the yearning to belong to those inside (or seem to be inside) is expressed as strongly as in the case of those who want to belong to the Hutsuls. While the measure of belonging is indeed limited by the real conditions, the sense of reality makes it necessary to replace the willingness to belong with the compromise of participation. There are few who would voluntarily resign from participation in the Hutsul way of life.

That arranged participation takes place on all possible levels and concerns biology, events, language, geography, relations and eroticism. The eros of the Hucul people oversteps any convention and in this respect shows an affinity with the phantasms of the Gypsy eros. The Huculs are settled Gypsies, without the Gypsy stigma but with their own unique charisma instead. Equally passionate, freedom loving and musical. Some of that aura is shed on a participant.

Biography can be falsified, origin can be invented or embellished, events can be adapted, language can be copied, geography can be laid out, relations can be imposed, folklore can be cultivated, art can be collected. Eros is sought, but usually there are only fantasies about him. All this is done so as to turn participation into at least closeness, if true belonging is not possible.

Being a Hutsul, real or alleged, offers unique opportunities. Belonging to the Hutsuls, an individual does not assume obligations towards any community, not even to the community of the Hutsuls, unless the individual in question does come from among them, so there are no obligations towards them other than the ones the individual imagines. Those imagined obligations reveal themselves not only as unnecessary to the real community but also as deeply incomprehensible to it: indifferent in the best case, alien – in a worse one, harmful in the worst case. An imaginary sense of belonging to the Hutsuls imposes obligations solely towards oneself. And if we do not know who we are, we assume obligations towards an ideal, idealised self, the I-ideal. It is imagined belonging to an invented self and that is why the obligations that result from it are not so innocent.

Being with them is considerably different than being with others. I do not know how the Hutsuls feel about themselves. Probably much the same as the other people. Yet being close to the Hutsuls evokes admiration, jealousy mingled with a sense of one's own inferiority and degeneration, an urge to emulate, invariably doomed to be comical. And, first and foremost, the eagerness to participate. It seldom happens that one falls at a stranger's feet the way non-Hutsuls do towards the Hutsuls. To that end all means are justified: one gets some (often nonsensical) words out of the lexical jumble, another tries to acquire Hutsul tones in the intonation, yet another emulates

Hutsul flair in the pronunciation. All that is to confirm one's belonging, to be a premise for being recognised.

No other folklore is as widespread and as popular as that of the Hutsuls. Its cult gathered momentum, which clearly demonstrates more than just the desire to cultivate localness. No other rhythm is such a guarantee of authenticity. Possession of Hutsul souvenirs exposes the very essence of the desire to possess and collect: magic belief in the transference or appropriation of signs through metonymic mechanisms of contact, belief in learning and assimilation of properties. Hutsul souvenirs are not merely mementoes of impressions. They are exhibits of participation, testimonies of initiation, fetishes of reincarnation.

People crawl up so much to few other communities, trying not only to adulate them but also gain their recognition. Never do they so often invent false genealogies, distort biographical facts crossing out key elements from the least coincident circumstances. In no other case are they equally willing to sacrifice a part of their identity in order to acquire a Hutsul part. An eagerly sought-after Hutsul great-grandmother can boost prestige as much as a Czech grandmother for the native Viennese.

What is behind all that is the phantasm of enhancement of one's blood. And following it, the phantasm of ennobling the soul.

It is sensational that the Hutsuls are still out there. Everything exists, although everything around is changing. And some time ago they managed to achieve yet another extraordinary thing: they created the impression of primevalness. In their company everybody feels like one who has come late and not necessarily at the right time. Yet everything that is Hutsul exudes authenticity and order, and carries the conviction


that that is the way it should be. Vivid exoticism of the Hutsuls does not evoke a shadow of the impression of excess. Conversely, the very exoticism actually supports the sense of archaism. It does not give the impression of artificiality, but evokes the desire to emulate, consolidate and collect. And, most importantly, it imposes the sense of primordality.

To what extent have the Hutsuls contributed to that sensation? Their own contribution is not extensive. They lived their own lives, not caring if they made any particular impression. If they were guilty in their legend, that guilt is purely derivative. Their contribution to the legend of authenticity is genuine authenticity itself. Which means the kind that they are not aware of and do not think about. The kind they do not work on and do not achieve. That they do not desire. That authenticity is a side effect of their lives, their organisation and activities connected with it. What the Hutsuls lived for and what they were like became the foundation for their independence. Their self-ness became a sign and premise of their extraordinariness. Everything worked for the Hutsul myth: the mysterious origin, the once nomadic lifestyle, the choice of the place where they later settled, scattered settlement which implied inborn individualism, and cattle breeding on mountain pastures, the tradition of clan vengeance, later *opryshkostvo*¹, the figure of Olexy Dovbush² - all that threaded one after another, like beads on a fanciful *krivulka*³.

¹ *opryshkostvo* – Hutsul brigandage – developed on a large scale in Eastern Carpathians in the 16th century. Brigands, locally called *opryshky*, became heroes of many legends and tales, and inspired artists. There were military expeditions against them, court trials and public executions. (Polish translator's note).

² Olexy Dovbush, also called Dobosh, is the Hutsul equivalent of Janosik – the bravest and most famous outlaw in Hutsul lands, who lived in the 18th century. This Hutsul warlord's tempestuous life was described for example by Józef Korzeniowski in his drama *Karpaccy górale* (*Carpathian Highlanders*, 1840), while Benedykt Chmielowski in his *Nowe Ateny* [*New Athens*] noted down his death in 1746 (Polish translator's note).

³ A colourful, collar-like necklace made of small beads, worn by Hutsul women (Polish translator's note).



As to the mysterious origin, the situation is much the same as in the so-called ethnogenetic myths: the holiest figures always come out of nowhere but despite that – or perhaps owing to it – they become the most complete embodiment of localness. The Hutsuls came from nobody knows where, like the basket with little Moses. The paradox of that allegation of archaism consists in the fact that the latest settlers have started to be considered as the most ancient people. Those who came last have indeed become the first. I suspect it did not happen in an entirely peaceful way.

The Hutsuls' contribution to their later legend is that they, a late nomadic tribe of an unknown, most probably mixed origin, settled at some point in uninhabited, hardly accessible, mountainous areas, surrounded by inhabited lands. Nomadism was already so rare at the time that it projected the splendour of archaism onto almost everything, including ingenious but rather late crafts, art, dress and beliefs.


No wonder then that it was that tribe that began to be considered the most archaic and equally exotic, and as such was attributed distinctive features whose loss had been the price for being settled, for agriculture, progress or some other things that were still much coveted, like unconditional pride, an indomitable sense of honour, nobility, hyper-rational love of freedom, artistry, the gift of imagination. Where such a set of romantic ideals is present, there must also be the central character around which the whole world revolves: eros.

The Hutsul eros acquired a peculiar cult status. Not only were the ideals of noble and proud aquiline beauty and passion sought among the Hutsuls, not only was an outstanding erotic temperament attributed to them – they, both men and women, were said to have relationships with several (more than ten!) lovers at the same time - but they were also perceived as always ready to answer the call of passion unconditionally

and without limitations. Love as an unconditional imperative and the priority in life. It seems strange only at the first glance that the pole of promiscuity is used in the Hutsul myth simultaneously with its antithesis: the ideal of conjugal faithfulness, chastity and innocence, punishment for adultery, the idea of the necessity to pay for a betrayal in love with one's life.

In fact all significant narratives which result from strong emotions have two faces, so they are often two-faced. Any content needs the presence of its twin-traitor, any narrative requires its twin-opposite. Each myth is ambivalent, and the Hutsul one is quintessentially ambivalent. The Hutsuls are attributed all those features that one longs for but cannot achieve either because of a lack of courage or strength. Participation in the Hutsul way of life reveals a compromise channel to obtain those energies by means of metonymy masked with metaphor.

Eventually, even the Hutsuls themselves noticed the allure of such idealistic projections. They realised that others were fascinated by them and wanted to know why. They were told, 'because you are proud and frivolous'; and they replied, 'yes, of course we are proud, frivolity is our element'. They were admired as noble and independent individuals so they started to say, 'nobility and independence are our ancient traits'. Projected identification happily married agile opportunism and an instinct for opportunity. But identifications, even when projected, are after all material for identity. The Hutsuls felt the strength derived from other people's expectations, and the power that fulfilment of those expectations gives. It was necessary to respond to them. All the more reason to forget that they had come from outside and to believe in their authenticity. The Hutsuls became hostages of other people's projections but they turned their bearers into their own slaves, voluntary slaves to the Hutsul legend.



What happened was that not only were other people's own, allegedly lost traits attributed to the Hutsuls but also, again with the Hutsuls' help, that other people tried to assimilate those traits by assimilating the Hutsuls themselves. People not only grew fond of the Hutsuls but started to look up to them. Just like they struggled to participate in the Hutsul way of life, they competed for a share of the Hutsuls in themselves. They sought the Hutsuls' recognition. Prudence and zealotness. For being recognised by the Hutsuls guaranteed that you were a complete human being. That you were equal to them. That you did not lack anything, either in your body, in your mind, or in your soul. Being recognised as one of their own exempted you from the agony and curse of low self-esteem. That is why we put such store by each word the Hutsuls say; why we remember even the most inconsequential chatter of Hutsul husbandmen; why we guard them and use them in more or less opportune moments – because we see in them stores of primeval, authentic wisdom, the truth of the ancient age that we have lost.

It is particularly difficult to accurately determine what exactly is *Hutsulshchyzna*. There are attempts from outside to expand that space onto something it is not, while from inside - there are attempts to narrow it down to the scope of those who do the narrowing. The jealous care that that space takes of its own borders is astonishing and is a direct opposite of, say, Volyn which seems not to have any borders at all. It is easy to mark out the borders of Galicia as they are determined by the former political divisions. The borders of Hutsul lands resemble the geographical outline of Europe: there is no consensus as regards them, there are scores of contradictory criteria of how to draw them, and it is necessary, again and again, to reach a compromise about them. In a sense, Hutsul lands as an object of desire and idealisation in general distinctly resemble the European Union as there are also complex factors at play here, both internal and external. Here

those who would like to be called Hutsuls and who are not recognised by recognised Hutsuls would like to be called by the same name. And inner Hutsuls take the same avid care of *Kernhuzulenland*. Both Hutsul lands and Europe are authentic in the eyes of the people from outside because they represent access to certain values and guarantee certain qualities. Thus understood, *Hutsulshchyzna* is our internal Europe.

The desire to participate in the Hutsul way of life is phenomenal. All the more so as in the case of belonging to Hutsul lands, unlike in the European Union, it is not about pragmatic issues. Here profit is of a purely idealistic nature. Contact with the ideal creates an illusion of taking possession of it and incorporation, and this is where the phantasm of transformation is born. Participation in the Hutsul way of life is thoroughly romantic, the Hutsul element in general is romantic from any point of view: stylistic, strategic or sentimental.

It is romantic also because of its origin. The times when non-Hutsuls started to create *Hutsulshchyzna* coincided with the birth of Romanticism. It is possible that in fact the opposite was true: the spirit of early Romanticism encouraged people to start constructing a much needed *Hutsulshchyzna* in the minds of intellectuals, in literature, in academic treatises, and then also in political programmes. Even had there not been *Hutsulshchyzna*, it would have been invented there and then. The *Hutsulshchyzna* we know was largely invented at the time. *Hutsulshchyzna* is another proof of the durability of the Romantic quests. And of the permanence of the need for romanticism.

The first wave of Central European Romanticism seems to have been expecting a phenomenon which could be so idealised. All necessary components were already there: a mysterious origin, noble archaism, unspoilt organic relationship with nature, picturesqueness. The aesthetic factors were soon

followed by political ones which even then had an aesthetic dimension: the ethos of freedom and pathos of independence, the spirit of protest and defiance, the ability to rebel in the name of honour. Also in that respect *Hutsulshchyzna* contained all the traits for Romanticism to discover it: a way of life, sophisticated weaponry, *opryshkostvo*, Olexy Dovbush. Without the central romantic component in the myth of a noble savage there would be no contemporary *Hutsulshchyzna*.

To the Central European generation of 1848 *Hutsulshchyzna* became an important reservoir of secessionist political visions. The idea of a community that was ready for anything in the name of freedom laid the foundation for all later idealisations of the Hutsuls. The legend of Olexy Dovbush played the key role here, and Dovbush himself still remains the key figure in the Hutsul pantheon as a character who embodied all important mythic qualities in himself: from eros to ethos, from rage to appeal, from excess to ecstasy.


And then it was like that: with the beginning of industrialisation people became aware of the fragility of nature. Cities, perceived as decayed centres of industrialisation, were juxtaposed to reservoirs of unspoiled nature. The secondary character of plans and intentions - to the primordality of existence and destiny. The scandal of comfort- to the sensation of success. The degenerate nature of the modern human being - to the virgin nature of the human who refused to fall out of grace again and did not waste what had been given to him. Untouched nature is always an ideal for the 'touched' one. The untouched is the most inaccessible. The most inaccessible nature is in the most inaccessible places. The Carpathian Uplands are just such a place for the whole Central Europe.

The status of the most ancient of Carpathian tribes was attributed to the Hutsuls. It is an important consideration because the Hutsuls turned into a screen for Neo-Romantic

urban projections not only of the Ukrainians or Poles but also of the Czechs, Austrians and Hungarians. That is how the Neo-Romantic rediscovery of the Hutsuls began. It coincided in time and in the tendency with the beginnings of urban mass tourism and fashion for holidaying in the mountains. The areas of Jaremche, Vorochta, Kosovo and Krivorivnia became 'natural' destinations for home-made expeditions to landscape, artistic, folkloristic, dialectological, ideological, ethnic or political utopias. Admiration for the Hutsul art and way of life resulted in the culture of plein-air painting and museum pathos. Kosmach transformed into an aesthetic topos and code. The painted egg became a symbol of the mystery of biological existence, embroidered cloth stood for the destiny, and a *grazhda*⁴ represented cosmic order. Urban architecture, even as apparently international as Secession, gradually filled with Hutsul and highlander motifs. Afterwards that architecture was re-exported into the Hutsul lands, since it was considered primeval and, as such, more important than the one that existed in reality. More genuine than the genuine. It was an architectural analogy to ideological re-export, which was constructed, reinforced and distilled to obtain the essence.

A significant example is the building of the Ukrainian credit society 'Dniester' in Lvov. The construction was completed in 1905. At the time when the struggle of the first champions of nationalism was already in full sway under the Habsburg universalism, architect Ivan Levyns'kyj (Jan Lewiński), who himself had at least a double (equally strong Ukrainian and Polish) identity, chose Hutsul motifs as the instrument of articulation and declaration of the national status of the building he designed: Ukrainian.

⁴ A typical Hutsul four-sided closed homestead, which was originally connected with its military function, necessary in the region where homesteads were loosely scattered. (translator's note).



That aesthetic choice was a manifestation of a tendency which had started earlier. Astonishing competition for the Hutsuls had begun. At some point each national community wanted to appropriate them for itself in the ethnic sense, declaring them to be the best (the noblest, the most courageous, the most freedom loving and – the most archaic!) part of their own nation, be it Ukrainian, or Polish, Romanian or Slovak.

That appropriation becomes particularly ironic if we take into account that the Hutsul myth was simultaneously used both as a prototype, embodiment, and an ideal of the extra-national: either pre-national, hyper-national or post-national. Or, in general, of the politically indifferent, non-political, bah, even anti-political. That pathos can be clearly seen, say, in Vincenz. But should such an ambivalence surprise us? Political eros is equally complex as sexual eros.

The Hutsul motif was incorporated into a surprisingly subtle dynamics of ambivalence. Such differences in emphasis may happen inconspicuously and in the blink of an eye. The Hutsul way of life may be idealistic, ideal, it must be idealised, but should a need arise, it can quickly become ideological. Activation and de-activation of political connotation in the Hutsul element may be carried out fast, like transition from love to hate. That is why part of the Hutsul appeal is the luxury of something extra-political. Something concerning solely the outlook on life, we could say, without a touch of anything ideological. That is what may explain the extraordinary eagerness to participate.

To the Hutsuls themselves that double perspective, which attributes to them unique and exotic identity on the one hand, and on the other the struggle to include them in a community's own national projects, became an invaluable reservoir of political identity options and a premise for unusual flexibility in political reactions. It offered them the opportunity to assume a position which was optimal in the circumstances at any

given moment. In this way the Hutsuls are rarely perceived as successful – in fact extremely successful – opportunists, conformists and collaborators. When a favourable situation comes you can declare yourself part of a political nation but there is always one option left: you can identify with yourself alone: one of a kind, belonging to nobody, participating in no one's identity, obligated to nothing towards nobody – a Hutsul.

The latest political history abounds in examples of the use that the Hutsuls made of such divergent options: at different times different groups of Hutsuls chose to be extra-national archaic representatives of their clans, or founded, like Dmytro Klympush, the Ukrainian Hutsul Republic in Iasynia, joined the Ukrainian National Army or the 'Halychyna' Division. Some found their feet in the Soviet system, some hated and fought against the Soviet rule, some became Russian oligarchs and ministers, others found employment as hired workforce, some others remained traditional local husbandmen, others became handymen. Some of them recognise and praise independent Ukraine while others complain about it. The Hutsuls are extremely flexible: they easily pick up foreign languages, intonations, they take on accents and customs. They can equally easily find a job in Moscow as give concerts in Amsterdam; they can steal as successfully in Mukachev or on the Zachodni railway station in Warsaw as they lecture at university in Vienna or trade either sheep cheese on a bazaar in Stanislavov or stocks and shares at the New York Stock Exchange. 'Hutsul' is a tribal name and a parabola of belonging to the human race.

The number of the Hutsul population is the basic premise for their exceptionality. Their multifaceted nature guarantees uniqueness. Their ability to change warrants definability. At the time of unprecedented erosion of former relations, the Hutsul myth remains the surest factor in preserving their

identity. When folklore is increasingly becoming alienated, existential order is breaking apart, emigration and escapes to cities are rife; when young men wearing embroidered clothes Made in China, who have just got out of their cars with Czech, Russian or Italian licence plates, greet one another at Easter in front of the Orthodox church in Delatyn with 'Priviet'⁵ rather than 'Chrystos Voskres'⁶; when on other days they have ceased to use the greeting 'Slava Isusu'⁷ because they have ceased to greet one another at all – it is at times like these that the Hutsul legend remains the last bastion of Hutsul identity. Because it will be possible to say, 'yes, actually we are no longer there but in fact we are proud, freedom loving, noble, artistic, exotic and erotic. Because we are Hutsuls.'

At the time when meaning has been lost, outlines of feelings have been blurred and passion as such has been extinguished, the Hutsul myth offers the possibility to unite the broken parts of the contemporary soul. Belief, creativity and passion are the virtues which we expect, bah, demand from the Hutsuls. In our dreams they should remain the substance which guarantees these possibilities, always available, so that we can purify and heal ourselves with it. That is why we demand that the Hutsuls be the substance, and remain the substance.

Soul and eros are two central components of our desire for all things Hutsul. And, since eros is the most generalised symbol not only of passion but also of vitality, it means desire for an ideal human, perfect in the body, soul, origin, way of life and the environment in which s/he lives. Two fundamental, opposite but complementary modes of utopia

⁵ Russ. 'hello' (translator's note).

⁶ Ukr. 'Christ has risen from the dead' (translator's note).

⁷ Ukr. 'Praise the Lord!' (translator's note).

are at work in the phantasm of *Hutsulshchyzna*: a nostalgic, conservative vision of the ruin of the ancient organic order and a romantic yearning for renewal, a transformation of the human nature. The utopia of a new human as a premise and guarantee of overcoming existential decomposition and meaninglessness.

The contemporary Hutsuls may need these projections as a necessary condition for their identity to survive. We, non-Hutsuls, do not need that because our belief does not require their actual existence. And that is, again, what makes them resemble the Jews in our eyes. When they disappear, we will conjure our own Hutsuls. And when these are gone, too, we will declare ourselves to be them: proud, freedom loving, noble, artistic, exotic and erotic. And we will stick to that last vision which is left to us – the illusion of authenticity.

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