

Péter Korniss

THE LONG ROAD: 55 Years of a Transylvanian Village

Abstract

The pictures were taken between 1967 and 2022 in Sic/Szék, a small village in the heart of Transylvania, Romania. The project started in the period when despite the rigid political and economic circumstances, the village preserved its traditional peasant culture both in their everyday dress and their customs on festive occasions. After 1989, the political and economic landslide altered the life of the village, and the changes were permanent and irreversible. At the same time, the easy passage between frontiers and the free drift of the workforce increased the number of people taking up work in Budapest for financial reasons: guest workers. A gradual change was underway, and, along with the arrival of globalization, it created new content and means of expression. The village of Sic arrived in the present by the beginning of the 21st century. The project was published and exhibited in 2023.

Key words

Documentary Photography. Eastern Europe. History of Traditional. Hungarian Minority in Romania. Time-lapse Document. Traditional Peasant Culture. Transylvania. Visual Sociology.

To preserve a way of life that will soon disappear! As a photographer, I couldn't have found a finer task for myself.

I felt this in November 1967 when I first entered the "dance house" in Szek and thought I had been whisked back into the past. In the dim light of the paraffin lamp, dancers swirled, yellow straw hats flashed and red ribbons flew. It was as if nothing had changed here in this tiny Transylvanian village for a hundred years. I reckoned cameras were invented for the purpose of preserving what was transient. At that time, few people were aware that in certain regions of Transylvania and Eastern Europe, the traditional peasant culture was alive and still virtually intact. It was clear to me that I should track down this world before it faded altogether.

So, I asked ethnographers and scientists to help me discover where the old customs lived on. Transylvania wasn't my only destination, I sought out villages in Hungary too where, at the end of the 1960s, traditions were still being kept.

Understandably, it was the spectacle of the feast days that enchanted me at first. Soon it became evident that tradition created masterly forms: many pictures were there for the taking, perfectly composed. To discover the community behind the spectacle and to see the strong human bonds within the community needed more time, however.

Transylvania also offered rich Romanian traditions. A few years later, when I first visited Maramaros, I happened on a soldiers' farewell party. Just as in one of the dance houses in

Szek, here too I felt time had stood still, and I was pleasantly surprised that they received me with the same openness as in the Hungarian villages. From here it was just a step for me to consciously photograph Hungarians, Romanians, Slovaks and Serbs, all over the place, on this side of the border and beyond. The pictures of everyday life were multiplying rapidly, and they gradually became more important than those of special occasions. The emphasis shifted from spectacular costumes to toilsome work, from the old-style to poverty. No one could wish for the kind of living conditions they lived in.

The attachment I felt to the peasant world led me to the next chapter too. From the end of the 1970s, I followed the life of a commuting worker with my camera. The man in my story came from a peasant background and, though he worked in Budapest, his family, his market garden, and the village community were waiting for him in a faraway village at the weekends. Through his life, I related what I considered important and enlightening about this double life. I gave the title *The Guest Worker* to this series of photographs.

At the beginning of the 1990s, after the political landslide in Eastern Europe, the life of the old, familiar villages began to change before my eyes. In the fields and on the small farms, changes were more gradual; in the villages, in the homes they came swiftly and were more eye-catching. The symbols of distant worlds arrived in peasant homes.

Opportunities changed and demands became different. The more ambitious set off abroad to be guest

workers. Budapest was the main destination for people from Transylvania. From Moldova they made for "Spania", "Talia" and "Jermania" – as they put it. Again, I came across the "guest worker" existence, with the difference that those who went abroad spent a longer time away and became wealthier – their houses were proof of this.

My friendships and links with families spanned decades, and I was able to follow the lives of many people. I saw families gather for a celebration or for mourning, but I could feel that the binding strength of the community had slackened. They still kept the traditions, but all sorts of other things were mixed up with the customs by this time. Once again, I found something crying out for a camera, but I knew that what initially seemed like simple preservation work, in truth meant an intricate and complex task. Only in this way could the message – which becomes the aim of every undertaking of a personal nature sooner or later – be conveyed.

In the spring of 2008, when I set out for Moldova to look for a woman from Leszped and her now adult "babe-in-arms" in order to photograph them again almost 40 years later, I knew this would be the last picture in my book.

What I thought would soon disappear gave me work for a lifetime.

**Péter Korniss -
THE LONG ROAD - 55 years of a Transylvanian village**



Schoolgirl, 1967.



Lovers, 1970.



Weaving Woman, 1967.



Woman in a Hurry, 1973.



Schoolchildren from the Village, 1973.



After School, 1967.



Tired Shepherd, 1971.



War Veteran, 1976.



War Veteran, 1976.



Resting Women in the Wheat Field, 1974.



Weaving Woman in a Blue Room, 1973.



Girl Spinning Among Boys, 1973.



Singing Boys, 1970.



Bride and Groom, 1971.



In the Dance House, 1967.



After Holy Mass, 1973.



Easter Monday, 1972.



Farewell to the Deceased, 1973.



New Year's Ball, 1994.



Car Seat Cover, 1997.



In the Village Museum, 2007.



By the Tomb, 1973.



Husband, Wife and Their Son in the Fancy Room, 1997.



Wedding Procession Viewed from the Pub, 2007.



Photographing Groomsmen, 2004.



Young Mother Pushing Prams in the Fair, 2015.



Rozsi the Cowherd Woman, 2014.



In front of a Bus Station, 2014.



In the Village Fair, 2015.



In Front of Bookshelves, 2015.



In the Underpass, 2014.



Geography Class during the Covid Pandemic, 2021.



Waitress in the Bar, 2022.



Boys in the Pub, 2022.



The Cow Farmer, 2022.



Groomsmen and Bridesmaids with the Grandfather, 2022.



Bride Dancing with her Father, 2022.



Disneyland in the Village Sic, 2022.

Péter KORNISS

Born in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, on 4th August, 1937, he has been living in Budapest since 1949. Formerly he was employed as a photojournalist for the editorial office of *Nők Lapja* for 30 years, subsequently working freelance internationally for, amongst other publications, *National Geographic*, *GEO Magazine*, *Fortune*, and *Forbes*. As a documentary photographer, he has dedicated fifty-five years to capturing the disappearing way of peasant life and culture. His most important books on this topic are *Heaven's Bridegroom* (1975), *Passing Times* (1979), *Attachment* (2008), and *Continuing Memories* (2018), and *The Long Road* (2022). From the late 1970s, for ten years, he followed the life of a commuter worker, compiling the collected material into *The Guest Worker* (1988). He was a member of the International Jury of the World Press Photo Foundation (1977 - 1979), the Advisory Board of the World Press Photo Foundation in Amsterdam (1984), the International Advisory Committee of the W. Eugene Smith Grant, USA (1983), and the International Jury of the Czech Press Photo (1996 - 2011). He has published twenty-three independent volumes. His work has been exhibited in museums and galleries in sixteen countries, including Musée Nicéphore Niépce, France,

1980; Dom umenia, FOTOFO, Bratislava, 1999; Kultturién Museo, Helsinki, 2000; Museul de Arta, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, 2017; Staroměstská radnice, Prague, 2018; Museum of Fine Arts, Bucharest, 2018; Museo di Roma in Trastevere, 2019; Rosphoto Museum, Saint Petersburg, 2020. He was awarded the Kossuth Prize in 1999, the Pulitzer Memorial Prize in 2004, and the Prima Primissima Award in 2018. In 2014, he was awarded the title of 'Artist of the Nation'. He has been a member of the circle of artists at the Várfok Gallery in Budapest since 2012. In 2020, he donated the entire archive of his oeuvre to the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest.

Individual Exhibitions

- 2023** *The Long Road - Sic 1967-2022*, Várfok Gallery, Budapest, HU
- 2021** *Le Navetteur*, Galerie Keller, Paris, FR
Constante Évolution, Institut Culturel Hongrois, Paris, FR
Időfolyam, Classic Photography Gallery, Moscow, RU
- 2020** *Időfolyam*, Rosphoto Museum, Saint Petersburg, RU
- 2019** *Transizione*, Museo di Roma in Trastevere, Rome, IT
Schimbari, Muzeul de Arta,

- Cluj, RO
- 2018** *Transitions*, Mirbach Palace - City Gallery Bratislava, Bratislava, SK
Continuing Memories, Staroměstská radnice, Prague, CZ
Folyamatos emlékezet, Museum of Fine Arts, Bucharest, RO
- 2017** *Long Distance*, Várfok Gallery, Budapest, HU
Continuing Memories, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, HU
- 2016** *Betlenemesek*, MODEM, Debrecen, HU
- 2014** *Csíkszereda*, Új Kriterion Gallery, Miercurea Ciuc, RO
- 2013** *Kallay & Korniss*, The House of Art, Bratislava, SK
- 2012** *Folytatás*, Várfok Gallery, Budapest, HU
- 2011** *LS Landskron Schneidzik Galerie*, Nuremberg, DE
Skotia Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA
Muzeul de Arta, Cluj-Napoca, RO
Hungarian Cultural Center, New York, USA
Abbey of Tihany, Tihany, HU
- 2008** *Mű-Terem Gallery*, Debrecen, HU
- 2006** *Museum of Ethnography*, Warsaw, PL
- 2005** *Foto Art Festival*, Bielsko-Biala, PL
- 2002** *Galéria fotografie Profil*, Bratislava, SK
- 2001** *Galerie le Pont Neuf*, Paris, FR

- 2000** National Museum, Tartu, EST
M. Zilinskas Gallery, Kaunas, LT
Kultturién Museo, Helsinki, FIN
Hoved Bibliotek, Copenhagen, DK
Historical Museum, Riga, LV
- 1999** Staroměstská radnice, Prague, CZ
Muzeul Taranului Roman, Bucharest, RO
Dom umenia, FOTOFO, Bratislava, SK
Cabanas Museum, Guadalajara, MX
- 1998** *Inventory - Transylvanian Pictures*, Mucsarnok-Kunsthalle, Budapest, HU
- 1996** Oscar Wilde House, Dublin, IRL
- 1990** *The Guest Worker*, Aspekte Galerie, Munchen, DE
- 1989** *The Guest Worker*, Canon Gallery, Amsterdam, NL
- 1988** *The Guest Worker*, Mucsarnok-Kunsthalle, Budapest, HU
Galerija Fotografija, Split, YU/HR
- 1985** Casa de la Cultura, Quito, ECU
- 1983** Stadtische Galerie, Erlangen, DE
Canon Photo Gallery, Amsterdam, NL
- 1982** Salon Fotografije, Belgrade, YU/RS
- 1980** Museum of Tihany, Tihany,

- HU
Musée Nicéphore-Niépce, Chalon-sur-Saone, FR
- 1977** Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N. J. USA 1978
t'Hoogt Gallery, Utrecht, NL
- 1974** Mucsarnok-Kunsthalle, Budapest, HU
- 1972** Kluuvi Gallery, Helsinki, FI

Collective Exhibitions (Selected)

- 2018** *Promote-Tolerate-Ban*, Wende Museum - Getty Research Institute, Culver City, California, USA
- 2016** *The Guest Worker*, Art Karlsruhe, Karlsruhe, DE
- 2013** *K and K - Kállai-Korniss*, Dom umenia, Bratislava, SK
- 2011** *Hungarian Photography in the Twenties Century*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, GB
- 2009** *Photo Biennale Venice*, Venice, IT
- 1999** *La Hongrie*, Musées du Mans, Le Mans, FR
- 1992** *Les Trésors du Musée Niépce*, Musée Nicéphore-Niépce, Chalon-sur-Saone, FR
- 1987** *Hungarian Photography Today*, National Museum of Photography, Bradford, GB
- 1986** *Studio Nadar*, Ernst Muzeum, Budapest, HU
- 1982** *Hungarian Photography 1840-1981*, Palace of Exhibition,

- Budapest, HU
- 1976** *Expozició*, Hatvany Lajos Muzeum, Hatvan, HU
- 1968** *Dance in Photography*, National Gallery, Budapest, HU
- 1963** *Women in the 20th Century*, Ernst Muzeum, Budapest, HU
- 1961** *International Photography*, Ernst Muzeum, Budapest, HU

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Contact

Péter Korniss
<https://korniss.webdesign.hu/en>