

“WE WERE LED BY THE LORD IN A SPECIAL WAY...”

VISIONS, EXPLICATIONS AND REALITY IN A TWENTIETH CENTURY CALVINIST CONGREGATION

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Abstract: The main religious lay-leader of the Hungarian Calvinists living in Carpathian Ukraine was the peasant-prophetess, Mrs. Mariska Borku (1910–1978). Her highly important work, the so-called “Third Testament” is a manuscript, written under the influence of the Holy Spirit. It was considered by Mrs. Mariska Borku and her followers as a holy text, a part of the Bible. These almost 800 biblical “quasi loci” were spread in hand-written copies and were read aloud at religious meetings in the Hungarian villages of Carpathian Ukraine, even 10–15 years after her death. Beside the biblical paraphrases, religious songs and prayers, one fourth of the text consists of her visions. The prophetess never explained these visions and the Holy Spirit’s “verbs” to her followers – only announced them. Recently the largest religious community of her followers, mostly women over fifty, exists in the village of Dercen. Its lay-leader, Miss Ida Balla, can explain the Words of the “Third Testament”, and the visions of Mrs. Borku on the occasion of their private religious service Sunday afternoons.

My study offers a short survey of the historical and political situation of the area between 1920 and 1995, in which the emphasised folk religion played a very important role in the survival of national identity and in strengthening the faith of the Hungarian inhabitants living in a very often tragic minority status.

I illustrate my presentation with original visionary texts of the “Third Testament”, and their actual-political exegesis given by the recent lay-leader of Mrs. Mariska Borku’s followers.

Keywords: religious lay-leader, peasant-prophetess, Hungarian Calvinists, Carpathian Ukraine, influence of the Holy Spirit, manuscript, the so-called “Third Testament”, private religious service, survival of national identity, minority status

A special phenomenon of Calvinist folk religion in Carpathian Ukraine is a peasant-prophetess, Mariska Borku (1910–1978) and the still existing circle of her followers. Since 1989 I have been dealing with the activity of this prophetess, her personality, and the social and intellectual influence and folklore of her teachings.¹

The region where Mariska Borku lived makes this theme especially fascinating. This part (Sub-Carpathia) of today’s Ukraine belonged to Hungary before the First World War when 60% of the population were Ruthenians, 25% Hungarians and the rest Jews, Romanians and Germans.² Under the terms of the Treaty of Trianon, the territory was annexed to Czecho-Slovakia. The Czech rule lasted from May 1919 till October 1939 when it was reoccupied by the Hungarians who lost it again in 1944.

¹ KÜLLÖS 1993, 1998, 1999. I did fieldwork on four occasions (spring 1989, autumn 1992, summer 1993 and 1995) in the company of Calvinist Dean Ambrus Molnár.

² Cf. SZABÓ 1993.

The multiethnic Sub-Carpathia belonged to Ukraine for a short while, then in July 1945 became part of the Soviet Union. The ethnocide carried out between 1944 and '47 at the order of Stalin was only recently revealed. All Hungarian and German men between the ages of 18 and 50 from this region were interned in November 1944 on the pretext of "three days of work". Only a half to two-thirds of the men returned years later from the prisoner-of-war camps. (Unfortunately, there are still no precise figures on the numbers of internments and deaths.)³ Since December 1991 Sub-Carpathia has been part of newly independent Ukraine but this has not brought much in the way of positive change for the remaining 155 000 to 160 000 Hungarians, who still constitute the biggest national minority in the region. Because of the difficulty in securing a livelihood, Hungarians, particularly intellectuals and tradesmen, have been migrating to Hungary in a steady stream since 1991.

I have sketched in this background to give an idea of the unstable historical and political conditions in which a Calvinist Hungarian peasant woman with two children was "called" by the Holy Spirit to preach in October 1936 in Tiszaágtelek. It will also give a better understanding of why the Hungarian minority, repeatedly confused in its identity and nationality, persecuted for its religion and living a precarious existence, needed and still needs to believe in this lay religious leader.⁴

The activity of Mariska Borku over a period of 40 years has two results and traces that can be examined from the angle of folkloristics, history of religion and cultural anthropology.

One is the so-called Third Testament (*Lettszövetség*), a manuscript written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, combining texts of various genres, which is a document not only of the work of a peasant woman who preached for 40 years, but also reflects her spiritual experiences and theological views. Mariska Borku and her followers regarded this writing as the third part of the Bible, a renewed covenant with the Lord proclaimed by the Holy Spirit, and it is still read at religious services held in the family and homes. Manuscript copies of varying length can still be found in Calvinist villages of Sub-Carpathia. This is understandable since, up to the collapse of the Soviet Union (1990), official religious practice was regarded as a seditious activity, and it was impossible to obtain Hungarian-language printed religious materials, Bibles, prayer books or hymn books. Anyone who wanted such material made hand-written copies in exercise books from old publications borrowed from whoever would lend them, or from other people's manuscripts, and read these. To my greatest surprise, I found that in the seventies and eighties people in Sub-Carpathia longing for religious literature made copies from each other's exercise books of Milton's *Paradise Lost* in Hungarian translation. In these circumstances the Third Testament written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit filled a keenly-felt

³ György DUPKA 1993.

⁴ Mariska Borku was not the only Sub-Carpathian peasant-prophet in the 20th century. A prophetess was active in 1938–50 in the neighbouring village of Nagydobrony. One of my students wrote a PhD thesis on her personality and her religious activity which was known in a much more limited circle. For details on this, see SÁNDOR 1998 and 1999.

need. The followers of the prophetess are still able to quote from it by heart and revere it as a norm. The work is thus not only a constituent part of modern peasant literacy but also of religious oral tradition in Sub-Carpathia. (This is now true only for the generation over 50.)

The other phenomenon to be examined from the angle of religious ethnology is the existence of the so-called peasant ecclesiolas, small prayer groups formed within the Calvinist congregations in Hungarian villages of Sub-Carpathia (Nagydobrony, Dercen, Fornos, Csongor). The faithful who regard themselves as believers in the Third Testament and live in spiritual fraternity now represent no more than 2 to 5% of the different congregations, but everywhere they are the most fervently religious core of the community.

I have chosen as the basic text for this paper the longest folk manuscript known to me, a copy of the Third Testament done by a woman in Dercen (Róza Fodor, 1928). It contains 780 "Words". Out of these 780 religious texts of various genres, 183 (more than a quarter) are narratives of visions.⁵

In interpreting and analysing the visions of Mariska Borku I relied on two related sources:

a) visions recorded in writing in the Third Testament,⁶

b) narratives living in oral tradition, containing visions, dreams and miraculous recoveries related to her prophetic activity, or explaining her written Words and visions and applying them to current events.

In this paper I shall deal with popular interpretation of a few of the prophetess' visions of historical, current political or local relevance.

Mariska Borku was "called" at the age of 26, after family problems and illnesses, in a vision accompanied by hallucinations, in the same way as the biblical prophets.⁷ She thought these unusual phenomena were a sign of her approaching death, and only gradually became aware that they were the will of God: "...I was found to be faithful in small things and so He entrusted a spiritual family to me. I tend the flock under the guidance of the only shepherd." (445)

I found on the occasion of my first collecting trip that Mariska Borku only explained the Words learnt from the Holy Spirit and the visions if she was specifically called on to do so. Her task was only to transmit the divine manifestations. When I

⁵ I was able to make a photocopy of this manuscript notebook in October 1992. Its owner lent it only reluctantly and for a short time, since it was part of her daily religious practice to read the Third Testament. For understandable reasons, it was even more difficult to obtain the autograph manuscripts of Mariska Borku for the purpose of making photocopies. It was not until June 1993 that her daughter decided to lend her mother's "sacred" writing. She was afraid that without it, trouble would befall her house and family. However, she also dreamt that the time would come when this sacred text could be published, so she regarded this research as the fulfilment of her prophetic dream. Up to 1993 I had copies only of the autograph copy of the first 187 "Words" – which Mariska Borku had sent to the Calvinist minister of Nagydobrony in 1937 – and of versions of the Third Testament copied by three followers.

⁶ The figures in brackets refer to the numbering of the Dercen Third Testament copy.

⁷ G. ANDRÉ 1982; KISS 1942; DREWERMANN 1985 (one chapter also appeared in Hungarian in 1991 under the title: "Jelenések, isteni elhívások, víziók és próféciák" [Apparitions, divine callings, visions and prophets]. *Egyház és Világ* II, 13:6–12).

asked questions her followers addressed me to a “spiritual sister” in Dercen, Ida Balla, a spinster crippled in childhood, saying that she was the person able to interpret the Words and visions of the Third Testament. “She has been given this grace”, and as the lay-leader of the 20 to 30-member peasant ecclesiola still operating in Dercen, she does so every Sunday afternoon. Thus, in presenting the visions of the prophetess I have relied mainly on the explanations and interpretations of Ida Balla and her circle, who call themselves the “workers of the Third Testament”.

The method I use for analysis could perhaps be called “anthropological hermeneutics”.⁸ I attempt to link the reading and aesthetically perceived level of the texts with an approach that interprets retrospectively and also decodes the historical and spiritual aspects.

One of the central themes and main messages of the Third Testament is to confirm that the teachings of Mariska Borku are not in contradiction with the Bible; she is not the founder of a sect but an intermediary. She carries out her activity under divine inspiration, with the help of the Holy Spirit, for the good of her immediate community.

The Words of Mariska Borku stress in a number of places that the Third Testament and the Bible (Old and New Testaments) belong together, forming a three-part whole. The following pronouncement is practically unassailable theologically and a manifest truth in her folkloric culture which favoured the tripartite principle:

*God says: in the Old Testament: I am as the Father,
In the New Testament I appear as the Son,
And in the Third Testament I teach and speak
As the Saviour by the Holy Spirit.*

*“When a prophet of the Lord is among you
I reveal myself to him in visions
I speak to him in dreams”* – we read in the Bible. (Numbers 12:6)

I found in my fieldwork that the majority of my informants attributed coherent meaning to the happenings of real life and the pronouncements and visions of the Third Testament. They constantly compared the events of everyday life and history with the Words of Mariska Borku and were able to explain and accept the most varied and unexpected life situations with these texts calling for spiritual awakening, patience and charity and strengthening their sense of being chosen.

For example: *“A cloud of darkness has descended on the house of prayer”* – wrote Mariska Borku in one passage, and her followers in Nagydobrony link this pronouncement with the real fact that in the Soviet period the churches were closed and children under 18 were forbidden to exercise their religion.

Allow me to cite two visions of particular current political relevance in the Third Testament:

⁸ On the model of the literary hermeneutics of H. R. JAUSS 1981. See also ORBÁN 1992.

1. *"I was taken in spirit by an angel from river to river and from lakes to lakes. And the angel pointed to the lake and river and said: – The waters in these are poisoned. – The angel of death came down and took me to the dried up river and there were dead fish there, and took me to a swampy lake, and they teemed there. And finally, the angel took me to a mountain, this well was dug by Noah, and I saw a multitude of living fish in it, and said: – This is the living water gushing from inside the mountain, that you have received from Jesus for preservation. These fish drink from it and eat manna under the palm-trees."*

According to Ida Balla, leader of the lay congregation, the poisoned waters are the evil teachings of the Russians and the communists, which spread over a very great area, *"from rivers to rivers and from lakes to lakes"*. These evil teachings are causing the destruction of human life. The swampy lake symbolizes the church which is full of errors and therefore its followers live with great difficulty (*"wasting away"*!); it is only the fish in *"living water"* in Noah's well, the *"workers of the Third Testament"* – who prosper. An important message of the visions of the prophetess was dissatisfaction with the Calvinist Church and the priesthood who failed to ease the *"spiritual hunger"* of the believers. In these visions the walls of the church are cracked, only the foundations are intact; in cases it has fallen in ruins and she helps to rebuild it; or the path leading to the church is overgrown with weeds and she has to clear it; elsewhere the angel shows her at the Communion table how to prepare good food for the congregation.

It is difficult for the outsider to decide which vision of the prophetess should be understood in a figurative sense and which have concrete content applying to a local event. Her followers know this exactly, although they emphasize that Mariska Borku did not prophesy, *"she did not do superstition"* (that is, she was not a seer or a healer), her task with the help of the Holy Spirit was spiritual guidance and enlightenment, setting an example and bearing witness. As Ida Balla put it: *"She was like Hobab for us."*⁹

I did not understand the following vision in the Third Testament either, until Ida Balla explained it:

2. *"Early in the morning I was taken up to the mountain of faith (by the Lord). A stone's throw from the mountain, where I was standing, columns of fire in the form of banners descended from the heavens, and I thought they would burn the earth. As I saw this, I prayed more fervently to the Lord, and then I saw a divine hand reaching down to the very lowest fire, and it pulled up that great fire. Standing on the mountain I gave thanks to the Lord because I survived. Thy will be done, my Father. Amen."*

I quote Ida Balla's explanation: *"You will be remembering the Prague Spring? Well then the two sides, the western side and the Soviet Union, they were a-sitting in the train here, because Tiszaágtelek and Ágcsernyő are close, – that's where they were, and Mariska Borku told how the soldiers were set up there, all the land around Ágtelek and Nagydobrony was full of them, because World War Three would have*

⁹ See Numbers 10: 29–32.

started here, they would have clashed here. But then the Lord averted that. It doesn't matter that the Soviets occupied Czechoslovakia! That was the Lord's will. Because if the West had occupied it, then World War Three, the battlefield would have started here, not in Russia, because its border (that is, of the USSR) was here then, *but the Lord defended this area for the sake of the prophet, because the Third Testament wasn't yet written then*. Then He reached down, then pulled up the great fire with His hand, then they reached an agreement: the Soviet Union occupied Czechoslovakia, they agreed there on the train, then we were spared the soldiers. – But Mariska Borku said that – if the Lord hadn't pulled the fire with His hand – not even the black soil would have been left here! Such a great mercy! *This is how we were led by the Lord, how we knew where history stands.*"

All the Words of the Third Testament show a thorough knowledge of the Bible, and in particular the Revelation of Saint John and the Psalms. It is actually a paraphrase of the Bible. The layout of the notebooks containing the Third Testament – the arrangement of the texts in two columns and their numbering – reveals the biblical model. And the material collected locally provided abundant evidence that in the culture found today in the Calvinist villages of Sub-Carpathia the language of everyday religious communication is a figurative language full of biblical similes, metaphors and parables (in reality, the language used in the beautiful translation of the Bible done in 1590 by Gáspár Károli). In their spontaneous prayers, dream and vision narratives, and in their religious poems the "workers of the Third Testament" use the imagery of that translation, as well as the style and phraseology of an 18th century Calvinist book of prayer¹⁰ that has appeared in numerous editions. It was among the most moving experiences of my career to hear the eloquence of these barely educated women and to see their deeply experienced faith in God.

The exceptionally rich collection of visions in the Bible paraphrase of Mariska Borku is quite literally *narrative theology*.¹¹ Further analysis of this material offers a unique possibility for getting to know and understand Calvinist spirituality and folk mentality in Sub-Carpathia.¹² Up to now the ministers, representatives of the local church only forbade its use if it came to attention, or from the outset ignored it. But none of them took the trouble to look into these folk manuscripts, to "decode" the "message" this prophetic tradition had for them, too. The entire activity and personality of the prophetess of Tiszaágtelek and the narrative tradition that has grown up around her Words all show what a wide gap there still is between the so-called elite and folk culture. More precisely, how the people attempt to reconcile the phenomena of reality with official theology, how they reshape it according to their own laws and adapt it into their own traditional ideology, folklore.

Although the peasant-prophetess *carried out individual religious activity*, the *influence* of her extraordinary life-work is *communal* and many of its characteristics are

¹⁰ György SZIKSZAY: Keresztyényi tanítások és imádságok a keresztyén embernek külön-különféle állapotai és szükségei szerint. [Christian Teachings and Prayers for the Multifarious Conditions and Needs of the Christian] Debrecen 1795.

¹¹ On this concept and the anthropology of the senses, see W. BRÜCKNER 1979.

¹² GACSÁLYI 1985; SÁNDOR 1998.

universal.¹³ The Third Testament is not only an unmatched document of Hungarian-language Protestant folklore, but was also a source of spiritual strength for the Hungarians of Sub-Carpathia during the years of Soviet oppression, which strengthened their sense of belonging together and was an integral part of the survival strategy of more than one small village community. For it exhorted patience, steadfastness and unconditional faith in God, and proclaimed religious ecumenism, saying:

"The Word is addressed to everyone!"

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¹³ A. LJUNGDAHL 1975; DREWERMANN 1985.