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Being at a Feast – a fieldwork diary

It was very clear from the start that the fieldwork I was to participate in Szeged would be very different from the fieldwork I had done so far. Whereas I am used to planning and doing the fieldwork on my own on topics I know quite well, I would now work in a team investigating a phenomenon I knew very little about – and all this in a strange and new environment! My lack of knowledge in Hungarian would make my usual fieldwork method of personal in-depth interviews impossible. However, this situation also opened up possibilities for me to explore new ways of doing fieldwork and, very importantly, to learn from my co-workers.

Friday 1 August

9:00 am Preparations for fieldwork. The participants, teachers, Hungarian and international students, gathered at the Ethnology department of Szeged University to discuss different approaches to fieldwork. We divided ourselves into different search-teams according to what specific theme we had chosen to work with. My team, led by Bertalan Pusztai, would be focusing on the church and the cloister. In our discussion within the group we came to the conclusion that we should specifically concentrate on observing peoples behaviour in the church.

Friday afternoon: We went down to the church to watch the decorating and preparations for the feast. The young monks from the Franciscan community were cleaning all the public spaces, even sweeping dust and cobweb of the Some of them were carrying extra chairs into the church. Old ladies were busying around with big bouquets of flowers. Our Hungarian teachers had told us that they were all members of the guild of St. Anne. The old ladies evidently took pride in decorating the church. They took great care in arranging the flowers and discussed the alternatives among themselves. Some of the ladies seemed to be more in charge than the others – perhaps they had greater experience when it came to this event?

We had the opportunity to speak with some of the ladies. Ildikó Pusztai translated into English. They explained that the ladies group met every Tuesday. The meetings were usually led by a priest. The group seemed to have a 'social-security'

function. The ladies said that if one of the members were absent from the meetings it is important to find out why. If she is ill the other members will visit her. Within the group they can discuss problems at home e t c.

The flowers for the decorating of the church were grown especially for the purpose and were collected by the believers. It is very important to arrange them nicely; preferably one should have two or three colours combined with some green. Some time ago a nun lived in the community and then she took care of the decorating. Now when she has gone it is the old ladies job.

Saturday 2 August

8:30 am Arrived to the church. The ladies were busy decorating the entrances to the church and the cloister with a colourful garland of flowers. An old man and a young girl is also helping out. It is raining rather heavily and the Hungarian students' film team have to hold the umbrellas for their cameramen. The old ladies do not seem to mind the rain too much. There is a table with tea and coffee. The sugar is slowly dissolving in the bowl.

9:00 am The fieldworkers are sitting in the lecture room we have been given as head-quarters. The film team try to warm and dry up a bit.

9:15 am I had planned to go and take a look at the church but the Franciscan are holding some sort of private service in the apse so I remained in the entrance looking through the windows of the inner doors. It is still drizzling a bit. No pilgrims around as far as I could tell.

9:30 am The different teams are preparing in the 'head-quarters'. The market group is a bit at a lose end because of the rain. There is not much happening outside the church. My search group is in a good mood, making jokes and trying to get organised.

There are flowers in the corridor along the midship of the church. I draw the conclusion that this means it is part of the sacred ground of the pilgrims. A few lay people are sitting in the church praying. There is no one in the church. It is still very, very quiet. Is this because of the rain? I look at the sequence of psalms on the board: 814, 229, 256, 801, 303 – and I wonder whether there will be any psalms I know. I few people from our search group are walking around in the almost empty church.

Later in the afternoon our group, that consist only of international students, get the opportunity to do an interview with Ethnology student and Franciscan brother Kelemen. We are sitting in one of the small siderooms that apparently are used for teaching and as an assembly room for the guild of St. Anne. Bertalan and Ildikó Pusztai acted as translators, mainly for us foreigners as brother Kelemen seemed to understand most of was being said in English. We asked Kelemen about the preparations for the feast. He answers that the most important thing to do is to clean the church, especially the windows and the floor. The members of the congre-

gation help. There are also the preparations for the Sunday lunch which is held for the Bishop, the Lord Mayor and some other specially invited guests. Plates and cutlery have to be ordered as well as food and pots for cooking. The old ladies of the guild will help with laying the table. During the actual feast the liturgical tasks are mainly for the believers. There are always two monks responsible for order and organisation of every mass. However, the monks without specific tasks will probably go about their everyday duties regardless of the feast.

There seemed to be some tension between the showmen at the fair and the clergy. The previous year a priest had to ask the showmen to turn the music down for the procession. This year white ribbons had been put up to separate the profane market from immediate vicinity of the church. In the old days big groups of pilgrims from the same villages used to travel together. Nowadays people from afar do not visit the feast to the same degree, Kelemen does not know why, but he thinks that it is perhaps more and more turning into a local feast, the feast of the people of Szeged-Alsóváros. It seems like the social needs the feast serves have changed.

Kelemen estimated that the feast was more important to Szeged and the community than to the monastery. To the monks serving the parish was more important than the actual feast.

Kelemen then answers questions on the daily routines of the monastery and why he chose to become a monk. On the question why there are so many young monks in the Szeged community he gives a very comprehensive answer. First and foremost it has probably to do with the personality of St. Francis - who is a very popular saint especially among young people. The famous film by Zefirelli has also influenced a lot of people to find out more. The knowledge that there exist a young community also attracts other young people. Furthermore the fact that the order can accept other occupations than priests is an important factor. In this respect that the Franciscan order is more open than most other Catholic orders.

2:20 p.m. The Children's Mass, The altarboys and -girls are preparing in the corridor. Everybody is waiting for the Bishop to arrive. In the church the congregation is practising the psalms for the mass.

2:25 p.m. The Bishop arrives.

2:30 p.m. The mass starts. There are quite a lot of disabled people and families with children present. However, the mass seems to be a bit too long and 'talkative' to keep the interest of the younger section of the congregation.

After the Children's Mass we ask questions and take photos of the altarboys and the girls from the choir. By 4:15 p.m. we are ready to return to the hostel for our dinner.

6:10 p.m. High Mass. The church is crowded, a lot of people are standing in the aisle and in the back of the church, As I am standing near the doors I can hear the sound and noise from the fair. Old euro-disco hits mixes with the voice of the priest. The contrast is quite striking. I find it a bit surprising that the doors are open all through the service. People are walking in and out. My helpful and ever-

patient friend Ildikó translates some of the sermon for me. Interestingly the priest is known for his opposition to popular religion. In his sermon he criticises that people are just waiting for miracles. After the sermon he mentions the presence of the ethnology teams. When the service is over and people are leaving the church an old lady walks up to us, she is evidently very moved. She takes my hand and starts speaking very animatedly, tears are running down her cheeks. Ildikó translates: The old woman talks about her joy in front of the miraculous Mary-image. 'The painting', she says, 'is truly miraculous'. For me this incident constituted an interesting contrast to the words of the priest.

Later in the evening we, the fieldwork team, watch the preparations for the Greek Catholic liturgy.

22.00 p.m. There is less people in the church for the Greek-Catholic liturgy, the congregation almost solely consists of elderly ladies – and, of course, young ethnology and folklore students. A lot of incense is used during the service. An old lady sitting on the side-benches in the apse looks like she is near choking. There is quite a lot of confusion among the congregation as to when to sit down and when to remain standing. I try to follow the majority – and when there is a draw, remain standing to be on the safe side. I like the service and the heavy scent of incense. However some of the participating Franciscan monks seem to have problems with staying awake.

23:45 p.m. Back in the head-quarters again. We are all fairly tired but in a good mood. The Hungarian students are very giggly. My search-team decide to skip the Requiem and do an interview with three Franciscan brothers instead.

We interviewed Benedek, László and Timóteus in the small office in the entrance to the monastery. We started by discussing the pilgrim feast. Brother Timóteus said that he fears that the feast are not solely for religious purposes. The tradition does not seem to attract young people. Benedek compared the Szeged feast with pilgrim feasts elsewhere. He felt that there were too many masses and that there should be more time for private veneration. Still, the feast is a good opportunity to reach out to people who does not usually go to church.

Benedek, László and Timóteus also explain why they choose to become monks and why specifically Franciscan monks. Their backgrounds and reasons were different but for all of them it was a decision that grew upon them after starting to think about their lives. All of them found the freedom and the openness the Franciscan order offers attractive.

Sunday 3 August

01:50 am There are a few of us left to go through the stations of the cross.

8:50 am On the tram out to the church I met an old lady. She spoke English since she had lived three years in Florida. She was also on her way to the pilgrim feast. I asked her what she thought about it. She answered that she liked it very

much and that she participated in it every year. She also went to church every Sunday. When we arrive to the church it is obvious that there is a lot more people around than on Friday. There are also more sellers and tents at the market. The sun is pouring down gloriously.

8:55 am In the church people are practising psalms. There is a lot of people inside, more than yesterday. There are also quite a few families with children and, even more common, old ladies with their grandchildren. The bishop is participating in this mass which finishes with the procession round the church. For this occasion the people at the fair have actually turned the music off, instead psalm singing is sounding from the loudspeakers on the church wall.

11:00 am The sellers of religious objects outside the church seem to be doing very well. The believers are obviously very keen to bring some souvenir with them back home. The music from the fair is turned up high again. People are standing in groups and talking on the square outside the church. It seems to be a very social event.

The rest of the afternoon our search-team spend walking around the fair observing sellers and buyers, and also trying some of the specialities on offer ourselves.

In the evening we watch some of the video shot during the fieldwork.

Monday 4 August

This day is spent at the Department of Ethnology. Within the search teams we discuss our observations and ways of presenting our results to the other groups.

Tuesday 5 August

The different groups present some of their findings, general discussion. and the closing of the seminar.

The participation in the seminar and fieldwork in Szeged was a very interesting experience for me. Three of the main 'benefits' it brought me was perhaps first and foremost to be able to learn about and study at close hand a custom I previously knew very little about. Experiencing a different way of doing fieldwork from what I am used to also proved to be a valuable lesson. Especially seeing how the video can be used for folkloristic work was very inspiring. Lastly it was very interesting for me to see how I could apply some of my research on drama/performance onto a pilgrim feast. And, naturally, one of the most important aspects with an international fieldwork course like this is the possibility to meet follow folklorists from all over Europe.