

In Memoriam Béla Gunda (1911–1994)

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The following article commemorates the great figure of 20th-century Hungarian ethnography, Béla Gunda, who died thirty years ago. Béla Gunda stayed away from politics, and he had no educational radio or TV series or media appearances popularizing science that would have etched his name in the nation's memory. At most, newspapers reported some of his foreign scientific awards, such as the Herder Prize and the Pitré Prize. In retrospect, considering the absence of Hungarian state awards as well as his awards and professional recognition abroad, it is no exaggeration to say that he received more recognition abroad than at home. This statement is also underlined by the fact that the Hungarian Academy of Sciences elected him as a corresponding member quite belatedly, at the age of 80, in 1990, and then as a full member in 1991. During the years of political regime change (1989–1990), the Academy rushed to reinstate the membership of scientists (most of them posthumously) who had been arbitrarily excluded on political grounds during the communist takeover and tried to make up for member elections missed for similar reasons: those of Béla Gunda, Kálmán Benda, György Györffy, and other distinguished scientists. After all, the 'sort of' restoration of scientific values was brought on by the regime and era change.

It is impossible to define in a sentence or two who Béla Gunda was. In commemorations of him, he is usually described as “a researcher of comparative ethnography, the folk traditions of the Carpathian Basin and the Balkan Peninsula,” and “the most significant Hungarian scholar of European ethnology.” Indeed, Professor Gunda was one of Europe's most renowned and popular ethnographers in the half-century between 1940 and 1990, and two major tribute volumes written by the best of European ethnology, were published in his honor at the age of 60 (the larger one in Copenhagen, the other one at the University of Debrecen). He owed his prominence to his uniquely prolific publication activity compiling and interpreting ethnographic documentation, a plethora of books and articles in foreign languages, active participation in international conferences, frequent travels, tireless correspondence, and his exceptional ability to build and maintain relationships. He was on the editorial board of dozens of international, foreign, and Hungarian journals, and was an active member of numerous international organizations, working committees, and professional cooperations. In addition to the major world languages (including Russian), he was also able to communicate in Swedish, Slovak, and Romanian and was proud of his publications in Croatian, Slovak, Romanian, Polish,

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Finnish, Bulgarian, and other less common languages. It was mainly thanks to Béla Gunda that Budapest and Debrecen became centers of European ethnology in the 1960s.

On his initiative, and with his editorial and authorial contributions, an entire series of ethnographic studies have been published, featuring an international roster of authors, on subjects such as pastoralism, animal husbandry, peasant farming, folk architecture, or fishing methods and cultures, in a broad European and even global framework (an example of the latter is *The Fishing Culture of the World*, a large two-volume work that he edited). One of his last undertakings, which mobilized an international group of authors and was co-edited by his student, László Lukács, a Herder Fellow, was dedicated to the memory of his late teacher, Zsigmond Bátky (the volume was published in 1989 in Székesfehérvár, by the Szent István Király Museum, and was well received in European ethnological workshops across the continent).

His handbook on Hungarian folk culture was published in Finnish in 1996, posthumously, at the University of Jyväskylä, and has been used as a textbook there ever since.

In his obituary of István Györffy, written in 1939, Gyula Illyés praised our great predecessor as “the scholar of the Hungarian people.” We know very well that Györffy was not only studying Hungarian traditions. He devoted much of his time to studying various Romanian and Turkish ethnic groups, conducted field research in Moldavia, Dobruja, and Asia Minor, and all his life he was interested in the nomads of Inner Asia and the lifeways of the Turkish-Tatar peoples of the Volga region. Although his major volumes such as *Ethnographica Carpathica* (1966) and *Ethnographica Carpatho-Balcanica* (1979) focus on the peripheries and neighboring areas of the territory inhabited by Hungarians, Béla Gunda was himself a “scholar of the Hungarian people.” His generation, having suffered the trauma of Trianon, strove perhaps even more than their predecessors to demonstrate the values of Hungarian folk culture and to convince the world of the thousand-year-old European character of the Hungarian people, of the Christianity they adopted under King St. Stephen, and of their European culture that can also appreciate the Eastern elements of their traditions.

He often quoted Kodály’s words to us, his students: “Hungarian culture: an eternal struggle between [Eastern] tradition and Western culture (...) One hand still held by the Nogai Tatars, Votyaks, and Cheremis, the other by Bach and Palestrina. Can we bring these distant worlds together?” As editor of the 1943 Kodály Memorial Book and a scholar who wrote a lot of poetry in his youth and has respected and loved poetry all his life, Béla Gunda understood exactly the metaphor and anguish of Kodály, the musicologist.

Gunda, who successfully traced the “old European” folk heritage in the current culture, chose the conclusion of the psychoanalytic ethnologist Géza Róheim’s book *Hungarian Folk Belief and Customs* as the motto of one of his books: “The peoples of Europe are completely unaware of how close they are mentally.”

Professor Gunda explained in his lectures and in his treatises: “The nation lives not only in its language, but also in its history, traditions, and cultural heritage in their broadest sense. We came close to dying when we had to submit to a foreign ideology in our mother tongue.” His historical perspective is reflected in his statement that “Through language [through writing], we communicate not only with each other but also with our past.” This view of tradition can be found in his monograph of “rural research” published in 1936 under the title *Elsüllyedt falu a Dunántúlon, Kemse község élete* (A sunken village in Transdanubia: Life in the village of Kemse), and also in his inaugural at the Academy more than half a century later, in 1991: “We embrace



the traditions of the past. Yet we don't want to preserve that world for its own sake, but to incorporate the values of the past into our historical consciousness."

Even in his old age, Professor Gunda enjoyed doing fieldwork in villages, remote rangelands and farms. He investigated ethnographic phenomena, listened to the social complaints, witch stories, and fairy tales of the down-and-out, because he believed that "The field is the ethnographer's laboratory." An ethnographer cannot become an armchair scientist, cannot be satisfied with information from libraries and archives, cannot be content with newspaper and media reports if he wants to follow the cultural and social changes in rural society, if he wants to learn about the real evolution of folklife. It was this approach, preserved from his youth as a rural researcher, that made his teaching so appealingly animated. During his long teaching career, he raised three generations of ethnographers. The first at the University of Cluj, the other two at the University of Debrecen. His students continue to serve the cause of the survival of Hungarian folk tradition, cultural heritage, and national identity, and to keep and spread the memory of their late teacher.

Few representatives of ethnography in Hungary have received a commemorative plaque from a posterity appreciative of their life's work, the narrower homeland that raised and issued them, and even fewer of them have a museum, square, or street named after them. Of Professor Gunda's teachers, we can refer to the memorial sites of István Györffy, Károly Viski, and Zsigmond Bátky, and among his contemporaries, primarily Sándor Bálint and Sándor Szűcs. They are joined by Béla Gunda, whose memorial plaque was unveiled in Debrecen in 2011 and in Székesfehérvár in 2012.

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