

Library School Student Book Review

THE MONEY HAT AND OTHER HUNGARIAN FOLK TALES

By Peggy Hoffmann and Gyuri Bíró. Illustrated by Gyuri Bíró

Westminster Press. 158 pages. \$4.50.

It was a rare pleasure for me to read some fables often told me in childhood. This English translation of folktales is a remarkable achievement of the collaborating authors. How this volume came into being is a fascinating story. Mr. George Bíró, "Gyorgy" in Hungarian, who uses the informal "Gyuri" instead, left his native land during the 1956 revolution and came to the U. S. Here he told these tales in German to his American wife who translated them into English. These rough versions were tape recorded and sent to Mrs. Hoffmann who molded them into their present form.

Although I was brought up in a Hungarian town, I also had continuous contact with villagers and absorbed much of their customs and legends. Now I feel that this essence of our romantic past indeed enriched my life. Does this flavor come through in the translation? In my opinion the text and the illustrations truly capture the spirit of the original. Peggy Hoffmann is an experienced children's writer. Her onomatopoeic language is eminently suitable for reading at story hour. I find the literary structure at least as good as that of the original and occasionally even better. Her lively style permeates the text. This may be the secret of her success.

In spite of the fact that Hungary has been exposed to Eastern and Western cultural influences its folklore is not a mixture of these, but unique. For example in Western fables an old woman often turns out to be a witch, while old men are usually wise and kind. The old man of the title tale is crooked. His credulous victims are fooled easily more through their own greed than his cunning. "The Forfeit" features two businessmen, one of whom refuses to pay a debt to the other. King Mátyás the Just (he is called "King Matthias the Just" in the book), the most beloved of all Hungarian kings, passed a judgment in this case so simple and brilliant, that even King Solomon hardly could have excelled it. He hated injustice and always stood up for the indigent and oppressed. "Only One Dog Market in Buda" tells of two men plowing with oxen. King Mátyás, riding through the place, asked the one with six oxen to lend a pair to his neighbor who had only two, four animals being sufficient for the job. The wealthy peasant was furious. "Your Majesty," he sputtered, "I am surprised that you cannot see that he is a poor man and I am a rich one. Why should I give him any of my possessions or even lend him two of my oxen?"

For the most part the affluent are presented as ruthless and greedy, though some tyrants, like Baron Dobrogy in "Ludas Matyi," are reformed after several vigorous thrashings.

Astral beings often play parts in shaping destinies of men. Water sprites, witches, and wizards materialize and disappear in a puff of smoke, like incarnated vicious creatures which are born in nightmares and die away at dawn. Not only mortals are trapped in cause and effect situations; the Devil himself likewise suffers the results of his intrigues.

In "Zoli the Doctor" individual dishonesty and ingratitude are displayed by the villagers in a joint enterprise which originally aimed at pleasing Zoli, their devoted physician. As one sows so he reaps . . . Their inescapable fate after losing Doctor Zoli seems well deserved.

Bíró's drawings blend well with the stories. They admirably complement the characters and events. Unfortunately, as any Hungarian can see, he neglected to check the names. Thus such a fine book is marred by several annoying inaccuracies. For example Károly is accented properly while Béla came through as Bèla which is a grave error because there is no grave in the Hungarian language. Moreover Péter became Peter, István Istvan and so on. These are minor oversights, but they look unnatural and sound ridiculous. Mr. Bíró made sure that his name was correctly printed. His interest in accuracy seems to have ended there.

A work should not be condemned for small faults. On the whole the book is an example of translation at its best. Hungarian is thought to be difficult to translate. Professor Joseph Reményi writes in his essay, "Modern Hungarian Literature in English Translation:" "There are few Hungarians who speak and write English with perfection, and fewer non-Hungarians who know the Hungarian language perfectly. This fact bears a share of responsibility for the lack of competent translators. It is difficult to find truly dependable translators whose rendering does not interfere with the pleasure one rightly expects from plays, novels and poems."

Indeed, few works have been translated successfully into English, and not many of these have been folk tales. The only translations I could find on this subject are: *Hungarian Folk Tales* by Gyula Ortutay, and *Once Upon a Time* by Gyula Illyés. The third is *The Money Hat* which is the first to be translated and published in the U. S.

In *The Money Hat* and the other tales fantasy and reality intermingle. The heroes are frequently entangled with forces of evil in tragi-comic situations. In the struggle the good usually win, but when the wicked powers triumph the moral lesson is still clearly pointed out. It is not forced on the reader, but is a natural consequence of the dramatic development.

These stories talk to all ages. For the young American reader they open the gate to the enchanted castle of Hungarian folklore. The Money Hat can be a uniquely valuable addition to private collections and to school and public libraries.

Reviewed by
Maxim Táborny

(Editor's Note: Mr. Táborny, a student in the Department of Library Science, East Carolina University, is a native of Hungary. Peggy Hoffmann, author whose book he reviews, is a North Carolinian.)