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Keeping Budapest Hopping

Old-time music and folk-dance steps preserve traditions and ethnic pride



The New York Times

LEFT Children's session at Al-massy Square Free Time Center. BELOW Bela Halmos, left, a founder of the dance movement. RIGHT Dancer from Szek, Transylvania, in traditional dress.



Photographs by Alexandra Shelley

By ALEXANDRA SHELLEY

AT 7 o'clock on a recent Saturday evening in Budapest, the call of a lively fiddle lured passers-by through the open door of the Twelfth District Municipal Building. Inside a young man sat playing the violin on a bare stage while a fellow with a handlebar moustache and a whistle like a construction worker taught some 15 couples the csardas — a dance that is somewhere between a Virginia reel and high-impact aerobics.

Soon another fiddler and a violist sauntered onto the stage. A three-stringed double bass kept a twanging beat. By 8 o'clock there were over a hundred dancers, and the swirl of cotton skirts and braids and the thud of boot heels raising dust from the wooden floor would go on until past midnight. During breaks, the musicians and the dancers cracked open beers. A guest ensemble of gypsies from the Transylvania region of Ro-

ALEXANDRA SHELLEY has lived in Hungary and is a regular visitor there.

mania arrived and took the stage. At another point a group of women gathered around a worn notebook of folk song lyrics and begin a haunting a cappella performance.

This was the regular Saturday night dance at which the Pontos Ido (On Time) ensemble plays. Almost every night in Budapest one can find several dances that are held regularly in the same halls and with the same musicians each week. The tanchaz, literally dance house, is open to anyone willing to drop 60 forints (under \$1) and all of their inhibitions at the door.

A folk dance performance is always put into the standard tourist itinerary in Hungary. But folk dancing wasn't meant to be a spectator sport. In the villages it is a community-wide celebration, entertainment, consecration after harvest or spinning cotton, during religious holidays, weddings, funerals. And in Budapest over the past 20 years the dance house — that is the name of the event, not of the building — has become a vital subculture, a way for young people from the so-called asphalt generation to plumb their roots.

The few foreigners who have discovered these folk-dancing sessions are warmly if

incredulously welcomed. The regulars are chiefly students, musicians and young professionals. But you are also likely to run into one of several American amateur folk dancers who have been so bewitched by the dance house circuit that they've contrived to spend much of their time in Hungary. "If you go to a dance house, two hours later you know everybody," said Katalin Rosta, the head of the Dance House Chamber, an organization of over 80 ensembles and dance teachers.

Each dance house has a different flavor, reflecting the ethnic variety in Eastern Europe. There are Hungarian, Balkan and Israeli dance houses. On Wednesday nights at the Marczibányi Square Culture Center, the Tatros Ensemble plays the music of the Csangos, a branch of the Hungarian people living in two regions of Romania: the Gyimes Pass and a remote corner of Moldavia. At the moment, this is the most popular event among aficionados. The music is new to Budapest since until two years ago travelers were barred from both regions. Played on a lute-type instrument, a wooden shepherd's

pipe, a violin and a cello whacked with a stick, the music is exotic even by Hungarian standards.

Some dance houses begin their programs at 5 P.M., with dancing and handicrafts for children. Formal instruction for adults lasts from 7 to about 8:30 but continues in one portion of the room throughout the evening. A professional dancer works with newcomers. The dance proper begins about 8:30 and goes on until at least midnight.

Suggested attire is, for women, a skirt that swirls, and for men, shoes with resonant heels. If you forgot to pack these things you can buy them from the Transylvanian peasant women in the lobbies of the buildings who sell used clothing, everything from aprons to beaded belts and elaborately embroidered jackets. Prices range from about \$7 for a simple white peasant shirt to \$40 for a fur-lined vest. Though there is little folk-dance etiquette, you're sure to be accepted if you throw out your cholesterol count at the snack bar by ordering a gyros kenyér — fresh brown bread spread with lard and onions.

Teachers like Laszlo Csatai at the Pontos Ido dances are undaunted by visitors with two left feet. In fact, Mr. Csatai consistently

plucks wall-flowers from their chairs. "C'mon, it'll only be harder later," he urged this reluctant foreigner. Within a moment I found myself being spun like a dervish by a partner in a csardas.

Mr. Csatai, a former professional troupe dancer, also presides at the Muzsikás and the Teka Ensemble dance houses. Having taught Italian nuns, Japanese businessmen, female prisoners, he maintains that he could "teach in Heaven."

During the teaching of dances like the csardas, partners are switched, and in most places I found the habitués to be extremely patient, often putting in words of encouragement in English. "We need to solidify our position," advised one partner, showing me how to grip his back with one hand while resting the other lightly on his shoulder so I could pirouette at a moment's notice. Another explained I'd get less dizzy if I looked into his eyes.

The 19th-century Hungarian poet, Janos Arany, described it this way:

A hundred couples are moving, all of them together.

There will be an infinite labyrinth . . .

In which — as many as there are couples —
as many

Shapes and moods of the dance,
And yet it is the same beat

That governs everyone's steps.

It is dancing on this borderline between a private world and a community that makes it so satisfying. In the chain or round dances, even a rank beginner has at least one heady moment when she stops worrying about stepping on her neighbor's foot and feels a sense of belonging to the whole. And in the couple's dances the world collapses to the space enclosed by your arms.

The dance sessions are serenaded by the best professional folk groups in the country. For instance, Muzsikas, when it is not touring abroad, cutting records or doing the sound track for movies like Costa-Gavras's "Music Box," still plays every Tuesday at the Szakszervezetek Fovarosi Muvelodesi Haz (Culture House of the Capital City Union).

Members of other ensembles usually show up and wait to be asked to play. Sometimes up to 20 accumulate on stage and often a few will jam in the lobby or by the bar.

BELA HALMOS, one of two musicians credited with founding the Budapest dance house movement, says he was impelled by a desire to bring folk dance and music down from the stage, where it had become enshrined in formal choreography and conventional instruments like the piano.

In the late 60's he was one of the pilgrims following Bela Bartok and Zoltan Kodaly to Transylvanian villages to learn to play folk music on original instruments. A combination of the romance with all things Western and the Socialist homogenization of culture had all but driven folk music from Hungary proper, replacing it with what Mr. Halmos called "pseudo-romantic folk trash." In Transylvania, however, the Hungarian population was under siege from the Romanian Government and buffered from Western influences. Folk culture was fiercely maintained as a form of resistance.

Among the instruments unearthed — and which one can hear at the dances today — are the hurdy-gurdy, the Jew's harp, the bagpipe and zither. The more ancient dance tunes, a fermentation including Turkish and Balkan strains, can strike a Western ear as dissonant or eerie, but nevertheless have an urgency impossible to sit out.

In the dance house, the musicians follow a specific dance order, a sort of suite, named after the village or region where it originated. Almost always the first is from the village of Szek, an island of Hungarians amid their age-old enemies, the Romanians. Its ancient polyphonic music, its deceptively simple dances with their minimal gestures and gliding steps (the women weighted down by heavy skirts) have been preserved in the bell jar of Szek's isolation. "There, almost everything happens in tanchaz — this is where they meet, where the love starts, where they get rid of every week's sorrows, where they say farewell to those who go away," said Daniel Hamar, bass player for Muzsikas.

A csardas that would take 45 minutes in



Alexandra Shelley

Laszlo Csatai, an instructor, leads a chain dance at the Almassy Square Free Time Center in Budapest.

Where the groups play for folk dancing around the city

In Budapest, from mid-September through mid-June, one can find a dance house — as the folk-dancing sessions are called — every night of the week except Monday. A few continue throughout the summer. They are generally listed in the English-language monthly Budapest Program, under Folklore, and in the Hungarian weekly Pesti Musor, under Muvelodesi Hazok (Culture Houses). Admission is either 50 or 60 forints (under \$1). Unless otherwise noted, they run from 7 P.M. to midnight.

Fridays The Teka serenades dancers at the Almassy Teri Szabadido Kozpont (Almassy Square Free Time Center), 6 Almassy Ter, seventh district, beginning at 5 P.M. with children's dances and handcrafts and lasting past midnight. Partly because Teka is known for its faithful reproduction of village music, partly because the Free Time Center has a large hall, and of course because it's Friday, this dance house draws the largest crowd, sometimes topping 500.

The Zsaratnok group plays for Balkan dances (Serb, Macedonian, Greek, Bulgarian) at the Lagymanyosi Kozességi Haz, 17 Korossy J. Street, 11th district. Balkan music, its plaintive pentatonic scale combined with lively instruments such as a huge skin-covered drum, sounds extremely "foreign" to a non-native. But the Balkan dance houses are popular for the preponderance of rela-

tively simple circle and chain dances, which also make them suitable to attend without a partner.

Saturdays Kalamajka plays at the Belvarosi Ifjusagi Haz (Downtown Youth House), 9 Molnar Street, fifth district — a five-minute walk from the grand hotels on the Pest bank of the Danube. The evening begins with a children's dance house at 5. At about 11 many of the dancers repair to a small pub on the fourth floor where various musicians play, and drinking, singing and dancing lasts until 2 A.M. The dancing room is cramped but the music is not. Bela Halmos, Kalamajka's fiddler, helped found the dance house movement and is thought to be the best practitioner of Szek Village music this side of the Rumanian border.

Pontos Ido plays at the XII Kerulet Polgarmesteri Hivatal (Twelfth District Municipal Building), 23-25 Boszormenyi Street, beginning at 5 P.M. with a children's dance. Dance house regulars say Pontos Ido is lackluster, but visiting musicians live things up.

Sundays Meta plays in the basement of the Jozsefvarosi Klub, 13 Somogyi Bela Street, eighth district. Meta is unusual for having a woman as its leader and for its bagpiping.

The Hora dance house, with Israeli dances taught by Israelis (usually not to live music), alternates between the II Kerulet Muvelodesi Kozpont (Second District Culture Center) on

Marczibanyi Square and the Almassy Teri Szabadido Kozpont. To find out which one, call the Hungarian Jewish Cultural Organization, 142-6924.

Tuesdays Muzsikas plays the Szakszervezetek Fovarosi Muvelodesi Haz (Union Culture House) on Fehervari Street 47, 11th district, starting at 5 p.m. with children's dance house. Muzsikas is the most polished and internationally renowned of the ensembles, and to dance to them it is worth making the detour to this obscure neighborhood and its monolithic Culture House.

Wednesdays Tatos plays Csango music at the II Kerulet Muvelodesi Kozpont on Marczibanyi Square. It was only in the last couple of years that the two Tatos musicians were permitted to travel to the far reaches of Rumania where this music originates. They brought back a rhythmic and compelling sound that has made this the most popular folk-dance session among aficionados. The Marczibanyi Square Cultural Center, with its pleasant dancing room and courtyard, is a five-minute walk from Moscow Square.

Falkafolk plays Balkan at the Szakszervezetek Fovarosi Muvelodesi Haz on Fehervari Street.

Tukros plays at the Ferencvarosi Muvelodesi Haz, 27 Haller Street, ninth district.

Thursdays Mezo plays in the Czerepesnaz, 28b Vezer Street, 14th district. A. S.

Szek dance houses is dispatched within 15 in Budapest. But in the urban rendition the dance order and the spirit are meticulously followed.

The Szek suite includes a "lads' dance," in which the men circle up in front of the band, leaping and slapping their thighs, knees and the sides of their shoes with a sharp report that plays off the rhythm set by the double bass. Then a slow csardas begins with a stately promenade of couples and builds into a frenetic whirl involving a great deal of improvisation that nevertheless draws on a common vocabulary of moves. Inevitably, the pattern of the dance coalesces out of chaos; upon joining in, one realizes how much art there is to this casualness.

LYRICS are shouted out by individual dancers in a call and response, chanted by women circling in a "maiden's round dance," or by a singer on stage. The words speak from extremity: about the homesickness of the soldier, ruptured love, poverty, exile (occasionally rapture or lust). "Its expressive power is admirably large yet free of all maudlin sentimentality and of all superfluous bombast," wrote Bartok of Hungarian peasant music. "It is sometimes so simple as to be almost primitive, but never silly."

The dance house movement began accidentally in 1972, when Mr. Halmos and other folk musicians and professional dancers got together in a ground-floor hall in Budapest. As they played, a curious crowd gathered around the open windows and finally they decided to hold an open house. Until recently the dance houses were considered a subversive trapping of nationalism in a Soviet satellite state. They were frequented by members of the secret police. Ivan Vitanyi, director of the Hungarian Institute of Culture for the past 20 years, recalled that the Minister of Culture used to summon him to ask just what was going on at those dance houses.

Though the excitement of political opposition may be gone, the sessions have a new resonance amid the onslaught of things Western (which has even brought a disco to the village of Szek). Mr. Hamar from Muzsikas likens this thousand-year-old folk culture to Sleeping Beauty. "It stayed young while everyone got old because it was sleeping. Now it woke up and is getting old quickly."

But folk dancing is still fueled by Hungarian pride, and in a region where countless Hungarians have become detached from their homeland, culture becomes the repository of national identity.

Zoltan Kallós, a noted collector of folk music, for decades has traveled Transylvania, mostly on foot, recording gypsy fiddlers and asking old women to sing the songs of their girlhood. At the Budapest dance house season opening in mid-September, he sat on the edge of the stage, at the feet of the musicians, a satchel around his neck, looking somewhat out of place indoors. He watched the more than a thousand dancers and musicians who had come from as far away as Moldavia, Slovakia, even Szek. "We're real Hungarians," he said, "as long as we sing and dance in Hungarian." ■