

## The forming of the ethnic identity of Hutsul highlanders

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*The forming of ethnic identity is one of the basic aims of education. First and foremost, it consists in creating bonds with the local community. The factors that are favourable to the forming of one's identification with the region are social norms, history, traditions and customs, regional art, language, folktales and legends, handicraft and forms of everyday life, etc. The mentioned paper briefly presents the ways in which the ethnic identity of one of the most fascinating and unique ethnic groups of the Carpathians the Hutsul highlanders of Eastern Carpathians is formed; and the factors that influence their identity.*

Key words: *the Hutsul region; Hutsuls; cultural heritage; ethnic identity*

Ethnic identity is a cluster of socio-cultural traits that differentiate a particular community/group from other groups, i.e., from “strangers”. An ethnic group is connected by common ancestry (myths, legends), history, land (even in the case of resettlement a connection with the land of the ancestors is retained), language (or dialect), religion and beliefs, culture, and social relationships.

Robert Szwed, who deals with the problems of identity, mentions a relationship between the questions of ethnicity with a particular country. He states that “ethnicity as a foundation of socio-cultural identity arises first and foremost from a conviction that the country that individuals identify themselves with is of a crucial importance. It is, at the same time, (...) a belief that we have a unique connection with a country and that the connection is of a normative character, and that feeling this connection is a moral duty for all the members of a community. This specific connection and the accompanying convictions constitute a foundation of national culture, which is reflected in the notion of the fatherland. (...) The fatherland is the fundamental correlative of a nation. A nation can be formed on the condition that there is a sufficiently broad cluster of contents which constitute a symbolic universe of national culture”<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, an ethnic group is typically a part of a larger unit, such as

a fatherland, a nation, a state, and the culture created by an ethnic group is a part of national culture. That is the case because there are certain qualities of regional culture that influence and encompass broader communities, which is why some of its elements constitute values which can be accepted not only by the inhabitants of a particular region, but by the members of an entire nation/country, as well. It should, however, be emphasised while that ethnic identity does not necessarily have to be connected with national identity it will always be related to one's place in a social group, with its own relations.

Identifying with an ethnic group may result from strong relationships formed naturally in childhood, it may be incidental and arise from historic conditions, or it may be the result of a conscious decision that is expected to allow one to realise one's intentions. When analysing the process of the forming of ethnic, socio-cultural identity one notices a certain regularity, namely, "we first identify with a land, within which we can realise our pursuits and create our identity. Because of the elements of local, regional culture, the nearest surroundings, meaningful locations, events, objects, we become rooted, we feel 'at home'"<sup>2</sup>. The process of identification, therefore, may take place successively since the day one is born, or it may start at any time in one's life. The basis of the forming of ethnic and socio-cultural identity is the acceptance of the culture of a particular community and perceiving it as "my own".

Family, school, the Church, professional, peer, cultural, and educational groups contribute to the forming of an individual's identity. "Each of them makes reality meaningful in a particular way, it makes reality comprehensible from its own perspective which is at the same time limited and internally justified"<sup>3</sup>. The higher the number of the groups and the factors that influence an individual, the wider the knowledge and the deeper the acquisition of a given culture should be.

The forming of identity requires a historic and cultural foundation, i.e., traditions, prejudice, rules, beliefs, emotions, temperament, political and legal institutions, moral and aesthetic convictions, and philosophical systems. "(...) Socio-cultural identity presents a mechanism of a unique connection between the past and the present within the cultural heritage of a group that is accepted or rejected by communities. Cultural heritage

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<sup>1</sup> Szwed, R. (2003): *Tożsamość a obcość kulturowa. Studium empiryczne na temat związków pomiędzy tożsamością społeczno – kulturalną a stosunkiem do obcych* [Ethnic Identity and Strangeness. Empirical Study of the Connections Between Socio-Cultural Identity and the Attitude Towards Strangers]. Lublin, Wydawnictwo KUL, p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> The same, p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> The same, p. 55.

and culture in their broad understanding constitute at the same time a means of intergenerational and interpersonal communication<sup>4</sup>. The cooperation between different generations is one of the most effective ways of passing down cultural heritage, which is to be understood as “that which we can contemporarily relate to, that which we see as ‘eternal’ in our culture, (...) it is an inheritance from earlier generations”. The heritage includes “all the cultural goods inherited from the past that we can relate to in our everyday lives, that we can use, and that we believe we need to function every day”<sup>5</sup>.

When our ethnic identity is being formed we relate to the so-called local heritage, which is small and important for a local community. It encompasses, among others, the dialect, traditions and rituals, events that influence the life of the group, as well as craft, cuisine, legends and folktales, children’s stories, art, clothes, games, and beliefs<sup>6</sup>. These elements constitute folk culture. Throughout the ages, under the influence of the passing generations, it has been subject to “... various processes, changes, and alterations that made them the mosaic that we can now see in the world around us. Some of them have disappeared, some have changed their character, and some are still alive today”<sup>7</sup>. As R. Szwed argues, tradition and heritage are the connection between the past, the present, and future<sup>8</sup>.

Socio-cultural identity is realised in cultural, ethnic, religious, and social aspects. Nation, culture, religion, and “conscious participation in the management of the environment that makes up the ‘little fatherland’ of an individual”<sup>9</sup> are, therefore, essential.

The factors<sup>10</sup> that form the socio-cultural identity include first and foremost:

- connections with the land, i.e., the village, the town, the region, which is in many cases stronger than one’s identification with the country,
- ideological and political identity (a citizen of a state, a citizen of Europe, of the world, or a Hutsul highlander)
- belonging to a religious community (which used to be associated with nationality, e.g. a member of the Orthodox or the Greek Catholic church is a Ukrainian, and a Roman Catholic is a Pole); the parish is also close to the local community, which makes the role of the parish priest essential.

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<sup>4</sup> The same, p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> *Edukacja regionalna* (2006) [Regional Education]. Warszawa, Wydawnictwo PWN, p. 193.

<sup>6</sup> The same, pp. 194–195.

<sup>7</sup> The same, p. 189.

<sup>8</sup> Szwed, R.: op. cit., p. 59.

The bonds with an ethnic group are also influenced by places, objects, events, and people that are believed to be important for a region and its inhabitants. These elements make up the cultural heritage of a region, and at the same time they are one of the foundations of socio-cultural identity<sup>11</sup>. It needs to be emphasised that it is especially the people and the events that may invoke associations and identification with a region, a village, a town, or with a country, when their significance is of a general social character. The existence of people or characters that are important to an ethnic community facilitates the creation of personal models that are crucial in the education of young generations.

A character that the highlanders of the Carpathians would often identify with is a brigand and an outlaw. He was glorified in legends and even made the protector of villages and entire Carpathian regions. Oleksa Dowbusz<sup>12</sup>, a ringleader of a band of brigands, has in the eyes of the Hutsuls<sup>13</sup> become the synonym of freedom, justice, and independence of the oppressive landowners. He made the inhabitants feel safe, which increased their connection with the place where they lived. The brigand was a role model in the moral and the physical aspect. The highlanders strongly believed that such a perfect individual could have only been formed by life in the mountains and supernatural forces. Such conviction increased the bond between the highlanders and the region and its community.

It was typical that the members of a particular local community became role models, objects of identification, and moral authorities that were a source of much needed knowledge and support, and who were also responsible for passing down traditions. That is why they played a crucial role in forming people's identities<sup>14</sup>.

Language was one of the reasons why the inhabitants of the particular regions of the Carpathians identified with a given ethnic group. The communities were independent in their language, however, when one compares the dialects of Carpathian highlanders one may find many

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<sup>9</sup> The same, p. 129.

<sup>10</sup> The list of factors is based on: Szwed, R.: op. cit., pp. 130–134.

<sup>11</sup> Szwed, R.: op. cit., p. 146.

<sup>12</sup> Oleksa Dowbusz (born 1700 in Pęczeniżyn, died 1745 in Kołomyja) – a character in Hutsul songs and legends, a leader of a band of brigands active in Pokucie in 1739–1745. Carpathian villagers believed him a hero avenging their oppression by taking away the possessions of the rich and distributing them among the poor. In reality, he would rob manor houses as well as towns and villages. He died at the hands of a Hutsul from the village of Komacz, because the brigand had seduced his wife.

<sup>13</sup> Hutsuls – highlanders inhabiting a region in Eastern Carpathians, now a part of Ukraine.

<sup>14</sup> *Edukacja regionalna*, op. cit., pp. 76–77.

words that are very similar in their sound and meaning, which may be a proof of their common origins. In the case of the Hutsul region, one of the ethnic regions of the Carpathians, the language used there was quite distinct. The old saying: "in every cottage a different tongue" may serve as a proof of the great differences. That is why, in spite of the strong identification that the Hutsuls had with their region, it is clear that since the settlements were distant from each other, the language was shaped within families and small communities.

So was the case with music and highlanders' songs. To the basis of similar melodies and lyrics Carpathian highlanders in different regions added different instruments, e.g. an accordion, cymbals, and they altered the rhythm and the melodic lines. However, the changes were not substantial enough to make it impossible for multiple bands to play together, as can be heard at the International Festival of Highland Folklore in Zakopane during the "Music of the Carpathians" concert, where Carpathian highlanders from different countries perform melodies from the entire region of the Carpathians together, without prior rehearsals. Nevertheless, some individuality of the music from the Western and from the Eastern Carpathians can be observed. The music of the Hutsuls is quite distinct, with its melodies, rhythm, songs, and dances. What is more, there are also some differences in musical details within the Hutsul region, which is reflected in the analogous saying: "in every village a different song". Music can encourage the establishment of a system of social communication within a given ethnic group. The Carpathian community is characterised by a specific communicative code, in which musical instruments such as trembitas can be employed. These were used to give signals that could be emitted from mountain tops and heard on the slopes and in the valleys, where the highlanders' cottages were situated. Thus, they played the role of a social communicator. In this way, the villagers and the herders who pastured their sheep and cattle in the mountain tundra were informed of natural dangers, someone's death, and celebrations. This specific form of information transfer increased the bonds between the receivers and their regions and its other inhabitants.

Clothes were yet another element that formed identity. The dress is typical of the entire region of the Carpathians, however, as in the case of language and music, each village managed to develop a number of distinctive features, which allow for a precise identification of the ancestry of individual inhabitants. The elements that tend to vary are, e.g., headwear, sashes, ribbons, the colours of embroidery or parts of clothes, the placing of patterns, etc. In the Hutsul region the local specifics are

clearly visible in men's and women's shirts. The differences are in the patterns, their placing, and the colours that vary between the everyday clothes and the ones worn for wedding parties. The latter were distinct in every region<sup>15</sup>. The colours used in the villages make it possible to tell the ancestry of each highlander: cherry – Riczka, Jaworów, green and brown – Werchowyna, violet – Worochta, golden – Kosmacz, blue – Jasinia, blue and black and light green – Kutý, dark red – Pistryń<sup>16</sup>. Differences of similar character were also found in other details of the highlanders' dress. On the basis of the clothes one could, therefore, learn where a person was from. The aforementioned distinctiveness can be seen in the embroideries on the clothes of all the ethnic groups of the Carpathians.

The works of folk handicraft are also unique. Objects for everyday use as well as those used during holidays inform of people's backgrounds and connection with their region, because the basic materials from which the objects were made were typically collected in people's immediate environment. Dishes were made of clay or wood. Clothes were sewn in wool, hodden, and leather, and they were adapted to the severe climate<sup>17</sup>. The colours of the handiwork and the techniques of production were shaped through many years. Independent of the typical features, conditioned by traditions, climate, nature, and works they were used for, the objects had forms characteristic of the particular villages. Towns and villages would specialise in given regional products, such as *lyźniki* (wool blankets) – the village of Jaworów, pottery – the town of Kosów, etc.

It is doubtless that traditions and rituals are factors that connect people with their regions. They are practised, first and foremost, during holidays and family and local celebrations (Christmas, Easter, wedding receptions, funerals, blessing of fields). It was during the holidays and celebrations that families were close together, which contributed greatly to the creation of bonds that form ethnic identity.

Apart from dialects, clothes, and traditions, identity was also shaped by legends and folktales. Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century they were told, and it was only as late as the 20<sup>th</sup> century that they were written down. "They are fragile, because they are usually based on undocumented events or they function independently of any real events, they may be altered so that the original meanings cannot be deciphered, and if they are not told they lose their power. (...) the knowledge of folktales, legends,

<sup>15</sup> *Гуцульщина. Історико – етнографічне дослідження* (1987). Київ, Наукова Думка, p. 194.

<sup>16</sup> The same, p. 195.

<sup>17</sup> The same, p. 190.

and stories is not only a proof of the wisdom of an individual, but also (...) of the level and character of a person's participation on the socio-cultural system. As in the case of characteristic places and objects and meaningful persons, the legends and stories root the individual in local culture and they make the operative system of meanings understandable". They speak of "the specifics of the community and the relationships between groups. They allow individuals to navigate in the symbolic space and reinforce their socio-cultural identities"<sup>18</sup>. Fairytales, folktales, and legends played an educational and an identity-forming role. They spoke of social norms, the behaviours that were accepted by a community and those that were rejected, and of human traits, emotions, beliefs, etc. Thus, it is doubtless that they helped to establish a feeling of community and identification with an ethnic group.

Identity is formed throughout one's entire lifetime<sup>19</sup>. It was, therefore, crucial that people of all ages participated in the social and cultural life of the local communities. Keeping traditions alive, songs, dances, wearing regional clothes on different occasions, and listening to legends and folktales established and reinforced one's bonds with the ethnic community and region. Nevertheless, one ought to bear in mind that the awareness of Hutsul highlanders was also influenced by the work of Polish and Ukrainian intellectuals at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>20</sup>. It allowed Hutsuls to join in the fight for their rights and it made the Hutsul traditions and culture known to the general public. The value of the region was emphasised and promoted the Polish and Ukrainian scientific and popular scientific literature as well as fiction, which presented a somewhat idealised image of the inhabitants of the Carpathians. Nevertheless, it is certain that such literature contributed to the promotion of the region and it taught Hutsuls to respect themselves, with their individuality and folk wisdom. The ethnic identity that was formed dozens of years ago made the Hutsuls a strongly consolidated and original group from the Carpathian region. They managed to preserve the entirety of their rich and unique cultural heritage.

Apart from the factors discussed above, the aforementioned intergenerational transfer constituted a basis in the forming of the Hutsul ethnic identity. The transfer took place within families and local communities. It is reinforced by the work of regional organisations and associations. The Hutsul Association (Towarzystwo Huculszczyzna) plays

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<sup>18</sup> Szwed, R.: op. cit., p. 155.

<sup>19</sup> *Edukacja regionalna*, op. cit., p. 70.

<sup>20</sup> *Гуцульщина...*, op. cit., p. 259.

an important role in the community of Hutsul highlanders. Its members live in Hutsul towns as well as all the cities where the Hutsuls made their way to live, among others, in Lwów and Kijów, and outside Ukraine, e.g. in Canada. The Association organises meetings, and promotes indigenous culture with the help of the folk music bands that its members perform in. The Association also publishes books that disseminate knowledge about the region and the literary works of its inhabitants.

Folk art, which has been created for generations, is one of the most important elements shaping regional identity, because the villagers have had contact with it for ages, even though it was noticed rather late: in the period when serfdom was abolished and land was given to the peasants, i.e. in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Contemporary folk art is essential in forming the identities of the inhabitants of the Carpathians: the Hutsuls and well as those from Podhale, Bukowina, etc. The clothes, the music, the language, and the traditions are only a few of the elements that bring together the old and the young inhabitants of these regions. They are taught to love culture and art since the earliest age, and children have the opportunity to grow up and live every day in an environment that has been shaped for ages by their ancestors. Perhaps for some the folk art of the Carpathians is merely a source of income connected with tourism, nevertheless, it is certain that for many indigenous inhabitants of the Hutsul region the tradition and the art of their people are essential values that they cherish to pass them down to the younger generation. They are the values that make it possible to instil in people the feeling of dignity and belonging to a social group.

Nowadays it is more difficult to decipher the information transferred through traditional folk clothes, because these have been changed by fashion and stylisations. The Hutsuls, who are proud of their cultural heritage, try to preserve as much of the symbolism of old as possible. Identification with the traditional dress has now taken on a new form, as regional elements are used in everyday fashion, and the local motifs have become national. So is the case with regional cuisine, dishes ornamented with Hutsul patterns, and even elements of the regional architectural style. This does not discredit the people of the Carpathians, to the contrary, it allows them to be proud of the cultural heritage of their ancestors, which is why it is possible for them to preserve their strong regional identity. Contemporarily, the identity is also promoted in preschools and schools through authorial curricula and course books. The "Hucuteczka" preschool that was established in Iwano-Frankiwsk thanks to the initiative and pedagogical work of Tamara Hrycaj, a secondary school in Jaworów near Kosowo started and ran by Petro Łosiuk, and the handiwork

workshops in Kosowo and Wyżnica that aim at closely preserving the colours and the pattern of the original regional handiwork, may also serve as examples of education in the Hutsul spirit. It is not only in the schools that young people are trained in traditional Hutsul art and handiwork, which is why this art can be preserved. The awareness of ethnic heritage is shaped since childhood, which is why the young generation identify with the region of their ancestors and they are proud to call themselves Hutsuls.

Religious celebrations (holidays, baptisms, first communions, weddings, funerals), public, local, and private meetings (varnishing days, festivals, family celebrations) are used to form the Hutsul identity. Traditions are kept and efforts are made to preserve them in the smallest details, just like they were observed tens and hundreds of years ago. For example, sheep are pastured with the use of a traditional equipment, cheeses are made with old methods, and old species of sheep, mountain cows, and Hutsul horses are being recreated and bred.

To sum up, it may be stated that ethnic identity is formed first and foremost by one's immediate environment, in which one is brought up, and the objects of material and spiritual culture that are created there. These are, in this case, the folk culture. The elements of folk culture that are present in everyday life allow one to identify with the region. However, since on the larger scale those elements are also a part of national culture, they constitute a connection between the ethnic group and the country. The stronger the bond with the local culture, the more powerful the emotional connection between an individual and the region and the country. This can be easily observed in such regions as the Carpathians, as the discussed Hutsul region. Regional culture makes people aware of who they are and where they come from. It makes it possible to establish bonds with the close environment, and the strength of these bonds helps to prevent losing one's national roots during emigration. This is exemplified by the Hutsul community in Canada. The cultural heritage of this ethnic group is not merely as source of nostalgia and homesickness, but it also becomes an incentive to care for one's culture, although it may be "strange" in the new environment. This allows the young generations to maintain ethnic identity and the heritage of their ancestors, regardless of where they have to live.