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János Kriza

by *Gyula Ortutay*, Budapest

Through the centuries of history to the present day the European has been increasingly characterized by an ever growing interest in history, in other words, the desire for immortality, the struggle for imperishability and horror and fear of transience. He has been watching and recording the changes in his own life with an ever clearer awareness and has been anxious to bequeath these changes to future generations. At the same time he has been studying his own past with increasing interest in order to be able to interpret the path and endeavours of his own life with the aid of these eloquent signs of the past. In fact interest in the past combined with the proud claim to immortality is one of the most characteristic marks of European consciousness. The European professes the proud view of the Latin poet that he will not die completely whatever changes take place, for he can show his example and culture in the face of whirling, destructive time. However peculiar it may seem at first sight, it is undeniable that this double endeavour of the European even appeared in his interest in primitive and peasant cultures.

This keen historical awareness cannot be detected in the primitive and peasant cultures themselves. Although the traditions of a very distant past were inherited from generation to generation in the epic traditions and customs which had almost the force of law in these cultures, this ancient tradition, an involuntary preservation of traditions, an instinctive respect for the words pronounced by ancestors cannot be confused with the ever richer feeling for history in European culture. The idea of collecting their own songs, stories and religious beliefs would never occur to the members of a primitive tribe or the inhabitants of a peasant village. The European owes to the increasing interest shown by town culture the fact that such treasures of our civilization have escaped the destruction of obscurity. Whenever we read a ballad of sombre grandeur or a funny folk-tale we should think of the collector who set out from a town with notebook, phonograph and camera, hastening to save the peasant traditions that ignore changes and the passage of time. The present essay is about one of the most outstanding Hungarian collectors, János Kriza, who in the 19th century saved Transylvanian folk-poetry from oblivion and without whom Hungarian literature and ethnography would have been, as János Arany, Pál Gyulai and others have said, immeasurably poorer.

Before discussing Kriza's career and life-work it is worth saying a few words about the antecedents of Hungarian folk-poetry, too, for Kriza was one of the first collectors, beginning his work before the publication of János Erdélyi's volumes, and the early history as well as the endeavours of the initial stages culminated in his activities. The discovery of Hungarian folk-poetry and the emergence of the intention to collect it were closely related to well-known European phases without which it is impossible to understand them. The discovery of the peasant in Europe by preromanticism and romanticism and the image of the peasant in those movements spread in Hungary, too. Indeed, this European trend was also helped along in Hungary by the decisive factor that the ideas of the freedom movement and national resistance were part and parcel of the collection of folk-poetry and the discovery of peasant life. Thus the wave initiated by the collection of ballads by Bishop Percy in England, the fashion of Ossianism, the principles of Rousseau's social criticism, and later continued by Herder's theory with its immense influence, by German romanticism and the works of the brothers Grimm, appeared in Hungary, too, and was reinforced by the idea of Hungarian national development. It was under all these influences that the work of collecting folk-poetry began in this country. Fragments preserved unintentionally and elements of folk-poetry have naturally been handed down to us from the periods of our Chronicles, that is, from the Middle Ages onward, but the first traces implying awareness may be detected only in the 18th century. It was our writers, such as Csokonai, Faludi and András Dugonics, who were the first to make use of the material of folk-poetry, partly by including it in their own work and partly also by collecting the material. At the same time there were also examples of the unintentional preservation of traditions in the form of hand-written books of songs and melodies, in which material originating among peasants, aristocrats and the nobility was mingled, circulated all over the country, proving the great strength of Latin culture.

The first exhortations and appeals for deliberate and regular collections date back to the 18th century. Mátyás Ráth, the editor of *Magyar Hírmondó* (Hungarian Courier) published an appeal in 1782 by a Hungarian patriot living in Vienna who, as Ráth put it, wrote it "filled with a zealous love for his nation and the language of his homeland". It is obvious right at the beginning of the appeal that it must have been written by a linguist, who regarded the ancient and folk elements as equally valuable for they facilitated a more thorough knowledge of the Hungarian language. He also drew attention to

differences between the various dialects. This “patriot living in Vienna” was Miklós Révai, Hungary’s first great philologist. The comments made by the editor, Ráth, reveal that he must have been familiar with Herder’s collection of folk-poetry. The second appeal for collection of the same kind was made by István Kultsár who, when publishing a folk-song in the *Hasznos Mulattató* (Useful Entertainer), called for the collection of what he described as the innocent songs of the common people, because such songs supplied the best information on the distinctive features of the national character. Even at that time, pieces of Hungarian folk-poetry were included in collections published abroad; there are Hungarian folk-songs in John Bowring’s anthology of 1830, and German romanticism was able to get a more or less true picture of the narrative ability of the Hungarian people from the collections of stories compiled by Gaal and Majláth. But by then collection was starting throughout the country; in reply to the appeal issued by the Academy of Sciences enthusiastic collectors such as countess Virginia Dessewffy from county Szabolcs, the citizens of Komárom, noblemen along the Tisza river, preachers in Transylvania and writers themselves, too, set to work all over Hungary. The modest request of János Kriza, a Unitarian minister in Transylvania was made in such an atmosphere: he appealed to the noble-minded inhabitants of the country with his subscription list for a collection entitled *Vadrózsák* (Wild Roses), in which he made a bouquet of the poetry of the people living in Transylvania. The subscription list was issued in 1842. It might have been expected to meet with understanding, but the number of subscribers was so low that he was afraid to have his work printed. He had to wait several years, and by the time it appeared, he had become a bishop.

But let us begin at the beginning: it is worth looking briefly at the self-sacrificing life of the man who recorded Transylvanian folk-ballads and stories and the gay acclamations at dances and who made, among other things, the first detailed analysis of the Transylvanian dialect. In all probability credit must be given to Pál Gyulai (the renowned literary critic of the 19th century who persuaded János Arany, a very shy man by nature, to write that little literary gem, his brief autobiography) for getting János Kriza, too, to write his autobiography. This was discovered in the archives of the Academy of Sciences, and subsequently published by Gyula Sebestyén, the faithful custodian of Kriza’s works. This is how János Kriza’s autobiography begins: “I, János Kriza, was born on June 24, 1811 at Miklósvárszék in Nagy-Ajta, where my father, a Unitarian minister, served for 47 years

in the same congregation. My mother, Borbála Bence, was a genuine Transylvanian. Father came from Torockó, County Torda, a romantic village enclosed among crags, whither I was taken to at 9 to study at what was called the 'particula', a school of high reputation. I completed my studies there with the *syntactica classis* after spending five years in that patriarchal small town with its splendid simple morals and noted all over Transylvania for its picturesque dresses and dwellings, with most of its population making a living from iron ore mining and others from agriculture." Kriza's birthplace is also mentioned in a book, *Székely honról* (About the Homeland, Transylvania) by Kőváry, the enthusiastic collector of Transylvanian antiques and mementoes, describing with tender affection the surroundings in which Kriza used to play as a child and of which he subsequently sang as a poet. In fact Kriza had an undying passionate love for his homeland and wrote one of the most beautiful poems extolling Transylvania. Not only his poetry was inspired by the Transylvanian landscape; as a young man he was also inspired by the people living there. Besides the influences he was subject to from abroad it is almost certain that the spiritual richness of the people of Transylvania was the main inspiration for his collecting activities. After spending his childhood at Nagyajta and Torockó, he was taken at fourteen by his mother to Székelykeresztúr to attend the local secondary grammar school and acquire higher culture in the poetry and rhetoric classes. It was at that school, —following his studies of the *Hármas História* (Tripartite History), *Hét Bölcs Mesterek* (The Seven Wise Masters) and the Bible—that he was at last acquainted with Hungarian literature, primarily the writings of Ferenc Kazinczy. He, too, tried his hand at writing poetry during his stay at Székelykeresztúr and struck up a friendship with Mihály Szentiváni, the most talented representative of Transylvanian popular poetry. After his studies of philosophy and theology—for it was beyond any doubt at that time that the son of a Unitarian minister would follow his father's footsteps—Kriza went to Kolozsvár to study law at the Calvinist College. There he spent seven years. The young student of theology toured the whole of Transylvania, observing the rich and varied colours of the area, the different groups of the Székelys (Magyars of Eastern Transylvania) who had settled in the different areas, and the Magyars in the river valleys; he was able to see the development of the minority areas and at Torockó, the splendid folk costumes, that peculiar blend of folk culture and city influence.

Now it was high time for him to follow the old tradition of the travelling Hungarian and visit the wider homeland of Europe, that

common home of the nations, after getting to know his Hungarian homeland (which in his case meant practically no more than Transylvania, and it was no joy to him to leave it). But he was only a simple Unitarian student of theology, sent to Berlin for two years by the Unitarian congregation of Kolozsvár to study. He could not afford to travel in the manner of our aristocrats, comfortably and on a timetable covering all Europe, nor could he follow capricious routes like wandering students. In addition to these two traditional modes of travel for Hungarians going abroad there was also a third kind of European tour, for poor students sent abroad at the expense of congregations, the Churches, or aristocrats, to study in some major European town. It is impossible to decide which kind of tour was more fruitful for the advances of Hungarian culture, but it is certain that Kriza's study trip to Berlin was extremely profitable. Yet he did not much like his stay there: as he put it, "...the man inside me... found no pleasure in the way of life there, nor did I like the cold Hegelian system of philosophy, let alone the theologies modelled after his image and likeness", and as he added jokingly, it was very hard for him to cure himself at home with the good old acidulous water of Borszék.

Yet 1835, the year in which he left for Berlin, was of decisive importance for him. Though Hegel failed to please him, he was all the more impressed by Herder and the whole sphere of thought of German romanticism. He is almost certain to have been guided towards appreciating folk-poetry by Herder and the intellectual life around him, his instinctive love for it was awakened and made conscious to him by the influences he was subject to in Berlin. For in addition to Herder's very powerful collection, which included primitive poetry besides French, Wendish, Lithuanian and Scottish folk-songs, Wolff's excellent work of old French folk-poetry, and the collection of legends and stories by the brothers Grimm had already been published, and there was an increasing enthusiasm for popular culture and folk-poetry; Homer and the legendary figure of Ossian also emerged before the awakening literary public opinion as poets and gigantic spokesmen of the people.

It is quite understandable that this major intellectual turning-point, a real revolution, had an influence on Kriza's responsive soul. It was in the year of his arrival in Berlin that the other major work by the brothers Grimm, the three-volume *Deutsche Mythologie* appeared, and its effects have lasted until our own time. It also inspired Hungary's Arnold Ipolyi to reconstruct the origins of Hungarian mythology from our popular traditions. Many people are reluctant to admit that even

for our national movements and for the discovery of the popular forces of the nation the inspiration came from abroad as, for instance, in the cases of István Széchenyi, Miklós Wesselényi and János Kriza. Yet we have no reason to feel uneasy about this, for it was not only in Hungarian history that this phenomenon occurred. Even Herder, who formulated the theory of research on romantic folk-poetry and exercised an extremely great influence on the history of the German spirit, is said to have had the experiences, which served as a basis for his thoughts and principles, in Riga where he could see, while among the oppressed Lithuanian people living in servitude, that there is a force in popular culture, preserving and saving the nation almost instinctively, that is capable of triumphing over centuries-old oppression. Herder's soul was impressed by the Lithuanian example and this is the experience that operates behind his philosophy and his view of history. It seems, then, that every national idea learns from and is inspired by foreign examples. The same applies to Kriza and his nation can acknowledge that influence only as a merit.

Kriza, physically weak, a quiet student of theology in Berlin, as Gyulai said, studied and worked with tenacity. He had had quite a good knowledge of German, English and French before he arrived in Berlin. So we have good reason to suppose that he was more than familiar with Bishop Percy's famous collection of ballads, if only on the grounds that his companions called him the Hungarian Percy and that in one of his later letters written in self-defence he compared his book to Bishop Percy's *Reliques*. The two years he spent in Berlin thus had some lasting results. Though ill in body the young man returned home loaded heavily with spiritual treasures, to take up after a year of rest his post as clergyman at Kolozsvár in 1838.

With this we might well end his short biography for the decisive events in Kriza's life had already taken place, the turbulent years had ended and the quiet, introspective activity that was to last until his death began. As he himself writes, he had an insuperable horror of public life and in this respect he was akin to Arany János with whom he had much in common in temperament. In addition to performing his duties as a preacher, he was also professor at the Academy of Theology and he had an ever increasing number of duties to perform especially after he was elected bishop in 1861. He worked and read, made friends with teachers at Kolozsvár and paid attention to every movement of the Hungarian spirit; it is obvious from his letters that he was well informed about everything in his solitude in Kolozsvár. He was not embittered even when János Erdélyi's collection in three

volumes appeared, overtaking of his own much older collection, which was to remain unpublished for a long time to come. He was not an embittered and injured spirit, and his consciousness was not built up on outer achievements. He was a member of the Academy of Science and of the Kisfaludy Society, and his merits were recognized even abroad; he died peacefully in the knowledge of this in the spring of 1875, just when the publication of the scheduled second volume of *Vadrózsák* was being considered by the Kisfaludy Society.

This quiet and apparently obscure life was, however, marked by one passion. This is how he writes of it: "During my tours of the Székely Country I discovered quite accidentally how many old treasures like this were lying about absolutely unnoticed in the lower strata of the people; from then on I always kept an eye open for them, however busy I was with my innumerable duties, and began to collect them while touring the Székely country and also from the many Székely men and women living in Kolozsvár, and then, in the years that followed the revolution, I began to correspond with a number of my fellow-clergymen and lay friends and with their assistance collected a great repository of Székely lore." The same tone, almost of confession, can be found in his introduction to *Vadrózsák*, which is worth quoting, because it faithfully reflects Kriza's literary policy: the collections of folk-poetry were not the products of mere enthusiasm for he felt that these songs and stories were integral parts of Hungarian literature as a whole. Similar views on this question were expressed by every poet and thinker of the period of Hungarian popular and national classicism, including Arany, Petőfi, Gyulai, János Erdélyi and several others, the whole populist movement. Kriza writes in his introduction: "With the passage of time when the spirit of the newly revived nation dipped more deeply within itself in order to strengthen and consolidate every root-fibre of its own national existence in the face of destructive disasters and for that purpose to feed that existence with popular elements that provided refreshing colour and a form of its own that alone matched its blood, I, too, resumed the collection of the flowers of the mind of the Székely people—its wild roses, if I may so describe them—with renewed endeavour..."

From these statements we have been able to learn not only of Kriza's persistent passion, but also of his methods of collecting and his literary principles. When the young Unitarian minister returned from Berlin he gave up his poetic aspirations to be instead a humble servant of folk-poetry, though judging by his poems and translations, he appears to have been one of the most gifted of the Transylvanian popular

poets, along with Mihály Szentiváni. And Kriza remained its servant to the end of his life. It was only for a short period that he renounced the idea of having his work published. He met with two major disappointments: one was the indifference shown in 1842 towards his appeal for subscribers and the other was the Vadrózsa lawsuit, the unfair attack launched by Grozescu after the publication of the book. The indifference led him to give up the idea of getting his collection ready for the press and for some time he also abandoned the work of collecting. The only factor he left out of consideration was the vigour and energy of the diminutive but militant leader of literary policy: Pál Gyulai. Later Kriza was always pleased to recall what he described as Gyulai's "kind badgerings", urging him on and encouraging him, calling the attention of Arany as well as of the public to him and this campaign led at last to the return of Kriza's self-confidence and courage. At one of the sessions of the Transylvanian Museum Society in 1860 Gyulai, while presenting some pieces from his collection, went so far as to belittle Székely folk-poetry, emphasizing its shortcomings in what seemed to be a challenging manner with the obvious aim of stimulating Kriza, who was in the audience, to action. He also found a patron for him in the person of Imre Mikó, the Széchenyi of Transylvania who not only made the publication of the book possible by financial assistance but also quite unselfishly handed over what he had collected to Kriza for publication in his collection.

All this gave Kriza new heart—as he said himself. The vociferous Gyulai was moved when he recalled Kriza's revived enthusiasm at that time and his renewed ambition to work. It is worth quoting some of Gyulai's observations: "He forced his collectors to record everything phonetically, and if they found it too difficult to cope with, he would enter into a long correspondence even over a single sound. And when the piece concerned was at last successfully recorded he would ask the printing house at Kolozsvár to cut new type, and he was a thorough nuisance even to the compositors over the accurate use of the letters." Feverish enthusiasm is indeed revealed in his correspondence with Gyulai—which was published by Sebestyén—we are struck by the revived flame of youth in an ageing man. He was once again busy, collecting, and writing letters describing at length each new discovery, each "beautiful flower" as he called his ballads, writing about his tales or his collection of dialect words incessantly, about his dealings with the printers, the number of sheets printed, the way he argued with old Sámuel Brassai about the title and all sorts of things. In 1863 the thick volume *Wild Roses*, dedicated to Count Mikó, came out at last.

The book was given an enthusiastic welcome all over Hungary and it became literally a national affair. (However, in spite of its immense popularity, it sold only slowly; Kriza complained about this in his letters and we know that at his death, twelve years after the publication there was still a debt of 198 forints to pay. Enthusiasm and buying the book were not the same thing in Hungary.) Everyone was proud of the fact that in Transylvania, the homeland of the Székelys, flowers of exceptional beauty were blooming, ballads of a beauty that was hardly equalled, not only in the country, but in the whole of Europe; droll tales and fairy tales, the richness and liveliness of the speech of the people there, the charm of the folk-songs as well as the host of idiomatic expressions and banter, all these were things to be proud of. Kriza's one volume could rightly be put beside Erdélyi's three volumes, indeed it was felt that in several respects it surpassed them. The way Kriza arranged the material naturally followed the lines and principles adopted by Herder and Erdélyi: his collection included not only folk-poetry and pieces of uncertain or semi-popular origin, but a separate chapter was devoted to popular style songs by writers. Nevertheless, this was the first publication of folk-poetry of a modern stamp. This is revealed, in the first place, in the endeavours to be accurate: Kriza and his fellow-collectors tried to reproduce as faithfully as possible the popular manner and style in which the pieces were performed, and it is only in connection with the style of delivery of tales that some suspicion may be aroused. In addition to pieces of folk-poetry in the strict sense of the term, Kriza quite correctly included in his volume the language of the people, too, in the form of a collection of idioms and words and tried to illuminate this question as well in his excellent essay. In addition, many facts about the life of the people, documents very important for the history of ethnography are to be found in his notes concerning, for instance, the recital of ancient popular lays. In this way his work was a setting not only for the most famous and most beautiful Székely folk-ballads such as *Körmives Kelemenné* (Mrs. Kelemen Körmives), *Julia szép leány* (Pretty Maid Julia), *Kádár Kata* (Katy Kádár), *A mólnár inas* (The Miller's Apprentice) and many others but it is also the most significant historical survey of the Székelys of the last century besides the enormous work by Balázs Orbán.

As I said earlier, in addition to his initial failure Kriza was also grieved by the attack on him by Julian Grozescu, who in a Budapest paper in 1863, described two of the ballads collected by Kriza, *Anna Molnár* and *Mrs. Kelemen Körmives* as plagiarism and translations from

the Rumanian. This was the dispute which János Arany called the *Vadrózsa* lawsuit. There is no doubt about the truth today, yet then the problem was to sadden Kriza to the end of his life. It has come to light on the basis of more recent collections and European comparative ethnographic research that the charges of plagiarism brought against Kriza were unfounded, and that the two ballads in question, like the others, constitute an integral part of both Hungarian and European folk-poetry, including the Rumanian. It is obvious today that the accusations were groundless; they were inspired by the awakening Rumanian nationalism, Hungarian nationalism defended itself against them. But Kriza's work and Székely folk-poetry survived in the face of both indifference and the charges. His introduction to the collection in December 1862, ended with the following lines: "Now let Kata Kádár, Bódizsár Bátori, Pretty Maid Julia, Mrs. Kelemen Kőmives and the others (the characters in the ballads) speak so that they, too, can conceal our many kinds of shortcomings." These witnesses and the Székely folk-poetry will in fact always speak in support of Kriza, preserving for posterity the memory of the man who served them so faithfully.