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**Peasant “Population Policy”
and Present Demographic Problems
A few, summarizing remarks**

First of all, about the motivation of the author to conduct research in this field, that is, why the researcher of transitional customs ventured unauthorized into the territory of the demography of Hungarians.

His motivation was of a dual nature. First, he was intrigued about the social, scientific, ecclesiastic, political, etc. rhetoric of the allegedly or seemingly fatal decrease of Hungarian population. Second, he felt a certain lack; as if the science of ethnography had been missing (or had been ignored) from the research of an issue that can indeed be considered a national problem. Therefore, it was certainly not the “have a finger in every pie” mentality that governed the author.

It was precisely this failure and beating the air that urged him to believe that the analysis of negative demographic indicators cannot be considered as a narrow, professional, welfare or (party) political question. Instead, a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach and the consideration of every possible factor (mental, ideal, depth-psychological motivations) are essential, even if some may seem unimportant or even anachronistic. They surely reveal more from the hardly perceptible *yes-no* mysteries of procreation and one’s desire to have a child than the shocking statistical indicators, which are nothing more but alarm signals. The author firmly believes that the *understanding of any demographic situation* requires, in general and even more so in crucial periods, the *examination of a community’s, a nation’s education and culture in its entirety; nearly all segments of culture* (even the culture of children’s games) *need to be surveyed in order that more resources of fertility and vitality could be found welling up from somewhere deep or existing latently*. This, in turn, can help us understand and find the harmful alterations, both the irreversible and the reversible ones, and those that can be made good in our days (the convertibility of the scale of values), so that they all could be potentially and effectively corrected.

Based on his studies and research, the author assumed that many manifestations and branches of folk culture, one of the pillars of national culture, directly or indirectly can also provide some solution for our present-day problems. These pillars always looked for answers and solutions for fundamental questions and challenges of life, and they never looked for the sake of search only.

His research experience and results concerning birth, marriage, and death in peasant society were directly responsible for making the author, although he is not an expert of population growth and the science of demography (merely understands it on the level general knowledge), deduce nevertheless something

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from the life and world outlook and the knowledge on the perpetual phenomena of life in the hear of the Székely Hungarian community's population philosophy. Not dogmatically, though, since peasant society has never fallen and still does not fall back on a doctrine or on any "elaborate" theory in any matter. Their attitude can be discovered and grasped from the algorithm of their decisions in certain situations of life, their work and lifestyle, their religious life and tales, and their idioms and proverbs that condense their wisdom into a few words.

The author started out to verify his assumption on population changes in Csík-szentdomokos (Transylvania). He had conducted research on transitional customs there for three decades and felt that the village was particular with respect to its population. Despite deficiencies of data, it is evident that its population has been gradually increasing, with smaller stops, for centuries. The trend has been clearly upward during the past 150 years. It is beyond doubt that in the Székely land, and certainly among the villages of Csík county, it is one of the larger villages. As far as its birth rate is considered, it is or was the first in the row. The unique demographic situation of Szentdomokos – it produced the largest of population reserves in all Székely land – caught the attention of sociographic literature as early as the early 20th century and the inter-war years.

What could be the secret behind this demographic phenomenon?

The author's research proves that the secret is certainly not what György Bözödi claimed, i.e. that the people of Szentdomokos know nothing about birth control and, therefore, the great number of children is to be explained by the fulfilment of their primary instincts.

On the contrary. A myriad of data shows that the techniques of family planning, birth control and abortion were known in Szentdomonkos and among all Hungarian peasants. Due to the abortion act of Ceausescu, the author himself had a chance to take note of a large number of various abortion techniques applied at home (and leaning on vast pool of latent knowledge) that, as often as not, led to tragedy.

Research has revealed that the community's attitude to life is strongly child-centric. Dezső Szabó also sensed this during his research on dialects in the early 20th century and József Venczel formulated the same opinion in the inter-war years.

It was proved that the answer to the "Why would a peasant family in Csík-szentdomokos would want children?" question lies in the context of conscious (not instinctive) decisions to have children. Based on a wider and more complex group of motives, which derive from the pragmatic life philosophy of the peasants, the author points out that the answers and arguments are defined by material, financial, social, societal, religious, national, emotional, and other factors relating to one's view of life.

You need children because then you have heirs to your property, you can lean on them when you get old, they nurse you when you are sick, they carry the father's name on and the family line goes on, they are there to bury the parents,

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they make life worthwhile, they are a source of happiness, they make a family, unique Hungarian characteristics are preserved in them, they make their parents proud, then you have somebody you can wait for to come home, and because children are a blessing of God that you must accept.

If the peasants in Szentdomonkos, and not only there, do have an ideology as to why they want children, they must also have a corresponding strategy. And this makes the second important result of the author's research and his contribution to a better understanding of the subject matter of population increase.

However, before elaborating on that is to be noted that the author has also considered the historical causes of population change in Székely land and drawn conclusions from them as to the present.

In his book on a village of border guard soldiers, Professor Ákos Egyed mentions that the main function of the village, besides carrying the burden of military service, was – and this was similar in Szentdomonkos – to “provide a framework for agriculture and animal husbandry... and reproduce the community. The *population of the military village practically multiplied...*” (Italics by the author.) It might be another piece of important information that the “border guard was not allowed to sell his property without the permission of his superiors”. This probably meant that there was control imposed over the living conditions and obligations. The author argues that these data indirectly indicate the presence of birth control, and the preservation and motivation of natural population growth. The obligation of “collective military service” that, according to the records, Hungarian kings introduced as early as the 12th century, the obligation of the “reproduction of the community”, and the right to free leasehold were all related and had not only political and economic but also demographic consequences.

Concerning population strategy, it is not a sign of exaggeration or grandomania to use the popular term, *strategy*, with respect to a society and its life that had to put up with so much prejudice in the past. One could even venture to say that in peasant society, although not dogmatically, the term strategy can seem more apt than in some of the conceited, highly organized living conditions controlled by educated professionals. One can argue that the autonomous, introverted peasant society, which in many respects was believed a closed society, developed a permanent and stable operational system for the preservation of their life and existence, an operational model, a set of norms, and limited individual action and freedom. The culture of the customs of peasant community developed from this shared internal will and objectives. The author considers this a particular legal system that regulated almost all of the actions of its members by attaching affirmative and prohibitive tags to them.

In other words, peasant society did have laws in the legal sense, and “internal politics” in a political sense. Offences were sanctioned according to their customs, that is, their peculiar laws and “politics”.

These reflections of ethnographic character aim at revealing a modern and useful trait: that peasant society developed a rather complex “child policy” and

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“demographic policy”, and maintained them across its whole culture and not only in a few narrow and occasionally surfacing fields as it happens in present-day society. It is important to point out that all this operated and became established under the guise of tradition. This meant that the whole system was put in perspective, which contributed to guaranteeing its successful operation. The peasant was socially, economically, and existentially interested in making it work, he realised this, and acted in accordance. It is outstandingly exemplary that, by its presence in the cultural, moral and religious context, the issue of procreation, child bearing, and the nurturing of children was naturally present in the people’s everyday life and consciousness. It became a sheer necessity similar to any other everyday and constant essential element of life.

Accordingly, the *peasant model*, which considers the issue of population increase a complex system, can serve as an *essential and fundamental lesson* for today’s society. It is the acknowledgement of the fact that *population increase is a constant and collective (social) issue that involves and affects everybody*. The members of a community can relate to it neither distantly nor with indifference or cynicism. The views on infertility and the “accounting for” one’s infertility before the public opinion of the village can serve as interesting examples in this respect. Quite frequently, infertility was considered a milder crime and, in part, it is often categorized as such even today. Just as childbirth, infertility was an issue and a problem to the individual and the community at the same time. It was not acknowledged without fuss in the family or on the level of the village. Both female infertility and male sterility were disparaged and seen as shameful, and induced abortion was morally condemned. Instead of not having children at all, it actually happened that the husband overlooked an extramarital affair if that was how the woman could “find the seed”.

The strategy of having a child at all costs is the answer to the problem of infertility. The author could have hardly found closer agreement between ideal and actual efforts than between the problems of his interviewees and those of the heroes of fairy tales.

The counterpart of the woman of Szentdomonkos who attends the parish feast, vows fast and the ninth, prays for pregnancy and does hydrotherapy, is the poor woman of the tales who prays as follows: “Oh, my Lord, my God,” she sighs, “grant me but a little child, as big as a bean, and I shall praise you until I die.” This is how the want of a child could result in the birth of Babszem Jankó (hero of a folktale similar to Tom Thumb), the Snake Prince and many others, who were all conceived in a state of intensive yearning for a child. “The queen raised her hands toward the skies and said: ‘Dear God, why am I not worthy of having a child? If you don’t want to grant me a child, grant me at least a little snake, so that I could have an offspring of my own.’”

The answers of the interviewees in Szentdomonkos have revealed that not the birth of children but childlessness put the family in danger. The Hungarian proverb, literally translated as “I have a slice of bread in more” has the same

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message. It not only means that one has a child but, with pre-Christian symbolism, it is also a beautiful metaphor of blessing and growth. Babszem Jankó brings not more poverty into poverty but riches, he does not reduce the family to poverty, as we can so often hear it today, but lifts it up. The family begins to prosper: "Jankó surprises his father, who has been ploughing with two sickly oxen, with six ox-carts." He "pulls the cart out of the mud" (what a finely dramatised metaphor!), and then assumes a mission: has a mace made from twelve carts of iron and goes off to fight the world. He returns to his old parents (remember the motivations of the people in Szentdomonkos) who now live in a castle but it is still their son who gives them real delight. And pride, too!

At the question of a lord "Who is driving the ox, who is cracking the whip ..., who is responsible for all this wonder?", the old man answers: "Well, my lord, just *my son*, Babszem Jankó! ..."

These were only a few examples of what a great joy a child means is in Szentdomonkos and, in fact, through the message of folk tales, in Hungarian peasant thinking in general. It is thanks to them that life assumes a meaning in the life of several folk tale heroes who make a tenacious effort – both actually and spiritually – to have this joy at last.

Ilona Budai (protagonist of a ballad) and other similar women raise another issue: a peculiar interpretation of freedom. One does not necessarily have to live in a traditional community in order to see how having or not having a child changes the way society (community) regards a woman. This was a factor indeed that shaped the community's and society's judgement of human quality.

The woman who rejects her child, while it is in an embryonic state, shares the fate of Ilona Budai, Beautiful Kata Bán, the Heartless Mother etc. who all leave their children. Ilona Budai, who is free to decide between child and money, comes face to face not with another hero in the ballad but a crucial situation of the human existence. Her situation entails an existential question. She realises the inferiority of her existence as a person and a mother and of her instincts for the first time when she sees a bison carrying a calf among her horns: "My God, my dear God! / A beast, a beast of spirit". Subsequently, both her outer and inner worlds become empty and fall apart: "I have become like a tree by the road / Whoever passes me, cripples my limbs / Cripples my limbs and tramples them in the mud."

According to the view characteristic of ballads (which is neither national nor popular but universal), the physical and human beauty of a woman loses its worth when she is fruitless.

The women in Szentdomonkos considered abortion a sin, even when performed right after conception. Their logic, just as the logic of traditional Japanese culture, is simple: the first minute, the first hour, the first day is a part of the nine months. An embryo counts as an individual life since the very first moment of its inception.

The sack is not opened for the sake of just one piece of grain, says a proverb. This is another strategy. The birth of a child achieved at all costs is a special situa-

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tion. In the peasant society of Székely land (and not only there) the refusal of having just one child was a question of principle. The meaning of the proverb is clear: we want more children.

The four-child model in Szentdomonkos – one for the mother, one for the mother, one for the homeland, one for death – and the three-child model of the tales are answers to real individual, family and social needs: the security of the parents (see several motives above), the needs of one's homeland and nation, which are not necessarily to be understood in a heroic sense. Today one's homeland needs excellent teachers, professors, priests, doctors, engineers, scientists, artists, statesmen, politicians and skilled workers. In order to become one, the "talented child" has to leave his home and take upon a mission outside the family, as does the third son in the tales. His mission is to establish contacts with other communities or distant relatives, exchange goods, make a fortune, gather knowledge and gain experience, marry, and, finally, return home, from where he started out and where he can put his experiences to the use. The example of Babszem Jankó proves how much this is so.

One day, Babszem Jankó says to his mother: "I can see now, mother, I must leave. I shall go and see the world... His mother tells him in vain: 'Don't go my son anywhere!', Babszem Jankó keeps on repeating that he must leave." Later, when he meets a man, he answers at his question: "*I am off to see the world.*" (Italics by the author.)

In other tales, the parents regard their son(s)'s request as natural, without detaining him, they pack food for him (biscuits baked in ashes), and let him go. There is scarcely no trace of emotional farewell present, there are no words of advice encouraging him to return, and the thought of definitive leaving does not even occur, since his return is taken for granted.

In other words, the wisdom of the peasants' way of looking at society, which in real life becomes tangible in their customs and, in the tales, in the wishes, proverbs etc., is that somebody has to stay at home (with the parents) to secure the family's, the basic unit's security, while somebody has to leave in order to develop and maintain new associations, social structures, alliances, and interest and professional groups. The pool of children, the qualities and reserves of man supply guarantee the qualities of those who leave, their mental and physical strength (which automatically reminds the author of the designers and builders etc. of the Hungarian pavilion at the Hannover World Fair). The token of quality is quantitative child supply. A community (family, village, nation) can only be effective and successful if there is a chance for selection, if there is a surplus of supply. Otherwise, the pressure of the selection of the least fit and its defensive logic starts functioning. If there is no son who could leave, the family becomes isolated. If there is only one son and he leaves, the parents will not have anybody to support them.

It is known that talented, able and fit-for-life children of balanced personality come from where, with a hint of exaggeration, "they are so numerous as the

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holes in a riddle or even more". Yet, this situation, as described in a tale, did not bring about ruin or despair.

The author's research has expressly revealed a message of folk culture and popular society model: only that nation can meet the challenges of today's ever complex world that reproduces and increases its human resources both quantitatively and qualitatively. When, with every year, increasingly more stop than start working it generates first latent and then erupting anguish with strain praying on the individual's psyche and then emerging on the level of society.

It is still another strategy, although it may clearly seem inhuman according to current public opinion, that the peasant society – that of Székely land for certain – sought to ensure the human resources of society through the abundance of supply, while today it has become a task of health service. It is in this context that one can understand the "one child for death" part of the family planning model in Szentdomonkos. In other words, community guaranteed that society was in good shape through natural selection. They healed the sick children and those who were born sick (see the stunning accomplishments of popular medicine) but they did not necessarily save those "unfit for life", they did not standardize death as we do today, and they often had to face the death of their babies.

Who has no child has neither joy nor sorrow, says a saying. Child strategy is related to one's emotional life. "Neither delight nor sorrow" hints an equal chance for both, accepts both, and endorses the dialectic of emotions. It formulates the real harmony of joy and sorrow in the negative, and indicates that the child is one of the sources of the universal need of humans for joy.

It has been mentioned that a peasant needs children so that somebody could inherit, take over, and further expand his fortune and estate. This expresses a life philosophy of economic nature, which is, in fact, an indirect version of the peasant's survival strategy. In essence it means that one has to have reserves and thereby prevent unexpected blows that may primarily strike from the outside. There are at least two conditions to this: long-term planning and a guarantee that one's property gathered with pain would not fall into the hands of a stranger. Occasionally, the guarantee that the property would be "in good hands" was even more important than having a person to nurse the old parents. This derives from the traditional peasant attitude to work, according to which work and its achievements are factors that influence human qualities and hierarchy, and from the moral commandment that the value produced by work have to be appreciated. The peasant family, with its distinct life, can be considered a miniature model of a people, a country, or a nation: the heads of the family, the parents, have to ensure survival and subsistence, and guarantee that the fortune and the estate of the family will have owners and heirs.

The author believes that the presence of children in many genres of folk culture and that the community finds it important and necessary to care for and educate children are other manifestations of the strategy of child cult. There are a lot of customs, rites, poetry, beliefs and magic practices etc. that conduct positive

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“propaganda” for children, childbirth, and family. A similar notion is present in the folklore of other European peoples as well. This culture takes a position against the currently growing tide, popularised by the media, suggesting that only misery and distress awaits the children of today. This is the essence of the tale entitled “Daftville”. The people of a nearby village name a place Daftville because its people, since their babies will have to die once, always start crying when children are born. The metaphor is clear, there is no need to go into detail about its more general interpretation. It is just to hope that Hungarians will never have to suffer from the same stigma.

In conclusion, it is to be pointed out that the author seeks not to force an obsolete culture onto the present but to introduce that culture’s energy-generating mentality. He believes that the fundamental questions on human existence have not changed, and the human, individual, national motives of life have also remained the same. It is the attitude toward them that is damaged, transformed, and changed.

The author finds that returning to a model that is anachronistic in several respects can still be a solution to the problems of population growth. He believes that his reflections do not offer a solution in themselves but only as a part of a macro system of solutions, the development of which he considers pressing.

He believes that the ideals, spirituality, faith, moral standards, legal customs, optimistic world view and, last but not least, the pragmatism of peasant culture (that reflects a continuity of existence and an ideal built on human relations and the mutuality of family members and can thus better ward off all perils), can truly be a life philosophy offering security and progress to modern-day Hungarians. Naturally, in a different dimension and interpretation, but society would only have to find the keys of convertibility.

Tradition, which protects and transmits shared values and scales of values – and today’s people, with all the insecurities, can feel this more intensely than ever before – means not only insistence on the past, as some may believe, but a safety net of communities against outside, alien, and adapted threats that erode our culture and attitude to life and devalue one’s humanity.