



# HUNGARIAN HERITAGE



By Ágnes Fülemlé  
and James I. Deutsch

Hungary is a small country in Central Europe, roughly the size of Indiana. Its population is approximately 10 million, but another 2.5 million Hungarians reside within the seven countries that surround its borders (Austria, Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia) and another 2 million Hungarians live in other parts of the world. These people speak Hungarian—known as Magyar (which is also the word that refers to a person of Hungarian ancestry). The Magyar language is related to the Ob-Ugric Khanty and Mansi languages in western Siberia, and was also influenced by ancient Turkic languages of the Eurasian Steppe, an area from which the Hungarians migrated to the West as equestrian semi-nomads. The Magyars' unique language helped them survive as a cohesive ethnic group and also to develop a distinctive identity and culture.

When the Magyars arrived in what is now Central Europe at the turn of the ninth and tenth centuries, they settled along the rivers of the Carpathian Basin—the largest being the Danube and Tisza—taking advantage of the fertile lands. Much of the countryside, including the flatlands known as the Great Hungarian Plain (east of the Danube) and the hillier regions known as Transdanubia (west of the Danube), was then and remains today very well-suited for animal husbandry and agriculture, especially for growing grains and vegetables, as well as fruits that can produce not only a wide variety of white and red wines renowned for their high quality, but also the powerful distilled spirits known as *pálinka*.

Mária Serestély from Szék, Transylvania (Romania), wears a local traditional bridal dress and wreath for her wedding in 2010.  
Photo by Ágnes Fülemlé, Balassi Institute/Hungarian Cultural Center



*“One of Hungary’s most distinctive cultural resources is how different artists, scholars, and practitioners have perceived, represented, and reinterpreted the country’s dynamic traditions.”*

Hungary’s history began with the coronation of its first king, Saint Stephen, in 1000 CE. Major turning points in its history included invasions by the Mongols in the thirteenth century and by the Ottoman Turks in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. From the sixteenth century to 1918, seventeen Habsburg rulers occupied the throne of the Kingdom of Hungary, including the period of the Austro-Hungarian Empire from 1867 to 1918. Subsequent periods of foreign domination include those of Nazi Germany during World War II and the Soviet Union from 1945 until 1989. Hungary, in fact, deserves some credit for the end of the Cold War: the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 represented the largest and most far-reaching armed uprising against the Soviet Union’s monolithic power until the 1980s; and in 1989, Hungary dismantled the fortifications along its border with Austria (part of the Iron Curtain), thereby allowing thousands of East Germans to escape to the West.

Traditional floral decorations adorn the walls of many homes in Kalocsa (southern Hungary), 2011. Kalocsa is famous for its folk traditions, especially costume and embroidery with colorful floral motifs. The Kalocsa region—as the home of embroidery, ornamental painting, traditional dress, and folk dance—was recently included on the list of intangible cultural heritage elements in Hungary.

Photo by James Deutsch, Smithsonian Institution

**MULTIETHNIC HUNGARY**

Throughout its one thousand years of history, Hungary has been a multiethnic country—drawing and incorporating new peoples and traditions. The territory has been an area of contact in Europe’s geographic center, welcoming influences from all directions. The resulting culture expresses itself in a rich and diverse heritage of music, dance, costume, arts and crafts, gastronomy, speech, and even the conventions of naming (Hungarians place the family name *before* the given name, as is the case with most peoples of eastern and southeastern Asia).

Jewish culture has been present in Hungary since at least the tenth century, and reached its cultural and demographic apogee in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when roughly five percent of the country’s population was Jewish. Hungary’s Jewish population declined initially when the 1920 Treaty of Trianon stripped Hungary of half of its total population and roughly two-thirds of its territory, including several regions where many Hungarian Jews had been living. One generation later,



Painted furniture and textiles were formerly part of a woman’s bridal dowry, as in this festive room of a farmhouse in the Kalotaszeg region of Transylvania (Romania) in 2006. Photo by Ágnes Fülemlé, Balassi Institute/Hungarian Cultural Center.



Lajos Busi is a master potter in Mezötúr (south-eastern Hungary), a community renowned for its pottery traditions. Courtesy of Office of Intangible Cultural Heritage, Hungarian Open Air Museum



A tradition bearer demonstrates machine embroidery at a festival in Kalocsa. Courtesy of Office of Intangible Cultural Heritage, Hungarian Open Air Museum

following the cataclysm of the Holocaust in World War II, the Jewish population fell to less than one percent of Hungary’s total population. In spite of this history, there remains a thriving community, which contributes greatly to Hungary’s cultural heritage.

Various groups of Roma people (also known as Romanies or Gypsies) began arriving in Hungary during the fifteenth century, and Roma musicians started playing music for high society and local communities by the seventeenth century. Roma culture has long contributed to the richness of musical traditions in Hungary. Today, more than half a million Roma people reside in Hungary, making them the largest ethnic minority in the country.

**DISTINCTIVE CULTURAL RESOURCES**

The richness of Hungarian folk culture found its fullest expression in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In some of the more rural regions, this folk culture—including folk art, music, dance, costume, and crafts—remained vibrant well into the late twentieth

century and started to disintegrate only during the Communist period after World War II. As a result, one of Hungary’s most distinctive cultural resources is the way in which different artists, scholars, and practitioners have perceived, represented, and reinterpreted the country’s dynamic traditions during the last two centuries.

For instance, the scholarly analysis of Hungarian folk music began in the late nineteenth century and achieved spectacular results, thanks to the efforts of composers Béla Bartók (1881–1945) and Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967), who are generally credited as the founders of ethnomusicology in Hungary. They uncovered a layer in Hungarian folk music based on the pentatonic scale, which connected it to music from the area between the Volga River and the Ural Mountains. Bartók and Kodály were pioneers in collecting, recording, analyzing, comparing, and systematizing folk tunes collected among Hungarians, Romanians, and Slovaks. Later generations of ethnomusicologists and musicians continued collecting folk music, resulting in a repertory of Hungarian vocal and instrumental music with as many as 300,000 melodies.



TOP Before the start of a traditional pig slaughtering in Gyimes, Transylvania (Romania), in 2012, Hunor Román, Botond Kedves, and Csaba Böjte (left to right) play a funeral dirge for the pig.

MIDDLE Although Károly Antal is the one who slaughtered the pig on a Saturday morning in Gyimes, Transylvania (Romania), in 2012, he remains outside the dining room—out of respect for the animal—while others enjoy a festive meal.

BOTTOM Traditional Hungarian sausages, fish, and ham hocks are sold at the 2012 Festival of Folk Arts outside the Buda Castle in Budapest. Photos by James Deutsch, Smithsonian Institution



Similarly, the study of dance achieved significant results in past decades, especially by seminal dance ethnologist György Martin (1932–1983), who was to Hungarian dance what Bartók and Kodály were to Hungarian music. His efforts in collecting and systematizing motifs found in Hungarian folk dances shed light on the many types of historical European dance forms that were preserved in Hungarian dances, including circle dances, weapon dances, elaborate Renaissance couple dances, virtuoso men’s solo dances, and the fiery *csárdás* and *verbunk* dances, which have inspired Romantic composers like Ferenc Liszt (1811–1886), Johannes Brahms (1833–1897), and Hector Berlioz (1803–1869).

**REVITALIZING TRADITIONS**

Popular interest in folk music and dance traditions was revived by the so-called *táncház* (dance house) movement in the 1970s. This urban grassroots movement reinvented the institution of the village dance in urban settings. Young people were searching for traditions that were “true” and “authentic,” and their interest was focused on the processes of learning dances that were



A young woman circa 1930 in Kazár (northern Hungary) wears a golden bonnet as part of her Sunday best outfit, while the elder woman wears an everyday blue-dye dress. Courtesy of Museum of Ethnography, Budapest

varied, improvisational, and performed to live musical accompaniment. They strived to thoroughly understand the original techniques, performing styles, and contexts of the dance and the accompanying vocal and instrumental music. Their teachers were remarkable personalities in rural areas of Hungary and neighboring countries who had been able to preserve these traditions in spite of twentieth-century modernization.

A similar motivation to preserve traditional Hungarian handicrafts has provided a boost to a flourishing crafts revival. The *táncház* and the crafts revival provided refreshing alternatives to the mandated, ideologically controlled Socialist youth movement and forms of entertainment of the time. The authenticity of their practices became not only an act of protest, but also a new channel for the expression of collective memory and identity.

Since its inception, the *táncház* movement has also been democratic in the broader sense that it has promoted respect for and attention to not just Hungarian traditions but also to the traditional practices of other ethnic populations within and beyond Hungary. For instance,



Young adults dress in traditional clothing for their First Communion in the Kalotaszeg region of Transylvania (Romania) in 2006. In this most emblematic region of Hungarian folk art, churches encourage the preservation of folk costume for special events and holidays. Photo by Balázs Balogh, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Ethnology

it was instrumental in inspiring more thorough explorations of traditional Jewish, Roma, Romanian, and Serbian music and dance.

In a similar fashion, the *táncház* movement has helped create a shared cultural language and a common denominator for ethnic communities of Hungarians living abroad—especially young people—who are thus able to connect with each other on an international scale. There are now dance enthusiasts in places as diverse as Argentina, Canada, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States, all of whom appreciate Hungarian dances because of their technical complexity and improvisational character. As a result, the Hungarian “dance-house method” of teaching folk dance and music was recognized in 2011 by UNESCO in its registry of best practices as a paradigm for passing on intellectual and cultural heritage.

Thanks to the transmission of traditional knowledge from these “last preservers” to the new succeeding generations, there is now an enormously rich repertoire and extraordinarily high standard of dance, musical,



A Roma musician in 1929 poses with his family in Sarkad (southeastern Hungary). Photo by Maár Photo Atelier, courtesy of Museum of Ethnography, Budapest



Performances, presentations, and dance teaching take place at the annual Táncház Festival at the Budapest Sport Arena in 2010. Photo by Ágnes Fülemlé, Balassi Institute/Hungarian Cultural Center

and crafts knowledge throughout the country. What had started as an amateur movement thus revolutionized the methods and concepts of choreographed stage performances, thereby creating new sensibilities and possibilities for both contemporary and traditional dance. Recent experiments in music, design, and fashion are reshaping the boundaries and meanings of tradition.

The *Hungarian Heritage: Roots to Revival* program at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival demonstrates not only the diversity and authenticity of these contemporary traditions, but also the significance of the Hungarian folk revival movement worldwide. Featuring highly skilled masters and apprentices from rural areas, as well as musicians, dancers, and artisans from more urban settings, the program highlights the vitality of this culture, as well as the strength it derives from the reinterpretation of traditions.



Fashion designer Melinda Molnár-Madarász uses Hungarian folk motifs as inspiration for her collections, incorporating not only decorative elements but also traditional structures and values. Her designs encompass women's and men's wear, as well as footwear. Courtesy of Melinda Molnár-Madarász

RIGHT Made of broadcloth and decorated with embroidery or appliqué work, the fancy coat (*cifraszűr*) was the most representative Hungarian festive male garment from the 1820s to the 1930s. Photo by Ágnes Fülemlé, Balassi Institute/Hungarian Cultural Center

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