

**A study tour to the
International Haymaking Festival,
Transylvania**

19 – 26 August 2012



Sarah Robinson
Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust
October 2012



Acknowledgments

The study tour was part of the Sowing the Seeds project and was funded by the Yorkshire Dales LEADER programme, which is being made available through the Rural Development Programme for England, which is jointly funded by Defra and the European Union.

Supported in partnership by:



Further information relating to the study tour can be found at the following websites:

Pogány-havas Microregional Association: www.poganyhavas.hu

Barbara Knowles Fund: www.treasuresoftransylvania.org

Mountain hay meadows project: www.mountainhaymeadows.eu

Introduction

The study tour was part of the Sowing the Seeds project, which aimed to make links and cooperate with LEADER/LEADER-type partners in the UK or Europe in areas with remnants of upland hay meadow so as to share experience and expertise on protecting and restoring traditional hay meadows and using hay meadows as an educational and tourism resource.

The project was run by the Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust (YDMT) from September 2010 to October 2012 using funding mainly from the Yorkshire Dales LEADER programme. The project complemented and built on the success of YDMT's Hay Time meadow restoration and education work in the Yorkshire Dales, and the Bowland Hay Time project, which is run in partnership with the Forest of Bowland AONB.

During the course of the Sowing the Seeds project, YDMT heard about the International Haymaking Festival and arrangements were made for me to take part in 2012's festival. This report describes the activities, experiences, lessons learnt and best practices identified during my visit. A report detailing all elements of the Sowing the Seeds project is also available.

About the festival

The festival takes place in Gyimesbükk, Transylvania and aims to introduce participants to the landscape of the Gyimes Valley and the traditional lifestyles of the Csango people who live and work in the valley and surrounding mountains, and to enable participants to take part in the traditional haymaking activities of the summer. The festival is now in its fourth year and is run as a partnership between the Pogány-havas Microregional Association and the Sárig family, with support from the Barbara Knowles Fund, the Global Environment Facility Small Grants Programme and Naturvernforbundet i Buskerud in Norway.

The following is an extract from the festival literature:

"As our experience from the past few years shows the Csangos living in the Gyimes Valley possess a knowledge that represents an exceptional value for the whole of Europe.

The ancient csango people settled in a wild, reclude valley in the Eastern Carpathians and in order to survive they had to develop a special life and land use style that was in harmony with nature.

Haymaking is the most important activity in the Gyimes Valley because people are mainly occupied with animal husbandry. With decades old work they created one of the most biodiverse mountain hay meadows in the world.

The haymaking festival in 2012 would like to introduce participants into this type of landscape creating, nature respecting lifestyle."

There were ten participants at the festival, all accommodated in and around the small guesthouse run by Attila and Rega Sárig with help from Attila's parents. We were also accompanied by other members of the family, team members from the Pogány-havas Microregional Association, and Barbara Knowles, a former NERC research scientist who having seen the grasslands of Transylvania now lives in the area and supports the festival.

The festival literature continues:

"Nearly all the food served to the participants of the course is organic because the ingredients are grown and produced by the Sárig family on their own farm by Csango traditional. The family uses mainly human and animal power to produce food which means that machine usage is kept to a minimum. We hope that all these consist a good reason for our guests to visit and spend a whole week in "Csanglia" with pleasure.

Participants of the haymaking festival can contribute to the survival of this beautiful landscape that became so magical because of traditional haymaking. During the seven days of the event participants are also invited to get a personal insight into the world and lifestyle of the Csangos."

Having decided that a simple chronological account of the festival would not do justice to the breadth of discussion or the range of experiences in the week, I have split the rest of this report into a series of subject headings, all related in some way to the traditional farming lifestyle of the Csango people.

Farming systems of the Gyimes Valley



On the first day of the festival, we were up early, the scythes and rakes were stowed on the top of Attila's car and we drove around 30 minutes to the start of an hour's walk up to a set of meadows owned by the family. Attila's father and brother Sultan were already there, having stayed up in the mountains, and had been mowing the most level areas with a reciprocating blade petrol "Allen" type mower. During a break for breakfast, I chatted with botanist Lasi Demeter, this is what he told me about the farming systems in the area:

Gyimes is near the old Hungarian border, so the people living here see themselves as Hungarian, and don't speak using Romanian. As Hungarians, they keep cattle, rather than sheep, which are kept mainly by the Romanians, who are widely held as the best mountain shepherds. Some Hungarians with common rights do keep sheep, but employ Romanian shepherds to look after them during the summer, and to make the cheese every day.

The mountains are all cut for hay, high up there is no aftermath growth, so a single cut of hay is all the land high up produces, but lower down the cattle graze on the aftermath at the end of the summer until they are brought in for winter. Much of the mountain area is too steep to cut by machine, and so it is mowed by hand using light weight Austrian bladed scythes. All the raking and collecting is done by hand, the hay is brought down using horses. More about haymaking later.

The landscape of Transylvania has been described as medieval in character, as both valley bottoms and mountain sides are run as strips, with very few boundaries between ownership. On the plains boundaries can be seen by different crop types, but in the mountains it can be less obvious to a visitor. Sometimes, meadow edges were marked by a line of anthills, sliced off and moved by hand to mark the edge and to make mowing easier. Other times edges were marked by a line of spruce saplings left to grow whereas others within the cut areas were sliced off and removed. However, on many occasions, boundaries are simply passed through the generations and known by all, so that 'from that tree to the curve in the track' works perfectly well.

An interesting difference between the extensive grass fed systems of this area and extensive grass fed systems in the UK is that sheep and cattle in Gyimes are seen as producers of milk, rather than meat. Meat appears much less often in the diets of the Csangos compared to here in the UK, and tends to be preserved pork products such as smoked bacon, sausage and chorizo, as well as rabbit and chicken, rather than lamb or beef. Perhaps this is because the families work all summer to produce enough food to see them through the winter months, and so they use the meat from animals which don't also produce protein via dairy products.

We visited Attila's parent's farmstead, next door to where Attila and Reka had their guesthouse, kitchen, garden, barn and caravan (they are in the process of building a house for themselves, totally by themselves, with wood from the

forest and stones from the river, so are currently living in a very sweet caravan under an apple tree) to see the livestock they have. Like many traditional farming families, the number of livestock is really governed by how much food the family need and some extra to sell for cash or to barter for those items they cannot produce themselves, such as clothes, metal items, some foods eg coffee, and to pay bills. The Sárig family had 4 cows, currently with 2 calves, a sow and a boar, currently with 5 youngsters, two horses, and ample number of hens, at least one dog and two huge rabbits, kept for meat.



One evening we walked with Attila up to the family's summer farm, called a koliba, where the family have their summer cattle grazing. From 28 May to 28 September every year, the cattle and one of the pigs live up on this farm, and the family sleep there every night. The Sárig's koliba has two small houses, just one room each, the older one is now used more as a store room. The newer one, built in the 1970's, has everything you need for an overnight stay, beds, a kitchen table and well equipped dresser, and a stove for cooking and warmth. The windows were decorated with lace and curtains, the walls with floral wrapping paper, and the dresser sported a set of Jackie Chan and Jean-Claude van Damme stickers, a sure sign of inhabitation by boys during the 1980's, Attila did say that Sultan had been a bit of a karate fan in his youth. During the summer the family would come up to the koliba in the evening, milk the cows and cook a meal, sleep overnight and then make cheese in the morning, come back down during the day and then return in the evening. The pig was there to drink the residue produced from the buttermilk produced in the cheese making and get fat. The farm also had a barn for the cattle in the night time, although Attila did say that it wasn't really bear proof! Up in a tree outside the koliba house was a piece of flat metal and a clapper, connected to the house by a thick rope. This is the bear warning system, which scares the bear away from the safety of the house. When I asked how you might know that a bear was close, Attila said that the dogs had a very particular bark when the bear was there, a bark that translates to "open the door and let me in quick", one might surmise.

We talked about the traditional lifestyle of the area, how everything had a use and nothing was wasted. Attila explained that the landscape could provide enough food and a little money, but nothing more. The recent entry of Romania into the EU was seen by Attila in a mixed light, with people in the area wanting to have more of the things available in the west, leaving their farming roots and looking for cash-rich jobs in the towns and cities.

Romania's entry into the EU was a regular discussion point, and one which was covered in some detail by Sergely when he spoke to us about the work of the Pogány-havas Microregional Association. The Association comprises the Harghita County and Local Councils, local NGOs, and local entrepreneurs, with a shared goal to increase local incomes, preserve the region's cultural heritage and conserve the natural environment. The Association supports local agriculture and boosts farm incomes by providing training and study tours for farmers, and by developing new dairy products and helping farmers associations improve the quality of their milk. Entry into the EU in 2007 opened up new opportunities to agriculture, as well as new rules and regulations, including for example dairy hygiene regulations. The changes in culture which regulations such as these have brought to Romania have been difficult for the farming community to come to terms with. The Association has been helping by enabling access to funding streams, running projects such as cheese

making courses, and developing milk collecting and testing equipment. This project enables farmers to sell high quality milk direct to consumers in towns, without having to use wholesalers, thus maintaining their margins. Milk is delivered to testing stations by farmers, it is then transported to 'iron cows' in neighbouring towns, where consumers can buy it direct, normally from outside of grocery stores. The 'cows' are refilled once the machine itself sends a text message back to the milk collection station. The Association also lobbies in Brussels, making the case that "traditional farming systems support biodiversity and landscape and need financial support not outside imposed rules".

Haymaking

Haymaking is the central part of farming in the Gyimes valley. Fodder is needed for six months of the year to feed the cattle whilst they are housed and there is deep snow on the ground. In a drought year, such as 2012, even more is needed as there is often little aftermath grazing. Attila's family were already feeding their cattle in August, when in a 'normal' year, they would still be grazing on the pastures of the koliba.

In the main, except where the ground is level enough, hay in the mountains is mown by hand. The meadows are not fertilised and one cut is taken between July and August. Haymaking is a collective operation, with scything taking place in a staggered line downhill, with the fastest person always at the front. Once at the bottom of the slope, each person walks back up, spreading out the cut grass as they go. The fastest person jumps down the line if they get held up by the person in front. In this way, our mottled crew of 10, ranging in age from 12 to 50-ish, managed to mow about a hectare in a morning. Amazingly, after lunch, the crop is dry and ready for raking into hay stacks. The raking method was incredibly complicated, and something that we only started to get the hang of by the end of the week. The theory seemed simple enough: two teams of people raking the crop towards each other, working uphill to form a long hay 'sausage' which could be rolled down the hill and then stacked into a neat egg shaped stack. Somehow it never seemed to work quite like that!



Rolling the hay down hill

The production of the stacks was amazing to watch, with careful folding and raking of the outside, in very little time the 6 ft stacks were neat and weather proof, combed to keep out the rain, and with spruce lids to stop the wind blowing hay away. Interestingly, it was always the most 'senior' male up on top of the stack in charge of the operation, Attila only when his father was elsewhere, and Sultan, the younger son, only when the alternative was one of us!



The stacks are then collected using a horse and cart, and taken either right down to the home farm, or more usually stored in wooden field barns in the corners of the meadows. From here the hay can be collected during the winter, on horse drawn sleds rather than carts when it is needed, and during a time of year when there is less to do every day than in the summer. These barns need annual maintenance, or within five years they become completely derelict and need rebuilding. Attila explained that this was part of the danger of meadow abandonment, as these days it is not possible to get the labour together to build a new barn up in the mountains.



Early morning climb up to the meadows

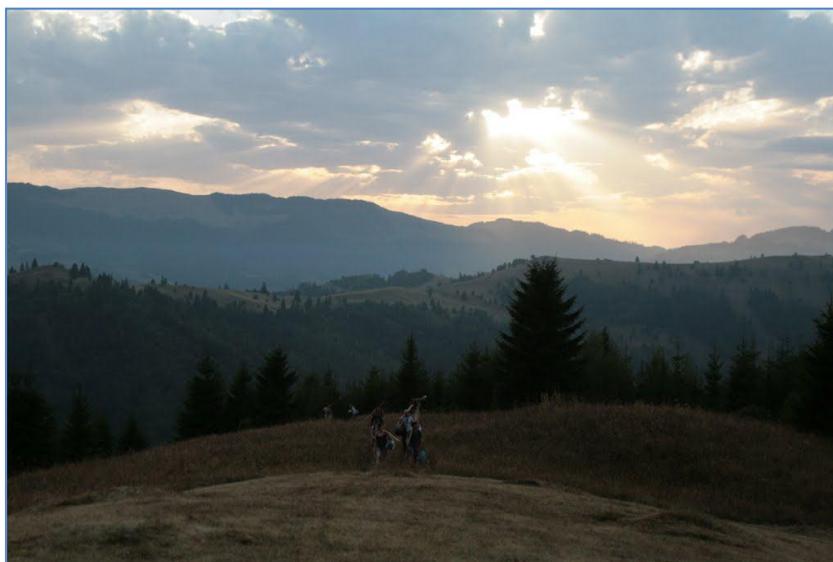
International Haymaking Festival, Transylvania

We helped Attila and his family to make hay in two sets of meadows during our stay. The first was on the land owned by the family, the second, a further hour's walk on from the first, belonged to a lady whose husband had died and who therefore had no one to make her hay. For this trip we stayed up on the mountain, making the trek in the late afternoon, having a meal from the camp fire, and then sleeping in a hay barn up on top of the freshly gathered hay from the adjoining meadows. Each time the routine was similar: breakfast, mow, polinka (see section on food and drink), mow, lunch, polinka, sleep, rake, home.



Scything downhill with more meadows in the background edged with spruce saplings

On the way up to this second set of meadows we started to see a lot more spruce saplings within the meadows, indicating that perhaps these more remote meadows were not being cut every year, and in some cases were being abandoned completely. Abandonment seems to be the meadow's main threat; they have been saved from ploughing, reseeding, fertiliser addition and pesticide addition simply because of their location, slope and remote character. However, it is these characteristics which also lead them to be vulnerable to abandonment where labour is not available, whether that be due to old age or a change to a job in the town and farming becoming more of a part time occupation.



Walking up to the high meadows

Cheese making

Cheese making is an important and sometimes daily activity, as a crucial way to preserve milk and the proteins it contains. Cheese featured in most meals we had during our stay, in a huge variety of ways, and I have tried to capture something of this in the section below. Normally this would take place at the koliba, but as the cows were now down and being fed hay at the home farm, this is where Attila showed us how to make cheese and other traditional dairy products. This was a slow and careful process, Attila explained that it was important to "work with the cheese, be relaxed, don't work like a crazy man".



The fresh milk is warmed to 36 degrees, rennet is added and the mixture left for 30 minutes. The curds are cut and the whey strained off, the resulting cheese is left to hang and is either eaten fresh or matured and used later or sold. Attila explained that people buying his cheese needed to know that it would not always taste exactly the same, like cheese from a supermarket, as his was not pasteurised and the same bacterial culture added, but rather they made use of the naturally occurring bacteria. The remaining whey was then heated again after a little fermented whey or diluted vinegar had been added. This was then strained and the solid 'orda', a product similar to cottage cheese, was eaten fresh. The whey residue is given to the pig selected to live at the koliba, as it is higher in protein than wheat.

Traditional skills

We saw many traditional skills throughout our stay, used as part of everyday life. Farming activities, such as the scything itself, the complicated raking routines and the stacking of hay were incredibly skilled. Back at the home farm, Rega was very often busy preserving summer foods for the rest of the year, making jam and cordials, drying herbs for tea and poppy seeds for cooking, bottling fruit and vegetables, making cheese, all vital in order for people to live through the winter months.

We made two specific visits within the village. The first was to Uncle Viktor, aged 78. A former forestry worker, Victor makes wooden tools all completely by hand, in a tiny workshop with no electricity. We watched him make a hay rake, the head from maple (for a man) or aspen (for a woman, as its lighter), the teeth from beech for strength and the handle from hazel for flexibility. He also made scythe snaths (handles) which were light and comfortable to use. Interestingly, we all used scythes with snaths made by Viktor, mowed for long periods of time having not mown very much, or at all, in the past, and no one suffered from any blisters. Just further up the lane we went to see a lady who had retired from farming and was now making a living weaving. She explained that although some of her income was cash from visitors buying her products, other people paid her in produce.

Food and drink and celebration

The working day during haymaking is long - Sultan was working from 5am till 11pm - but was interspersed with long rest periods for breakfast, lunch and an early evening snack. Each break has its accompanying traditional beverage, either polinka, a fiery plum spirit 'only 51%' apparently, or wine, often homemade. We were lucky enough to have homemade wine, made by Sultan for Attila and Reka's wedding, which had taken place just a month before the festival. Sultan explained that "white is for ladies, red is for the mens".



Attila and his dad during breakfast



Enjoying the shade during lunch

The food we had throughout our stay was delicious, all freshly prepared, using ingredients from the family vegetable garden, and cheese and meat produced on the farm. Many of the dishes used cheese as protein instead of meat. Breakfast, when early, was herbal tea and bread and coffee, later on it also included bread and honey, jam, cheese, salami or chorizo-type sausage. Lunch was similar when we were up in the meadows, although on one occasion Attila and Rega carried a huge pot of yellow peppers stuffed with chicken up to us, an hour's walk from the road. Supper was often soup, flavoured with herbs or paprika, and including beans, pasta, sausage and vegetables, followed by huge dishes of potato salad, stuffed courgette, aubergine, pasta and cheese, polenta, potato rosti, fried cheese, risotto, in fact we decided that their next diversification project should be a Csango recipe book. The morning we awoke on the mountain

top, Sultan made herbal tea for everyone, the traditional mixture of sage, St John's wort and oregano, picked from the plants growing in the meadows. Large bunches of these herbs were gathered and dried for use every morning at home.

On the last night of our stay, a local traditional dance troupe came to the guest house and put on a show for us, dressed in Csango costume and using traditional instruments. This caused a bit of excitement in the village and we were quickly joined by several other families and lots of small children, who were even more excited when Attila and Rega brought out birthday cake (it was my daughter Stella's 12th birthday and she had come with me for the trip) to share with everyone.



Scything competition

After our work in the meadows, we were rewarded by the dawning of competition day in the village. For the second year running, Attila had organised a scything competition, open to villagers and visitors alike, where 200RON, the equivalent to two weeks wages, was up for grabs for the winner. Based on speed and quality, entrants mow a distance against an opponent, first past the post wins, so long as the quality is good. Feeling rather nervous we decided that we would all enter, and so were surprised to find that this was a competition for men only. It turned out that this was because women of marrying age don't scythe, as it's a sign that they have given up on finding a husband!

Undaunted, and with ages ranging from almost 12 to around 50, we convinced the judges that a women's competition, following in the footsteps of the trail blazed by the female athletes from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Brunei in London this summer, would be a great idea. Twelve men and eight women took part, some of the quality was a bit ropey, one scythe even got broken, quite a few beers were drunk, and every one had a fine time. The results were pretty impressive too, with Nigel from our group getting a bronze, as did I, and Stella topping us all with her silver medal position.



Where next?

As well as being great fun, the festival was a fabulous learning experience. All the participants shared their different experiences of haymaking projects they were involved in, and we had some really good discussions around different situations. I gave a presentation about the Sowing the Seeds project and the meadows restoration and education work we are doing with the Hay Time projects in the Yorkshire Dales and the Forest of Bowland, and we had some really interesting discussions following on from that and from the other presentations given by the group. In particular, we talked about how meadows are managed in Gyimes to favour certain species. Whilst there is no need for meadow restoration management, farmers do work to encourage particular species favoured by the cows. This is done either by spreading out at the end of the summer hay known to contain that species, or by not cutting patches containing those species to ensure that they are able to set seed and spread. Interestingly, in the same area but down in the lowland plains, when fields are put back to grass from arable crops, they are not reseeded but simply left fallow and allowed to develop back into meadows with seed from the seed bank and from surrounding fields.

In order to continue discussions and to act as a focus for information about different projects across Europe, Barbara explained that she is in the process of setting up a website dedicated to hay meadow management discussions. This will be an excellent way of continuing to learn and exchange ideas about the subject.

All of the experiences and activities provided by the Sowing the Seeds project, including this study tour, will help inform development of our on-going meadows restoration and education work.

