



SHEPHERDS ON THE VERGE OF EXTINCTION

There are only a few shepherds, cowherds, herders, or just people who are good at dealing with cattle in Hungary nowadays. Five years ago, three Hungarian universities introduced training for shepherds, but it has not made much difference. There is no other option: soon, the first Mongolian and Turkmen shepherds and cowherds will appear on the Hortobágy and other Hungarian pastures.

The car turns on the main road leading through the Hortobágy. The driver is stepping on the gas harder and harder and cannot wait to get out of this barrenness, even though the world itself is here. The car stops at the edge of a slip-road, and we step out. We follow the tracks of a tractor for a little while, until we see a cow herd, set back against the flat landscape. The wind is gently caressing the twenty-centimetre-high grass, and suddenly, a tall man wearing a hat with a crane's feather is before us, with several barking dogs at his feet.

The man has a pocketknife in a leather case he inherited from his father hanging from his belt. Lajos Orosz, cowherd, describes his day, leaning on his metal-ended staff. Before herding out the cattle at 6 a.m., he gives them a little fodder

because the tender spring grass in itself may cause disorder of digestive function. With the help of the three dogs, he leads the herd to a lush pasture, all the while avoiding boggy, marshy areas. At 11 o'clock, he herds the cattle back to the stable that once belonged to the farmers' agricultural cooperative. Animals are kept for their meat and their calves here, so they are not milked. After a short rest, at 2 p.m., the cowherd herds them out again, and leads them back in the evening. It all starts again the next day.

Lajos Orosz was born in Tilalmas, on the outskirts of Karcag, and grew up doing manual labour, surrounded by nature, here, on the Hungarian *puszta*. Two years ago, he was looking after 400 sheep, however, today, he takes care of 150 cows under contract. From April until November, he lives in a farm building, and still keeps a couple of sheep for old times' sake. He suddenly has the urge to show me Lajkó, the hundred-kilo ram, whom he started nurturing as a little lamb and has grown immensely fond of.

'I'll herd the cattle that way, and I'll show you how tame the sheep are. The little lambs, too!' he says, proudly.

Not even a Dolby Stereo system in a cinema can reproduce what happens next. The dogs surround the herd from three directions. When they hear the shout "heerd" (*terelő*), they round up the animals that are lagging behind. After the command "to the froont" (*egy az elejire ne*), the dogs set the direction of the herd's chief bull, that has a cowbell around his neck. "Do not go theeere" (*egy amoda ne*) has them guiding the cattle barking, and when the herder cries "no, no, nooo" (*ne te ne*) or "bring it ooout" (*hajtsad ki onnan*), the dogs go after the animals that have wandered into the forest. A grey bull turns around and tries to horn one of the dogs like at a bullfight, then several cows follow suit. The two-year-

old herding dog and the other two one-year-old dogs that are still learning have a lot to do.

We pass by several broken utility poles. There used to be a stork's nest on one of them, but it has slipped down the pole and the stork couple has not moved back in. On 12 April, a shadoof (a counterbalanced bucket on a pole for raising water) was struck by lightning and broken into pieces. We step into the hall of the farm building, which has seen better days. It also serves as a storeroom, and there are sheep skulls and ram heads on a shelf. In one of the rooms, Lajos Orosz's partner shows me the "cute little lambs".

Lajos Orosz lets the sheep out. Something is already cooking in a pot on the stove. Hats and whips are hanging on the walls. There are also pictures, though not your typical Hawaiian palm trees or French Riviera. The host, out of his love for animals, has put pictures of cows upon the walls. If the wind ever blows away the crane feather from his hat, there are several others standing in a flowerpot. Next to them on the top of a cupboard, a long injection needle, used for giving medicine, kept in the fridge, to ill and weak animals.

On our way back to the herd, Lajkó follows us dutifully. However, I note that the chief ram is eyeing me up and down; maybe he is considering charging at me. The herder shouts at him then, and explains that Lajkó is worried about the girls sauntering behind him: Mari, Little Mari, Bori and Little Bori.

'Some rams are so wicked, they come at humans, too. You aren't paying attention for only a second, and they strike with their horn so hard, you won't believe it,' Lajos Orosz "assuages" my fears. He then opens up a little and tells me how deep a connection he feels with his cows, horses and sheep he nurtures from birth. The deep sound of cowbells and the tinkling of bells were his story's soundtrack.

This herd walks twenty kilometres a day out in the field. For keeping cows under contract, Lajos Orosz earns net 240,000 forints a month. His employer is a decent man, he even lets him have a small herd of sheep. There is such a shortage of herders who not only love animals but are also good with them, that Lajos Orosz has been offered 400,000 forints to work in another part of Hungary. He resolutely refused.

András Lakatos, who lives only fifteen kilometres away, in Hajdú-Bihar County, is not answering my calls. I visited the shepherd in Garbolc fifteen years ago, back when he was keeping sheep under contract at the easternmost point of Hungary, near the Ukrainian-Romanian-Hungarian tri-border area. He then told me that he was born in Tiszatelek. His father and his grandfather were also herders; the family has been looking after cattle almost ever since the 1920 Treaty of Trianon.

Even though András Lakatos never liked travelling, he worked at road constructions in Székesfehérvár. While driving near Uszka one time, their minivan had an accident and one of his colleagues lost his life. He then swore never to leave his little home near the border. Fifteen years is a long time, however, and when I phoned him the other day, he said he had moved from the Almásszeg meadow in Garbolc to the Kisvillongó farm in the Hortobágy.

Well, let us meet up, I suggested. Since he is still not picking up the phone, we leave the main road, and, seeing the state of the dirt road, get out of the car and continue towards the farm on foot. A man wearing a hat and a pair of rubber boots welcomes us. Although it is raining, he takes his hat off and says:

‘Old András, an excellent employee, died two days ago.’

‘Man proposes, God disposes’... He was 64 years old, and married several times; he left 14 children behind. The man

with the hat is Dr. Ferenc Varga, linguist, the owner of the farm. The old man and two other employees, Pali and Zoli, had a well-established working system, so he has had to take Old András’s place.

Since it is raining, we stand under the roof of a shed. The Fiat tractor standing inside looks like a piece of garbage, but it is functioning perfectly. The shed is also used for straightening shepherds’ staves. The staves are suspended from a beam by cords, and there are logs hanging from their lower end as weights. I can also see the skin of a cow that had to undergo emergency slaughter due to a tear in its abdominal wall stretched on a frame and disinfected with lime.

‘We, the Cumans (Hungarians descended from a group of Turkic nomads), were breast-fed with animal husbandry. I was born in Kunszentmárton, all my ancestors were farmers. We bought this farm here, on the Hortobágy, 13 years ago. We have 120 cows and 50 sheep. We also look after cows under contract, so currently, we have 280.’

Dr. Ferenc Varga and his wife used to live on a farm; however, when their children were born, they moved to Kócsujfalu.

‘Does finding manpower for the sheep and cows often prove to be difficult?’

‘The fluctuation is extremely high. Almost only fortune hunters reply to our ads. There was one man who, on his very first working day, left the herd out in the field and came back to the farm at 4 p.m., saying his working hours were over. The reason we stopped breeding sheep is because we didn’t find suitable employees and sheep require more care than cows. Labour shortage is a huge problem and will be farming’s largest enemy of progress in ten years. If there’re no workers here, one needs to go find them elsewhere. Dairy plants already

employ Indian workers with official work permits, and this is what's going to happen to farms as well. You can't ask Indians to come and work here with sheep, though, but up north, near the Pakistani and Tibetan border, people have a long tradition of sheep and goat breeding.'

It looks like he knows what he is talking about. As it turns out, Dr. Ferenc Varga is a linguist specialising in Mongolian studies. He obtained both his BA and MA degree at the National University of Mongolia. He knows that part of the world well. He has been entertaining the idea of bringing workers from Mongolia to his farm in the Hortobágy. At the end, he came to the conclusion that it was not worth it, because according to current Mongolian laws, headhunting is illegal.

'China, Russia and the European Union could "easily drain half the country". Three months ago, a company based in Veszprém contacted me saying that they were expecting a large group of Mongolian workers. They asked me to translate for them during the training, and to take care of the labourers, but I couldn't take the job.'

The farm owner tells me another peculiar thing: people answering his ads do not call him properly. They only ring once, so that Varga has to call them back. A new life and a new job are not worth a phone call, it seems. His phone rings at that moment. Yes, you have guessed it right: his ringtone is a cowbell. One of his cowherds is telling him that he is about to lead back the huge herd of dairy cows from Hajdúfenék, Trahos-flat to the farm...

I ask Péter Hajduk, Managing Director of the Association of Hungarian Sheep and Goat Farmers, about the issue. 'Shepherding in the classical sense has undergone a transformation. Shepherd farms are mainly owned by families who are trying to cope with the labour shortage. However,

trainings for skilled workers in the swine, cow and poultry branches are needed as well,' he tells me.

Seeing the labour shortage in the shepherding sector, three Hungarian universities, the University of Debrecen, Kaposvár University and the University of Szeged, introduced a training for shepherds in 2014. The students primarily came from animal husbandry. They studied breed studies, theriogenology, pasture management and husbandry technologies. They also learnt about nail clipping and "the relationship between the vet and the shepherd".

'60 people applied in the first year, 40 in the second, and only a little more than 10 in the following years. Interest has been decreasing ever since, and the training can only be begun in every two or three years with 20 students,' Péter Hajduk adds.

In the last two years, the number of sheep in Hungary has declined from 1 million to 900,000. The exports to Turkey are high: while 35,000 sheep were sold to the transcontinental country last year, 14,000 were exported only in the first quarter of this year.

'Those who started shepherding at the age of 40 in the 1990s would now like to pass the staff on to the next generation. However, not every young person in their twenties would like to continue this lifestyle. Many began shepherd breeding only to gain advantage in land acquisition, receiving subsidies or winning tenders. And now they're phasing the businesses out,' Péter Hajduk explains.

Eight or nine, animal-loving, Transylvanian families tend to the several thousand sheep, cows and swine belonging to György Kiss, his brother and their children. The man is the Vice President of Production of the Association of Hungarian Sheep and Goat Farmers.

'Shepherds, cowherds and herders have been marginalised. A lot of time and a great change in public awareness are necessary if we want children to proudly declare: My father is a shepherd, and we have a farm! The sector needs a quick solution, and that's foreign labour. We've been trying to invite workers from India to the poultry branch with the assistance of the Indian embassy, and labourers are soon going to arrive from Turkmenistan to be the first foreigners to work at Hungarian shepherd farms,' says the Vice President of Production.

András Lakatos has been buried. One of his 14 children has been working as a cowherd since his twenties; he lives near Nagyecsed in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County today. In order to find other young people who are good with animals and willing to work as herders in Hungary, one would need a magnifying glass.