

BOOK REVIEW

Gagy, József. (2019). *Régi ember, új világban: Sztrátya Domokos életútja*. [An Old Man in a New World: Domokos Sztrátya's Life Story]. Budapest – Kolozsvár: L'Harmattan – Kriza János Néprajzi Társaság. 277. ISBN 978-963-414-613-1; 978-606-9015-13-1 (Dissertationes Ethnographicae Transylvanicae)

Reviewed by **Zsolt Nagy***



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József Gagy's career as a social researcher only really started in the early 2000s. Although he has previously reported significant results – e.g., in 1998, on popular beliefs from the Szeklerland, titled *Jelek égen és földön* [Signs in Heaven and on Earth] – Gagy became a widely known and respected expert on the phenomena of popular religiosity and the social conditions of the second half of the 20th century in Romania and Transylvania at the turn of the millennium. From among his key informants in Maros/Mureş County in the last decades (Pál Balogh from Jobbágyfalva/Valea, Zsuzsanna Nagy from Marossárpatak/Glodei, etc.), this volume presents the life story and personal profile of Domokos Sztrátya or “Uncle Domi” (1931–2018) from Jobbágyfalva, intended by the author as a kind of historical document of the age, which the title references. The volume, which appeared in 2019 in the *Dissertationes Ethnographicae Transylvanicae* series launched in 2018 by the Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca-based János Kriza Ethnographic Society, is co-published by the L'Harmattan publishing house in Budapest. Without any exaggeration, we can say that the news of the publication of the monographic work on “Uncle Domi, the electrician” – previously presented only in excerpts, teasers, and lectures (e.g., in 2014 in Ottomány/Otomani, under the title *Sztrátya Domokos archívuma. Miért nincs?* [The Archive of Domokos Sztrátya: Why Does It Not Exist?], or in case studies (e.g., booklet no. 2/2019 of the Transylvanian Museum Society, under the title *Vidéki villanyhasználat. Egy villanyos esete* [Rural Electricity Use: The Case of an Electrician] – has excited not only the narrower circle of social researchers but also the wider, laic readership.

Let it be noted that an undertaking of this volume and subject matter, with a focus on a single informant and supported by written sources, was last seen a quarter of a century ago. In 1994, based on a farmer's diary, Tamás Mohay attempted to describe and analyse a 20th-century farm and household, focusing on its creator and organiser, Sándor Nagy from Ipolynyék/Vinica. However, while Mohay's subject was a peasant with a rural farm, József Gagy's informant was considered partly peasant and partly official (uniquely, in his own community he was both a peasant and an intellectual), i.e., a literate individual who can be classified in a transitional “category” and whose life falls in a transitional period (Domokos Sztrátya handled various documents as a soldier, later held a job in the office of the collective farm, and ultimately worked

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as an “electrician”). Hence, the author had at his disposal a considerable amount of written source documents and materials that facilitated the presentation and reconstruction of Sztrátya’s life. Moreover, from October 2014 until Uncle Domis’ death in March 2018, the author recorded about 190 (!) interviews. The documents and records uncovered by the author thus provide an insight into not only the structure and operation of his farm and household and the daily practices of farming but also into the life of his village and the region. At the same time, I consider it fortunate that the volume also includes photographs, some taken by the author in the field and others digitized from the family archive (even though few photographs were taken of Uncle Domi during his lifetime, most of them related to major life events), since this also gives a picture of the “lifeworld” of the studied individual.

It is interesting to note that, from all his encounters with Uncle Domi and their numerous (recorded) conversations, for his introduction, the author chose a “day after,” 1 July 2015, when after a “tour” and “inspection” of the farmyard, the garden, and the square in front of the house, they engaged in a conversation and some ritual wine tasting (“which rarely happens”), a moment that came to play a decisive role in the birth of the current book. By reviewing the local municipal archives and processing its data, József Gagyi – very sensitively and with an eye for all relevant details – places the individual life within the broader context of administrative-economic and social processes, in the world of the village, its cultural and political framework. The author describes the processes Domokos Sztrátya and his contemporaries “were part of (. . .), wittingly or unwittingly,” such as the period between 1948 and 1962, which resulted in the restructuring of property control, i.e., collectivisation. At the same time, he also draws attention to the fact that the manner and pace of the lifestyle change – which Gagyi attempts to explore in his book – is much harder to research than the more technical, “better documented” changes. For instance, the introduction of electricity, an important factor in the life of an “electric” individual, is well-documented, while the actual spread and local perception of electric consumer goods is more difficult to grasp. Another interesting fact about the book is that Domokos Sztrátya knew the subject of an earlier work of the author, written about Uncle Domi’s contemporary and fellow villager from Jobbágyfalva. When József Gagyi visited him, he was already aware of the purpose of the conversations, prepared for the meetings, and knew about the further fate of the recorded material. Perhaps (also) due to this circumstance, the basic motif of “then” and “now” always emerges, consciously or instinctively, in the semi-structured conversations, be it with Domokos Sztrátya the farmer, the collectivist vine-grower and winemaker, or even the “electrician” of twenty-four years (i.e., meter-reader and tariff collector, *cititor-încasator* in Romanian). It becomes clear even to the laic reader that Domokos Sztrátya, with his tremendous knowledge of place and society and having visited every house with electricity more than ninety times in the twenty-four years, would make an excellent key informant in a socio-ethnographic, sociological, and sociographic research focusing on the socio-cultural changes in the countryside. “Uncle Domi was not a simple interlocutor. He was perhaps also more than just a key informant” – Gagyi writes at one point in his book – “because he was a curious observer of people, villages, and the times. So the conclusion I’ve come to from our conversations is that he was a social researcher in disguise,” an “electrician” researching his own culture.

At the same time, it is not just the informant who is introduced to us through the published interviews but – in a way that has become customary for József Gagyi – also the researcher, as a humane anthropologist, often struggling, wanting to stand his ground, seeking understanding—an interlocutor seeking to know the “depth of life.” The lengthy quotations have been included



in the main body of the volume “so that it is possible to see into and follow the course and details of the joint construction of the narrative.” Without going into a more detailed description of the contents of the volume, I would like to note that the structure of the work – following the introduction – can be divided into two main parts. The first (*A kapcsolatépítés fordulatai. Első beszélgetések* [Turning Points in the Building of a Relationship: Initial Conversations]) and second (*Az idő hosszában. A módszertanomról* [Through Time: On My Methodology]) chapters highlight the motivations and methodological issues of the research. In the third (*Sztrátya Domokos, paraszt és írástudó. Életútja a villanyossá válás előtt* [Domokos Sztrátya, the Peasant and the Writer: His Life Before Becoming an Electrician]), fourth (*Sztrátya Domokos, a villanyos* [Domokos Sztrátya, the Electrician]), and fifth (*Mi van Sztrátya Domokos lelkének legközepén?* [What’s Right in the Middle of Domokos Sztrátya’s Soul?]) chapter, the author systematizes his knowledge of the life of his informant. Following the summary, the Appendix contains the transcribed and edited text of three interviews. The volume also includes a bibliography, as well as Romanian and English summaries.

Finally, it should be noted that since only a fraction (about a quarter) of József Gagyí’s interviews with Domokos Sztrátya were included in the volume, this “old man”, Uncle Domi, will likely appear as a main character in further monographs. In any case, the complete processing of these collections, together with the previous volumes published by Gagyí – *Ha akartam, füttyöltem, ha akartam, dúdolászgattam* [If I Wanted, I Whistled, If I Wanted, I Hummed] (Marosvásárhely/Târgu Mureş, 2012) and *Aki tudta, vitte* [If You Could Take It, It Was Yours] (Csíkszereda/Miercurea Ciuc, 2018) – presenting the relations in the village of Csíkfalva/Vărgata, will go down in the history of Hungarian social ethnographic research as a unique and exemplary undertaking. They also further nuance the findings of the personality studies of Gyula Ortutay and the various popular literacy studies (e.g. the so-called “peasant archive studies” initiated by Irén Sz. Bányai in the 1970s, the “rural letter-box research” promoted by Károly Kós, or the “farmer’s diary studies” represented by Tamás Mohay, etc.). Thus, from the first ethnographic work – János Jankó’s publication, *Kalotaszeg magyar népe* [The Hungarian People of Kalotaszeg/Țara Călatei] (1892) – which just named the informants, it took a century for Hungarian ethnographers to place an individual informant and interlocutor in the spotlight in their monographs. József Gagyí’s volume serves as a model for further research. Perhaps a similar monograph will be written about the “chroniclers” from Geges/Ghinești, about Uncle Domi’s former friend – who appears several times in Gagyí’s volume and is also mentioned by name – the key informant of the reviewer, András Szabó, who is still alive, or the reviewer’s own grandfather, Ernő Nagy Sr. from Geges/Ghinești, who passed away this year. The latter, as the dairy supplier of the region and the owner of a “*pálinka* factory” operated by electricity, was also a social researcher in disguise, a farmer-writer-documentarian, just like Domokos Sztrátya, who deserves the spotlight. Gagyí’s volume also mentions that Ernő Nagy Sr., as a contemporary, acquaintance, and friend of Uncle Domi, invited the “electrician” from Jobbágyfalva in his home on several occasions. They drank wine together, and more importantly, Ernő Nagy Sr. was the keeper of the often-mentioned bicycle – which becomes important and almost symbolic in Gagyí’s volume – while Domokos Sztrátya read the electricity meters and collected the electricity fees in the village. Uncle Domi could never suspect at that time that a book would be born from all this after his passing.

