

## SITUATION OF THE STRAW PLAITING COTTAGE INDUSTRY IN THE CARPATHIAN BASIN IN THE LATE 19th AND EARLY 20th CENTURIES

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**Abstract:** Research on cottage industry in the Carpathian Basin has not paid very much attention to work with straw. In peasant self-sufficiency, in addition to wickerwork and rush weaving, plaits made of wheat and rye straw were among the main materials used for agricultural and household storage containers. In some areas the making of straw hats as an income-supplementing activity carried out together with agricultural work also acquired special importance. In the 19th century with the expansion of trade this cottage industry in places rose to the level of a manufacturing industry. At the turn of the century the movements promoting domestic industry and the trade exhibitions gave special impetus to this activity. It flourished right up to the Trianon decision of 1920. As a consequence of the dictated peace Hungary lost around two-thirds of its territory and economic ties were suddenly severed. In some parts of the Great Plain, e.g. in Hajdúnánás (today Hajdú-Bihar County), and especially in the villages of the Székelyföld region, traditional straw hat making has survived right up to the present as a women's activity, providing a livelihood for many women working at home. This article deals with the industrial history background, with questions affecting cottage industry in general, and with the past of once flourishing trade connections, devoting special attention to a few villages in Hungary and in the Székelyföld region in the territory of today's Romania.

**Keywords:** history of cottage industry, straw hat making, promoting domestic industry and its influence

An attempt will be made in this article to trace the impact of the decades preceding the turn of the century and the movements promoting domestic industry on the straw hat making cottage industry in the Carpathian Basin that can still be found today, on the basis of contemporary industrial history data, statistical communications, and magazine articles urging the advancement of cottage industry, and local history reports. The aim is to throw light on the background of a cottage industry that still exists, and in fact is now flourishing in the Székelyföld and some areas of Transylvania. The subject will be examined only up to Trianon (1920), since the new boundaries drawn then imposed restrictions on trade and the migration of manpower, that is, on the big opportunities. However, in many cases this circumstance also conserved this traditional craft in the territories detached from Hungary.

At the turn of the 19th–20th centuries making straw hats was closely associated with the name of Hajdúnánás (Hajdú County). It was here that the greatest number of people took part in the activity of hat making, and where the cottage industry reached such a scale that investors and entrepreneurs raised the production of straw hats which had previously been a purely handicrafts activity resting on traditional

bases, to the level of a manufacturing industry. It must be noted that, with the exception of a few factories in Budapest and country towns, it did not grow to such a scale anywhere else in the Hungarian-speaking territory.

According to the geographical dictionary of Elek Fényes published in 1851 “the land around this Hajdú town is exceptionally fertile, and breeds very fine cattle”,<sup>1</sup> indicating that the basic conditions for a livelihood from agriculture and animal husbandry are good and the different descriptions of the town make special mention of its above average endowments: “its land amounting to almost 47,000 “hold” [1 hold = 0.57 hectare] is suitable for all agricultural crops and its durum wheat in particular rivals the quality of wheat from the Bánság”.<sup>2</sup> Researchers on cottage industry have found that in general people are obliged to take up supplementary work in places where the geographical endowments and the basic agricultural activity do not ensure a livelihood. The above statistics show that this is not the case here: the development of this cottage industry in Hajdúnánás cannot be explained by poor farming land. Perhaps it was precisely the large wheat production that provided the basis on which straw processing originally developed. This explanation seems all the more likely when we examine the spread of hat making in the straw plaiting villages of the Székelyföld. This is also true, for example for Kőrispatak now in Harghita County (Romania, Székelyföld) where agriculture did not and does not provide sufficient income for a livelihood, the local people are forced to seek supplementary earnings and making straw hats (an activity known locally as “*kalapkötés*”) still ensures a considerable proportion of their income. However, while the once flourishing cottage industry fell into oblivion long ago in Hajdúnánás under the influence of historical and economic circumstances, in Kőrispatak it can still be found in the form in which it must have existed in Hajdúnánás before it was raised to the level of a manufacturing industry. Although there are now few specific signs, oral tradition quite clearly links the two settlements located several hundred kilometres apart, through the straw processing. This fact is confirmed by measures, courses and exchange relations launched around the turn of the 19th century with the intention of spreading and promoting the cottage industry, and which could later gain impetus again, taking advantage of certain favourable historical moments.

For us the significance of a study of straw hat making in Kőrispatak (known locally as “*kalapkötés*”) lies, among others, in that it enables us to reconstruct a form that existed much earlier, in another region, in a different natural, economic and cultural context but with almost exactly the same parameters. It gives a clear picture of the early stage of cottage industry when straw hats were worn by both men and women, mainly on weekdays for work in the fields in summer. The hats were made for their own use or to meet small market demand by families, and later by families engaged in cottage industry who bought and processed the basic material made at home. In Hajdúnánás too, cottage industry underwent a big change when the first

<sup>1</sup> FÉNYES 1851: 133.

<sup>2</sup> Statistical yearbook of Hungarian towns, 1912: 96.

merchant appeared in this area which had previously been practically untouched by economic challenges and they began to product straw hats for more distant markets.

Under the influence of fashion and the Western demand for luxury mediated by Budapest merchants and manufacturers the simple, everyday cheap and practical hats worn by harvesters suddenly became “*girard*”, “*lord*” and “*Panama*” hats. This is an event of economic history in the hat-making cottage industry that separated in structure and nature the two basic work processes: plaiting the straw and sewing the plait into a hat. The basic material continued to be made by simple families, women and children. With skilful and diligent fingers they plaited the straw selected by size into plaits and sold them to the manufacturers in 40–50-metre bundles. In contrast, machines were used for almost every operation, from sewing to decorating to giving the hats their final form in small plants and factories specialising in this activity. Thus, while the former reserved for itself the privilege of never mechanising, the latter actually acquired the form of a manufacturing industry on various scales. Dozens of plants were set up in Hajdúnánás and they all managed to prosper without great difficulty. By then the different levels in the work processes of hat making had become clearly distinct. Apart from the factory workers processing the basic material, the owners employed thousands of indispensable outworkers specialised in making the plaits. In this way the contemporary experts too, attempted in debates on the law related to cottage industry to identify the cottage industries in the strictest sense which were in need of support, encouragement and development, and which could be transmitted to people living in other regions through the institutionalisation of their education and training.

Before examining data on the making of straw hats, it is worth looking at the general situation of the cottage industry in the last decades of the 19th century. This is the period when the state leadership began to pay attention to cottage industry also at the legislative level, coming to realise its significance for the national economy. At Hungarian and international exhibitions it urged that different activities be represented through various products because it regarded it as essential to show the character of the country through the knowledge and handicrafts of the people when presenting the national character. It was not by chance that it was found at the time of the successful presentation of the cottage industry section of the National General Exhibition held in Budapest in 1885, that: “it can be said that Hungary has discovered itself”.<sup>3</sup> In promoting cottage industry it was hoped on the one hand that it would bring the economic and demographic development of the people and on the other, as the wave of emigration was beginning, that it would have a retaining force, and numerous concrete measures were taken for this purpose. No convincing documents have ever been found to prove the connection formed around this time between Hajdúnánás and some of the “hat-making” villages of the Székelyföld (e.g. Kőrispatak, Bözöd [Hargita county]). However, oral tradition regards Hajdúnánás as one of the important cradles of straw hat making. At all events, there were exchange

<sup>3</sup> HEIRICH 1886: 511.

relations around this time directed principally at transmitting and teaching the skills of cottage industry and special handicrafts. The delegates often carried out their mission of one or two months with the help of elementary schoolteachers.

Hungarian governments formed after the Compromise of 1867 also supported cottage industry as an important branch of industry since “up to the last decade of the last century Hungary’s industrial production was actually concentrated in cottage industry output established in the peripheries and drawing on centuries of tradition”.<sup>4</sup> Analyses also taking international conditions into account mention a number of definitions of cottage industry; the need for these definitions actually arose under the influence of the provisions of industrial legislation and at the same time the demand also arose for an examination of the historical background of the cottage industry as a branch of economic activity and as a term.<sup>5</sup> A literal translation of the German term “Hausindustrie” entered Hungarian public awareness much sooner than its real content. In the Western economy where the focus was on industry it represented an isolated branch, while in Hungary even in that period agriculture was still the principal source of the national wealth and the development of the straw-plaiting cottage industry is also linked primarily to agriculture.

At the Vienna World Exposition of 1873 cottage industry was already regarded as a separate group, as the presentation of “products produced by the people for their own need”. The ethnographic and artistic aspects of the objects exhibited and the representation of the work process also attracted considerable interest.<sup>6</sup> The title and programme of the “Hungarian National Women’s Industry Exhibition”<sup>7</sup> held in Budapest in 1881 signalled its particular attitude to cottage industry, marking it out from the traditional industrial exhibitions held earlier. The objects presented embraced the scope of “female and cottage industry”. The concept of “folk industry” arose at this time and efforts were made to distinguish it in a number of respects from cottage industry.<sup>8</sup> There was no doubt about the confidence of the organisers and experts in the activity or of their recognition of the significance of this production. Nevertheless, there was considerable uncertainty and inconsistency at this exhibition too regarding the use of the term and indirectly in the classification of this form of activity. This event was held only a few years before the International Statistical Congress held in Budapest in 1876. This prestigious gathering devoted special attention to the definition of cottage industry.<sup>9</sup> After numerous Hungarian and foreign proposals were put forward, they adopted the definition of the Prussian representative, Dr. Engel: “cottage industry production is a form of operation where a commercial entrepreneur takes over goods made according to pre-specified patterns

<sup>4</sup> CSÁK 1928: 18.

<sup>5</sup> PUM 1914; CSÁK 1928.

<sup>6</sup> CSÁK 1928: 18.

<sup>7</sup> FÖLDES 1885: 12.

<sup>8</sup> In conjunction with the exhibition, József PUM noted the two concepts as follows: “Cottage industry”: the production of goods by women of the common people for their own needs; “folk industry”: production of articles for sale.

<sup>9</sup> CSÁK 1928: 18.

and conditions from tradesmen who are either independent or not independent but in all cases work in their own homes, and generally also provides the raw material or the semi-finished products needed to produce the goods”.<sup>10</sup> An effort was made to adjust the provisions of the industrial legislation of the period to Hungarian conditions in the spirit of this definition, that is, under the influence of foreign examples. Previously there had not been either a uniform definition,<sup>11</sup> or uniform legal practice regarding cottage industry. Even section 183 of Act XVII of 1884 mentions cottage industry only in connection with other measures,<sup>12</sup> as was the case for certain provisions of the industrial development acts of 1907. It was therefore considered necessary to adopt central ministerial regulations. In the last years of the 19th century three ministries, the Ministry of Religious and Education Affairs, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Trade dealt simultaneously with the matter and – approaching the issue from the viewpoint of their own territories – adopted measures aimed at the development of cottage industry and the economic and legal regulation of its situation. They attempted to attain their goals with numerous regulations and the establishment of educational, economic and other institutions.<sup>13</sup> The National Hungarian Cottage Industry Federation was set up in 1908 with headquarters in Budapest with the aim of supporting all efforts for the development of cottage industry, for which it received full financial and moral support from the state.<sup>14</sup>

Support for the development of cottage industry was seen mainly in the formation of trade connections and identification of markets, while producers were urged to set up co-operatives. Financial support for their operation was extended, among others, by the National Central Credit Co-operative set up for this purpose. At the turn of the century a number of cottage industries began to flourish thanks to this credit institution, and the co-operative also saved the Hajdúnánás straw hat industry “with its purely altruistic measures”.<sup>15</sup> It is therefore worth making special mention of the Credit Co-operative among the state measures. Writing about its activity József Pum mentions important figures on the situation of the Hajdúnánás straw hat industry at the time: “... in this locality it was a question of vital importance for around 1000 persons engaged in cottage industry. The old enterprise was in financial

<sup>10</sup> CSÁK 1928: 18.

<sup>11</sup> A number of studies dealing with the definition of cottage industry must be mentioned, but it is not possible here to examine them in detail: Tanácskozás a háziiparról [Conference on cottage industry]. Budapest, 1922; A házi-ipar lendülete [The dynamic development of cottage industry]. *Házi-Ipar Lapja* 1877/15, 1; Házi-Ipar Múzeum [Cottage Industry Museum]. *Házi-Ipar Lapja* 1877/6.

<sup>12</sup> PUM 1914: 401.

<sup>13</sup> It is worth referring here to the articles and studies dealing with these measures (in addition to the studies cited above): KELLER, Gyula: *Mezőgazdasági háziipar* [Agricultural cottage industry]. Budapest, 1903; GELLÉRI, Mór: A háziipar fejlődéséről [The development of cottage industry]. *Magyar Háziipar* 1910/1, 2; GAUL, Károly: Háziipar a XX. században [Cottage industry in the 20th century]. *Magyar Háziipar* 1910/1, 3–5; Tudósítás a Székely Háziipari Szövetség megalakulásáról [Report in the establishment of the Székely Cottage Industry Federation]. *Iparfejlesztés* 1910/15–16, 11; Gazdakörök a Székelyföldön [Farmers' Circles in the Székelyföld region]. *Magyar Háziipar* 1910/5–7, 3.

<sup>14</sup> PUM 1914: 418.

<sup>15</sup> PUM 1914: 425.

difficulties and was about to be wound up. The Government, wishing to rescue this cottage industry unique in the country, called on the National Central Credit Co-operative to carry out its financial reorganisation; this was successful and within a few months the Hajdúnánás co-operative began operation once again<sup>16</sup>. This fact, not specified in more detail, indicates that by then the Hajdúnánás straw hat industry had already survived a crisis. This had presumably been preceded by a period when it was considered developed and flourished, attracting the attention of the experts. Evidence of this is found in contemporary statistics, economic history analyses, and enthusiastic, encouraging, publicity articles in the newspapers.

The lines cited above make special mention of Hajdúnánás, as the only settlement where the straw hat making cottage industry was on a larger scale than anywhere else in the Hungarian-speaking territory. What led up to this quick flowering? What foreign precedents and connections could it build on and what caused its decline in the first decades of the 20th century? The following facts provide a far from full picture for a historical-type examination of a cottage industry. There is very little overview in the literature on the past of straw hat making or its Hungarian aspects. Since this is not such an important branch of craft industry as pottery, weaving or wool processing, there are few concrete sources on its past and origin. The product itself was never one of the essential items in the economic and everyday life of a community and even as an item of peasant dress it was only from the end of the 18th century that it became an indispensable part of the clothing worn for field work and the summer costume in some regions.<sup>17</sup> The product was made by peasant specialists, it involved almost solely manual work, meaning that it was one of the simpler branches of crafts. Statistical and other economic analyses as well as contemporary ethnographical descriptions deal with straw processing together with the related materials – withies, rushes and reeds. Special mention is made of straw plaiting only concerning its distribution and significance if it is of note as a supplementary activity to agriculture as the source of livelihood.

With a few exceptions, all the monographs that have appeared so far on the straw hat industry are manuscripts,<sup>18</sup> drawing mainly on data from oral tradition regarding the origin of this cottage industry. These are naturally important data, but they are difficult to confirm. For this reason, they have not been taken into consideration here. There are few written sources available on the subject. In the period before data was collected for statistical purposes we can draw only on translations

<sup>16</sup> PUM 1914: 425.

<sup>17</sup> JANKÓ 1892: 123.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., FÜLÖP, K.: *Hajdúnánás szalmafeldolgozó háziiparának története* [History of the straw processing cottage industry of Hajdúnánás] (manuscript, 1969); ÖTVÖS, Róza: *Hajdúnánás és a szalmaipar története* [Hajdúnánás and the history of its straw industry] (manuscript, 1965); KUTASI, Mihály: *A szalma háziipari feldolgozása Kőröspatakon* [The cottage industry processing of straw in Kőröspatak] (manuscript, 1972). Published studies: IGMÁNDY, József: *A hajdúnánási szalmakalapipar* [The straw hat industry of Hajdúnánás]. *Néprajzi értesítő* 1940/65–77; CSONTOS, Gábor: *A nánási szalmaipar* [The straw industry of Nánás]. Hajdúnánás 1975; MOLNÁR, István: *A kőröspataki szalmafonás* [Straw plaiting in Kőröspatak], in: *Népművészeti Dolgozatok* 1976, 92–96.

from foreign sources, and reports by early travellers often in search of the romantic and curiosities.

János Möller, in a work published in 1818, translated by Mokri Benjamin and supplemented with data on Hungary, a handbook on geography and technology in German intended for his fellow teachers, takes stock of the manual crafts in Europe. Among them, he mentions the use of straw, besides its indispensable role in animal husbandry and building, for making “artificial products”, such as common straw hats, baskets, chests, bedcovers, and chairs.<sup>19</sup> He mentions in passing that the manual work and tricks of weaving and binding straw objects are not very difficult to learn.<sup>20</sup> He mentions the places where straw hats are made in Europe: besides Berlin, London and Paris, they are also made in villages and small towns. He makes special mention of the vicinity of Dresden and certain provinces of Italy which, in fact, can be regarded as the first regions manufacturing straw hats on a large scale.<sup>21</sup>

Under the heading of “*cserények*” in his statistics of 1842 Elek Fényes mentions the making of straw hats, but attributes it solely to Apatin (Bács County)<sup>22</sup> (this is probably an error as basket weaving was a widespread activity in that village). A few years later, in 1846 according to a travel writing, Hajdúnánás was already known for its hat making: “people carry straw hats to the market by the armful. The inhabitants of Nánás are renowned for the fact that everyone ... here weaves so-called copper hats from straw, that is, they make straw hats. Unfortunately, here too *more patrio*, straw hat making is carried out without any advancement towards improvement”.<sup>23</sup> The passing visit made by Ottó Csatóry was sufficient for him to make analytical observations on the state and significance of the activity: “it would be worthwhile, ... obtaining one or two teachers for the local people, who could teach them how to produce the straw best suited to hat making, and how to weave the most refined straw hats”.<sup>24</sup>

An important item of information on the history of the Nánás straw hat appeared in 1860 in the *Debreczeni Közlöny* (Debrecen Gazette), written by Lajos Bocskai Papp, who, in his series of articles titled Hajdúság Letters, reports on the economic and cultural historical background of the settlement. He also writes in detail about our theme: “... as far back as people can remember every single house was a straw hat workshop, but this activity has become most widespread in the last two decades. Girls leaving school began to work with the new straw in the autumn and plaited until spring. In early spring the straw hat merchants arrived from Debrecen and the country, then the women of Nánás put down the ribbon (i.e. the plait) and took up needle and thread, sewing from morning till late at night ... On summer days the market is crowded with groups of women who carry the hats for sale, in

<sup>19</sup> MÖLLER 1818: 273.

<sup>20</sup> MÖLLER 1818: 274.

<sup>21</sup> MÖLLER 1818: 274.

<sup>22</sup> FÉNYES 1842: 216.

<sup>23</sup> CSATÁRY 1846: 758.

<sup>24</sup> CSATÁRY 1846: 758.

bundles or stacked in towers”.<sup>25</sup> The writer also reports the appearance of a certain Brunner, a merchant from Pest who actually discovered this unique cottage industry in Nánás, and by buying up the hats encouraged the makers to produce even more. The writer also makes a passing reference to a factory set up by the merchant Brunner, but this is not confirmed by other written sources. It is, however, certain that with the appearance of the merchant from Pest – who was presumably followed by others – and the purchase of hats in bulk linking the producers into a broad stream of commerce, a big boom began in hat making and the process of setting up plants to bleach and dye the plaits and sew hats began. These plants based their activity entirely on the plaiting skills of the women of Nánás, their provision of basic material and their diligence.

The Hungarian straw plaits appeared with great success already at the Paris World Exposition of 1867. The woven straw ribbons many metres long were used as the basic material not only for hats but also for other objects, and were able to compete in both whiteness and quality with even the most popular kinds of plaits.<sup>26</sup> The plaits were taken to Paris by the Micsei-Ráth commercial firm. One of the owners was Károly Ráth who already had close business ties with the hat weavers of Nánás. It is his great merit that he supported this cottage industry and the people working with straw. Support for the cottage industry from the government greatly increased in the decades following the world exposition, and Ráth too, as the vice-president of the National Hungarian Industrial Board, and as organiser of the cottage industry section of the 1885 Budapest exhibition, spoke up for this unique “industry”. Sándor Konek also praised Ráth’s merits in connection with the world exposition, but in his statistical work published the following year<sup>27</sup> he found only foreign – Italian, German – examples as worthy of mention and emulation.

The generation of statisticians following Elek Fényes made great efforts in presenting a precise picture of Hungarian industry. Although in the census of 1880 the questions in the occupational statistics cover those engaged in industry, it was only from 1884 that data was collected with detailed questionnaires. On this basis József Jekelfalussy published selected data on cottage industry in a number of articles. In his main group of “wicker, rush, bark, straw and reed industry”, he lists the number of male and female hat makers, the machines used and the annual production in a separate table. This shows that Hajdú County ranked first in all respects: more than 2800 individuals working independently operated 1000 smoothing machines in the work process.<sup>28</sup> After Hajdú County, the data for Udvarhely County were also substantial but the annual output of the latter was much lower. It must be assumed that in this respect Hajdúnánás was the foremost representative of Hajdú County. This is confirmed by Geiza Varga in “Hajdú megye leírása” [Description of Hajdú County] (1882), who, in the chapter on occupations, gives a description of the most impor-

<sup>25</sup> BOCSKAI PAPP 1860: 22.

<sup>26</sup> A szalmafonás, mint népipar [Straw plaiting, as a folk industry]. *Szatmári Közlöny* 1868, 50.

<sup>27</sup> KONEK 1868: 398.

<sup>28</sup> JEKELFALUSSY 1885: 35.

tant, straw hat making which has been practised since early times, especially in the town of Nánás where most of the women belonging to the agricultural and trades class, together with children over the age of six and the men, devote their spare time to this industry. In the spring a straw hat market is held every day, where not only finished hats are sold but also the still unsewn straw plaits, to buyers who flock here from all parts of the country.<sup>29</sup> The author cites an amendment made in 1795 to the rules of the local bootmakers' guild, referring to the straw hat as a local item of working clothing. This is the earliest written document known to us which mentions the wearing of straw hats specifically associated with Hajdúnánás.<sup>30</sup>

According to economic experts, the interest shown in cottage industry at the exhibition held for the millennium of the Hungarian settlement (1896) fell far short of that shown at earlier national exhibitions. Compared to the success of the ethnographic presentation of the regions and ethnic groups of Hungary and the millennium village, the cottage industry section attracted few visitors. The reason, of course, was to be sought not merely in the focus of attention on the ethnographic village, but also in the combination of the structure, nature and profitability of cottage industry production and the commercial factors.<sup>31</sup> However, from the viewpoint of our theme it is worth mentioning the novel way in which cottage industry was presented: besides the groups of objects exhibited, live demonstrations gave visitors a glimpse into the work processes. Among others, people from Hajdúnánás showed the spectacular parts of straw hat plaiting.<sup>32</sup> Hat makers from Bözöd (Udvarhely County) and Hencida (Bihar County) were also among the exhibitors.<sup>33</sup>

The comprehensive compilation on cottage industry by Dr. Gyula Kovács titled "A magyar háziipar törzskönyve" [Register of Hungarian Cottage Industry] published in 1898 in the official report on the millennium exhibition, must be mentioned as an important source. This summing up was based on reports by the chambers of commerce and industry and the author's own research. The work examined the subject from various angles and contains valuable data broken down to branches of industry, products and annual output. In addition to statistics, it also described the institutions of the cottage industry activity at that time. According to the book, straw plaiting was carried out on the largest scale in Hencida, while millions of hats were plaited from straw and sewn in Hajdúnánás, Hajdúdorog and Hajdúböszörmény. The hat factory in Nánás – presumably the Sohler plant – alone employed cottage workers using 380 sewing machines.<sup>34</sup> However, he remarks later that in the past five years production here began to decline because the "people find it more advanta-

<sup>29</sup> VARGA 1882: 212.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* Cites part of article XVII of the rules of the bootmakers' guild endorsed in 1795.

<sup>31</sup> RÁTH 1889.

<sup>32</sup> *Az 1896-iki Ezredéves Országos Kiállítás katalógusa* [Catalogue of the 1896 National Millennium Exhibition], 4.

<sup>33</sup> *Az 1896-iki Ezredéves Országos Kiállítás katalógusa* [Catalogue of the 1896 National Millennium Exhibition], 22.

<sup>34</sup> KOVÁCS 1898: 25.

geous... to do only the sewing, and to purchase the plaited straw from Italy and Switzerland".<sup>35</sup> This statement is of particular interest and presumably refers to the decline of the straw plaiting cottage industry because at that time the output of the Hungarian hat making industry had only just begun to expand.

At the end of the 19th century István Sohler's straw plaiting factory founded in 1888 in Hajdúnánás and subsequently modernised with machines was operating well and prospering.<sup>36</sup> It was delegated from the famous firm who gave the demonstration at the millennium exhibition. In addition to this factory employing more than 1000 persons, a number of plants specialising in hat making soon followed. However, they could not match the Sohler factory in productivity or business spirit. The enterprising person of the manufacturer István Sohler was the bridge between the application of western technical achievements and the traditional craft skills found in Nánás. He was able to base his innovations on these skills and was also prepared to spend his own money on study trips abroad, to England and Italy, on self-improvement, the purchase of machines and even on hiring semi-skilled workers from abroad, from Belgium and Germany. There was no doubt about his sound professional knowledge; the ministry of industry and trade appointed him to organise courses in straw plaiting. There are therefore good grounds for assuming that Sohler made a big contribution to the spread of straw hat making in Transylvania and its development, as remembered in oral tradition. The factory director was the first to use sewing machines brought from Dresden in the early 1890s, followed by hydraulic presses. The new methods were adopted by the factory founded in 1894 by Bernát Kattler and by the Meskó factory established in 1896. In this way István Sohler's activity had a big influence on cottage industry and the straw industry, determining the direction of their development; he was a businessman with broad horizons, aware of the expectations of the wider world but also of the demands of the stratum employed in local small-scale industry.<sup>37</sup> He had many followers; by 1913 there were over 30 plants.<sup>38</sup> Directly or indirectly the straw industry provided a livelihood for 3200–3500 people living in the town.<sup>39</sup> According to the factories' books<sup>40</sup> one third of the products were exported abroad (to Galicia, Bukovina, as well as to the western provinces of Europe), but the main market was Transylvania.<sup>41</sup> Straw hats from Nánás reached practically all the counties of Transylvania. It is very likely that not only the products but also the expertise was regarded as a "product" that could and should be exported, there is little doubt that the demand existed, but there is little information available on how the knowledge was transferred. At all events, there are grounds for

<sup>35</sup> KOVÁCS 1898: 29.

<sup>36</sup> IGMÁNDY 1940a: 224. He drew his data from the descendants of Sohler and from the factory's business books.

<sup>37</sup> This is why it was considered important to give more detail about his activity.

<sup>38</sup> IGMÁNDY 1940a: 225.

<sup>39</sup> IGMÁNDY 1940a: 225.

<sup>40</sup> The business and pattern books of the Sohler Hat Factory are at present in private possession; nothing is known of the others.

<sup>41</sup> IGMÁNDY 1940b: 76.

assuming that the Nánás straw industry and the activity of its outstanding figure, István Sohler constituted a bridge between the interior of the country and the cottage industry of Transylvania, either by sending out employees to give training, or acting as intermediary in obtaining machines, or forming contacts for commercial purposes. The system of contacts among the regions and their channels in the straw hat making industry too, call for a separate economic historical study. It is not possible here to make a thorough study of this “bridge” so burdened with economic and historical factors.

It is worth considering a few thoughts about the Transylvanian aspects of our cottage industry, where the development of the straw industry lags far behind the state found in Hajdúnánás. Field work done by human labour still largely characterises agriculture in Transylvania which is the vehicle of many traditions and archaisms. In summer a straw hat providing protection from the sun and rain was an indispensable part of the clothing of men and women working in the fields. In some regions this seasonal item was also regarded as an essential part of the festive costume (Mezőség, Kalotaszeg, Székelyföld). The varied use of the hat, the forms adapted to age and gender and the quality features can still be clearly distinguished in the different regions, although, like most forms of traditional costume, the straw hat is gradually beginning to disappear, and is being replaced by even cheaper and easily obtainable items. The insistence of the elderly and middle-aged on the traditional straw hat still supports a few makers. While it is disappearing from use as part of the dress, the upswing of tourism is now creating a new kind of demand that has given a boost to straw hat making.

In the “hat making” villages of Székelyföld, almost every inhabitant takes part in processing the straw of manually harvested common bread wheat (*Triticum aestivum*) or small spelt wheat (*Triticum monococcum*). The traditional work process noted by the early ethnographers, statisticians and sources on the history of the cottage industry has existed continuously in the same localities. In a historical description of Udvarhely County we find a communication from an 1829 manuscript of a professor in Székelyudvarhely, according to which straw hats decorated with many figures were made in Etéd and Csekefalva (Hargita County).<sup>42</sup> While this description is valuable for ethnography, it cannot be regarded as being a source of full value for the county as a whole, but it is of note that it regarded the widespread practice of cottage industry to be worth mentioning. Probably straw hat making could also be found in more distant parts of the vicinity of Udvarhely. Sources also reported on straw hat making in a number of places in other counties of Transylvania. According to a description of the state of the economy in 1879, more than 300 families in Háromszék and Maros-Torda Counties, particularly in Jobbágytelek and Hodos were engaged in straw plaiting, over 440 families in Udvarhely County in the villages of Bordos, Rava, Csöb, Béta, Magyarzsákod, Bözöd, Kőrispatak Bibarcfalva, Muzs-

<sup>42</sup> JAKAB-SZÁDECZKY 1901: 554.

na, Dobó, Vágás, Etéd and Köpecz.<sup>43</sup> The economic description of the county in 1904 lists the same villages among those engaged in the occupation.<sup>44</sup>

These statistics and historical sources give a good picture of the conditions before Trianon. As a consequence of the historic event in 1920 the previously flourishing straw industry was also ruined. The loss of their market, the bankruptcy of factories and the transfer of others to within the new borders, and the imposition of very high protective tariffs imposed an enormous burden on craft workers, development came to a standstill and there was a substantial fall in output.

In some regions of Transylvania, in Székelyföld and Kalotaszeg the straw plaiting cottage industry attempted to meet the much smaller local and domestic demands; it did not attempt, and because of its nature could not have attempted, to win foreign markets. Production continued in the traditional forms. After the second Vienna Award of 1940 (when Northern Transylvania was retroceded to Hungary), it seemed in the favourable historical period that lasted a few years that the straw hat cottage industry would gain new impetus. Craft courses teaching wicker, rush and straw weaving once again proliferated in the returned territories. Commercial links were also revived in the old channels. Around this time many families managed to obtain the hat sewing machines and presses needed for the processing, either thanks to their contacts in Hungary or through merchants. The German-made machines are still irreplaceable treasures for “hat-making” families as people engaged in cottage industry are still working on these machines sixty years later.

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