

Uncropped.

On the rural studio photography collection of the Museum of Ethnography

IN 1921-1922, NEARLY 25,000 GLASS NEGATIVES WERE ACQUIRED FROM THE COUNTRY'S RURAL ARTISTS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS FOR THE PHOTOGRAPHY COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF ETHNOGRAPHY. THIS ARTICLE BRIEFLY DESCRIBES THE PURPOSE AND RESULTS OF, AS WELL AS THE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES OFFERED BY THE NATIONAL COLLECTION.

The establishment and composition of the rural photography studios collection

In spring 1921, the Museum of Ethnography applied for government funding for the collection of ethnographic artifacts:¹ "The twelfth hour is already upon us after the all-destroying stormy years of the war.

We must salvage, urgently salvage, what can still be salvaged. For the time being, unfortunately, all we can do is to collect photographs and photographic plates depicting old and already destroyed folk costumes which, according to our experience and our knowledge, can still be obtained in large numbers from the various regions, before they are permanently destroyed or otherwise lost."² The First World War made the procurement of photographs important for two reasons. On the one hand, the post-war situation and the Treaty of Trianon made fieldwork in areas previously of high priority for ethnography, and long-term ethnographic collection in general, temporarily impossible. On the other hand, the turnover of photography studios increased during the war, and photographers were unable to store the suddenly accumulated number of plates: "Indeed, our field experience confirmed that we really only started the rescue in the last hour, and in many places, we were too late already.

There were cases when the photographers sold 10 to 50 thousand of their plates at a bargain price to glass dealers, mirror polishers, or greenhouse gardeners, or had carriage loads of these taken to the end of town, or, to save on the fare, buried them in their gardens, or carried them to the attic, the cellar, etc., because the taking of photographs, which had become almost epidemic during the war, had led to the accumulation of so many plates in their warehouses that they had to get rid of the old ones at any cost.³ The selection of sites was determined as follows: "With our photograph and plate collection finally revised and sorted, we had a clear picture of which regions were underrepresented in our department, and could base our collection program on that. Then, with the easing of times, we set out and traveled to a great number of places, having confirmed in the course of a few trial collection journeys that it was possible to collect old materials covering a larger area from a single photographer [...]."⁴ The main subjects are as follows: "relatively cheap photographic plates of great value from an ethnographic perspective, which can be obtained almost at glass price, depicting folk costumes, folk festivals, old time occupations, and facial features [...]."⁵ Among the ethnographic researchers of the museum, István Györffy, György Kemény, Gyula László Snr., László Madarassy, and Károly Viski were responsible for the field selection and the subsequent museum administration.⁶

The extent and intensity of the collection is well illustrated by the fact that within two years, the photography collection of the Museum of Ethnography⁸ was doubled by this purchase of negatives⁷. The photographs were cataloged within a short time, and the work was carried out in parallel by several employees of the museum, who were paid for the extra afternoon working hours.⁹ However, the records for the glass negatives are rather incidental: only a smaller proportion of the settlements have the name of a local photographer indicated. The museum records (the Néprajzi Múzeum Irattára, genealogical records, inventory books), which allowed for subsequent clarification, do not fill in all the gaps either. Due to the nature of the collection, we cannot count on the advantage of the positive images, or the studio ornaments, for identification. The date of the photographs was not properly recorded at the time of entry; most of them were taken in the period between 1914 and 1921.

Almost one hundred years after their entry, as a result of intensive research based on the currently available documents (registry data, reports¹⁰), photographer registers and comparative examination of the backgrounds, seventy-four photographers from sixty-two settlements could be identified from the complete collection:¹¹ the selection was drawn from materials of two studios each in eight locations, and four studios in Szeged. Photographers from nine settlements are yet to be identified. A significant portion (42%) of the studios are missing from Margit Szakács's national register¹² (marked with italics).

THE LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHERS BY COUNTY AND MUNICIPALITY

See table in separate file

The following brief statistics emerges from the photographs acquired by the museum (regarding the number of municipalities and photographers): The collection resulted photographs from the largest number of settlements in the counties of Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun (14), Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok (8), Tolna (6), and Békés (5).

The number of glass negatives received from the photography studios varies (between 8 and 1342 pieces), with Rilly Weissbach's studio in Mezőkövesd (941 pieces) and Sándor Vasas' studio in Vác (1342 pieces) providing the most glass negatives, and there were 18 more studios, where the number of items handed over was between 500 and 900.



3. Ede Borgula: *Bride from Sárköz*. Next to her the plate indicating the sequence number of the photograph. Szekszárd (?), 1910s, 13x18 cm, glass negative @ Museum of Ethnography, F 36256



4. Ödön Sztanok: *Wedding group photograph*. The “background” hanging on the wall of the building disappears behind the crowd. Pásztó, 1910s, 13x18 cm glass negative @ Museum of Ethnography, F 48592

What opportunities lie in two tons of glass negatives?

The 25,000 pieces of gelatin dry plates weigh about 1,800 kg. Due to the purposes and circumstances of collection (photographs taken mostly between 1914 and 1921, documented incompletely, selected based on an ethnographic perspective), the corpus, taken out of its context of production and use, provides a narrow, but all the denser and more layered cross-section of the history of photography in Hungary, and can therefore be a source of multifaceted research. The most powerful interpretation is that of the ethnographic, folkloristic reading, since - in accordance with the purpose of the collection and the methods of the selection - it provides a national overview of the spread, or even dominance, of the folk costumes, townspeople’s pieces of clothing and materials worn at the turn of the century in specific regions. Each urban or small-town studio³³ covered dozens of settlements, making the collection an invaluable resource of festive and everyday garments from hundreds of villages.

The photographic material clearly shows the prevalence of photography among the peasantry and the rural bourgeoisie in the period, as well as the main occasions for studio visits.

Some of them are related to a specific event: first communion, enlistment (picture 1), wedding (pictures 2-4), funeral; others are for ID cards (pictures 5-6), memories, family pictures (pictures 7-12). These are mostly characterized by the use (display, capturing) of festive costumes and garments. The entire material is dominated by the family having its photograph taken in a time of war (which was also the reason for the collection of these images), and by photographs taken for remembrance with a family member present (or included via retouching) in military uniform preparing to go to the front (image 13), and photographs capturing women and children without the men, who are already in the front, and to whom the pictures were to be sent (images 14-17). These photographs were not taken for a festive occasion, and they are very much characterized by ordinary clothing. Due to the ethnographic nature of the collection, mostly created from a perspective of the history of clothing, there are hardly any photographs depicting the settlements, or the cultural, social or school life of the given locality, and only a few occupations are displayed in this material.



5. Béla Borsy: *The making of a portrait*. Rákospalota, 1910s, 9x12 cm, glass negative @ Museum of Ethnography, F 32909



6. Béla Borsy: *The making of a portrait*. Rákospalota, 1910s, 9x12 cm, glass negative @ Museum of Ethnography, F 32861



7. Kálmán Solti: *Women from around Aszód wearing folk costumes*. They are photographed in an unusual angle, from the side and not from the front. Aszód, 1910s, 12x16.5 cm glass negative @ Museum of Ethnography, F 38716



8. Unknown: *Young couple, and an old woman with a sack on her back in the background, waiting (?)*. Salgótarján, 1910s, 9x12 cm, glass negative @ Museum of Ethnography, F 41580



9. Antal Kumpf: *Girl from Püspök, in folk costume*. With the damage to the painted backdrop in the background. Magyaróvár (?), 1910s, 13x18 cm, glass negative @ Museum of Ethnography, F 48530



10. Ödön Sztanok: *Siblings, with a man (the father?) lurking in the background*. Pásztó, 1910s, 10x15 cm, glass negative @ Museum of Ethnography, F 48753



11. Bartizek brothers: *A Family from Kovácsvágás*. Sátoraljaújhely, 1910s, 12x16.5 cm, glass negative @ Museum of Ethnography, F 25412



12. Ernő Hirling: A Gödöllő photographer on a call-out, taking a shot of an elderly couple in front of a coffin warehouse, with a traveling screen in the background. Valkó, 1910s, 12x16.5 cm, glass negative @ Museum of Ethnography, F 31269



13. Béla Sörenstein: Girl from around Pápa in folk costume. She is surrounded by two soldiers, and the shades are well discernible. Pápa, 1910s, 12x16.5 cm, glass negative @ Museum of Ethnography, F 37415



14. János Prohászka: Family. There is a camera in the foreground and backdrops stacked against each other in the background. Kisvárd, between 1914-1919, 12x16.5 cm glass negative @ Museum of Ethnography, F 28575



15. Aladár Vámos: *A Family from Cserhátvarsány*. The father is probably on the front; the window of the studio can be seen in the background. Balassagyarmat, between 1914-1919, 12x16.5 cm, glass negative @ Museum of Ethnography, F 28939



16. (Mrs.) Kirschweg Lajos: *Family picture*. We can also see the person holding the painted backdrop. Bicske, between 1914-1919, 13x18 cm, glass negative @ Museum of Ethnography, F 30154



17. Ferenc Schrantz: *Members of the family in folk costume*. Positive images are scattered on the stool in the studio. Tolna, between 1914-1919 között, 13x18 cm, glass negative @ Museum of Ethnography, F 46894

From a history of photography perspective, the collection has preserved negatives of several studios (in some cases hundreds of shots), where the positives never made it into another public collection, or only a few of them, mostly ones used in some specific way. The type and equipment of the photography studios is rather varied (see image 18, or images 4, 6, and 15): from the nationally renowned studios with the most advanced equipment of the time (for example the studios of Gyula Békés, the Fanto family or Károly Mathea) to the studios serving mainly the poorer social strata (but with their own versos, picture 2), and to photographers working on the veranda, porch or courtyard of a house, besides their other main occupation.

The enlargements supplied to the client are, of course, photographs corrected by the photographer. The negatives can also show the environment, the real milieu in which the image was taken, the details of the studio that later become invisible, and thus represent an unedited material compared to the positive images. Studying the glass negatives, one can see that the painted backgrounds, props and settings were aimed at imitating the bourgeois environment in the studios and photography salons operating with various technical equipment and backgrounds.

In most cases, this was not in line with the homes of the peasants, rural bourgeoisie, maids, etc. who came to be photographed. The subjects were generally dressed in carefully composed (festive) folk costumes that could be interpreted within the context of the local symbol system.³⁴ Ernő Kunt, writing on the anthropology of the peasantry's use of photography, observed that "the studios of professional photographers [...] were in fact workshops of transformation, special lock chambers in between the private and public spheres."³⁵ The photographs selected for this study showcase a wide range of geographical units, or types of folk costumes and photography studios from this briefly presented photographic material. The unedited negatives evoke this "lock chamber," the environment and milieu of the photography studios. The pictures also demonstrate the contrast between the members of the peasantry, or the rural bourgeoisie, and the bourgeois backgrounds and props. At the same time, they also illustrate the casual nature of the occasions, when the photographer is struggling with the lack of a real studio setting and suitable photographic equipment in a small space, courtyard or porch (e.g. images 1, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16).

- ¹ Fogarasi, Klára. "Fényképgyűjtemény." *A Néprajzi Múzeum gyűjteményei*, edited by Zoltán Fejős, Budapest, Museum of Ethnography, 2000, pp 729-776. (Specifically: pp 740, 741)
- ² *Levél a miniszterhez 25.000 korona gyűjtési pénz tárgyában.* (A Letter to the Secretary regarding the collection budget of 25,000 Hungarian korona.) (Néprajzi Múzeum Irattára - hereinafter referred to as NMI, 34/1921).
- ³ *Jelentés a Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum Néprajzi Osztályának tisztviselői által az 1921 év első felében végzett gyűjtőutjairól* (Report on the collection field trips carried out by officers of the Ethnography Department of the Hungarian National Museum in the first half of 1921) (NMI, 55/1921).
- ⁴ *Jelentés Fejérpataky László főigazgatójának a Néprajzi Osztály tisztviselői által 1921. év első felében végzett gyűjtőutakról* (Report to Director László Fejérpataky on the collection field trips carried out by officers of the Ethnography Department in the first half of 1921) (NMI, 55/1921).
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ Specifically, István Györffy visited 23, Gyula László, Snr. 21, and László Madarassy László 19 settlements. For example: Gyula László: "Szabadszállás - Jánoshalma - Bácsalmás - Dunaföldvár collection field trip; cost of plates: 440+300+240 Hungarian korona; personal expenses (1 day in Szabadszállás, 3 days in Jánoshalma-Bácsalmás, 2 days in Dunaföldvár, that is, a total of 6 days) for carriers, for fares, for receipts stamps, cloakroom charge at Keleti Railway Station and other miscellaneous expenditure 3614."
- ⁶ (Accounts of collection field trips, NMI, 73/1922).
- ⁷ In some cases, the photographer handed over the material to the museum in person; in these cases, it was mostly entered as a gift, and not as a purchase (for example: József Glück, Imre Szemán, Géza Sente, Károly Szentgyörgyváros, Völker and Tolnai).
- ⁸ The photography collection received its own inventory book in 1894.
- ⁹ *Az 1921. évi negyedéves jelentések* (Quarterly reports of the year 1921) (NMI, 32/1921) and *1922. év negyedéves jelentései* (Quarterly reports of the year 1922) (NMI, 31/1932).
- ¹⁰ NMI, 55/1921 (see endnote 3) and *Kimutatás Fejérpataky László főigazgatójának a 25000 korona elköltéséről* (Statement prepared for Director László Fejérpataky on spending the 25,000 Hungarian korona) (NMI, 67/1921), which includes the names of the sellers, without identifying the related settlement. The following are completely missing from the documentation: Brenner Siblings, László Dora, Fanto, R. Goldstein, Viktor Horváth, Sons of (Mór) Langsfeld, Ferenc Lintner, Róza Maár, Károly Mathea, Bernát Nesselroth, Pál Rovácsek (Récsei), Rutkay and Vitnay, Károly Steindl, Mihály Tumpek, Dóri Vajda, Aladár Vámos, Wurczinger Photography Salon.
- ¹¹ Péter Cservenák, Zoltán Fejér, Péter Illés, Kelemen Kothencz, Zsuzsanna Kunics, Anna Megyeri, Irén Mészáros, Zsolt Odler, Magdolna Szabó, Mrs. Ilona Körösi Székely, Petronella Szojka were of great help in identifying the individual photography studios.
- ¹² Szakács, Margit. *Fényképészek és fényképezőműtermek Magyarországon 1840-1945. Adatok a Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum Fényképtárájának gyűjteményéből.* Budapest, Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, 1997.
- ¹³ Albert, Iván. "Amiről a fénykép mesél. A bajai fényképezés rövid története 1945-ig." *Bácsország*, 2005/3. pp 40-42.
- ¹⁴ Bata, Tímea. *Műtermi fotózás Békés megyében (1872-1921). Válogatás a Néprajzi Múzeum vidéki fényképezőműtermek gyűjteményéből.* Budapest, Néprajzi Múzeum, 2018.
- ¹⁵ Durkó, Károly and Bernadett Durkó Illés and Tibor Balla. *Gyula régen és ma XI. Gyulai fényképészek (1896-2014).* Gyula, Gyulai Évszázadok Alapítvány, 2014.
- ¹⁶ Bata, Tímea. "A »német kisasszonyok« fotói a Néprajzi Múzeumban: a Weissbach nővérek és a matyó viselet." *Fotográfusnők. A Magyar Fotótörténeli Társaság 2017. évi konferenciájának kötete*, edited by Éva Fisli, Magyar Fotótörténeli Társaság (www.mafot.hu) - forthcoming.
- ¹⁷ T. Knotik, Márta. *Fényírók és fényírdák Szegeden (1859-1913).* Szeged, Móra Ferenc Múzeum, 2009.
- ¹⁸ Kaposi, Endre. *Fotográfusok Esztergomban a XIX. és a XX. században. Komárom megye fotótörténete.* Tatabánya, 1987.
- ¹⁹ Nagy, István. *A győri fotográfia 150 éve.* Győr, 1994.
- ²⁰ Demeter, Pál. *Egri fényírók és fényírdák. Az egri fényképezés kezdetei 1854-1914.* Eger, published by Pál Demeter, 2017.
- ²¹ Berta, Ferenc. *A fényképezőipar 150 éve Szolnokon 1852-2002.* Szolnok, 2002.
- ²² Mácza, Mihály, and Ágota Pusztai, and Mrs. Anikó Molnár Fűrész. *Fotográfusok Komáromban, Tatán, Tatabányán. Komárom megye fotótörténete.* Tatabánya, 1988.
- ²³ Reznák, Erzsébet. "Fényképészek és műtermek Cegléden." *Gazdaság- és társadalomtörténeli tanulmányok, Studia Comitatus 25*, edited by Sándor Soós. Szentendre, Pest Megyei Múzeumok Igazgatósága, 1995, pp. 265-306.
- ²⁴ Mrs. Székely, Ilona Körösi. *Fanto fotó Kecskeméten. Egy fényképész dinasztia emlékére.* Kecskemét, Private publication, 2014.
- ²⁵ Hárs, József. *A fényképezés története Sopron városában 1840-1857.* Manuscript, published on the author's website https://harsjosef.hu/sites/default/files/irasok/palyazatok/1984_A_fenykepezes_tortenete_Sopron_varosaban.pdf. Accessed 3 July 2021.
- ²⁶ The daughter of Mihály Rupprecht (?).
- ²⁷ V. Kápolnás, Mária. "Az első fényképészek és műtermek Tolna megyében 1870-1914." *A Wosinszky Mór Múzeum Évkönyve 24.* Szekszárd, Wosinszky Mór Megyei Múzeum, 2002, pp. 385-442.; V. Kápolnás, Mária. "Fényképészek és műtermek Tolna megye Központi járásában." *A Wosinszky Mór Múzeum Évkönyve 36.* Szekszárd, Wosinszky Mór Megyei Múzeum, 2014, pp. 507-546.

- ²⁸ V. Kápolnás, Mária. "Bátaszék első fényképésze Rovácsék (Récsei) Pál 1842-1926." *MAFOTApertura* no. 30. 2014/September. http://mafot.hu/apertura_bataszek-elso-fenykepesze-recsei-rovacssek-pal-1842-1926.html. Accessed 3 July 2021.
- ²⁹ Ürmös, Lóránt. *Régi pápai fényképészek. A vizit és kabinetképek korszaka 1864-1935*. Pápa, Jókai Mór Városi Könyvtár, 2014.
- ³⁰ V. Fodor Zsuzsa: "»Isten áldja a tisztelt ipart.« Iparosélet Veszprémben a két világháború között." *Veszprémi múzeumi értesítő*. Veszprém, Veszprém Megyei Múzeumi Igazgatóság, 1989.
- ³¹ Megyeri, Anna. "Fényirdák, fényképészek, amatőr fotográfusok Zalaegerszegen, a dualizmus idején." *Zalai Múzeum* no. 22. 2015, 147-200.
- ³² Megyeri, Anna. "Vajda Dóri (1880-1944) fényképész és családja emlékezete." *Pannon Tükör* 2015/3, pp. 6-11.
- ³³ People from at least 17 settlements visited the photography studio of Rilly Weissbach and her sister, Róza (Bata, Tímea). "A »német kisasszonyok« fotói a Néprajzi Múzeumban: a Weissbach nővérek és a matyó viselet." *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ More information on the use of photography studios and photography as such by the peasantry, see: Kunt, Ernő. *Fotóantropológia*. Budapest-Miskolc, Kunt Ernő örökösei, 1995.
- ³⁵ Kunt, Ernő. *Ibid.* p. 39.