

DANCING ON BLADES

Rare and exquisite folktales from the Carpathian Mountains



First English
Translation

CSENGE ZALKA

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“ANICA, TELL US A STORY!”

Pályuk Anna and the world of Transcarpathian folktales

I was a beginner storyteller, bright eyed and bushy tailed, when I came across a plain-looking library book titled *Felsőtiszaí népmesék* (*Folktales from the Upper Tisza region*). I was looking for new stories to tell. I sought colorful, delicious, little known Hungarian folktales that had not yet been overdone and contained more than dashing princes chopping off exponentially multiplying dragon heads. I found them in that book. In fact, I found several of them and, looking beyond the individual tales, I became curious. Who told these stories? Why were they so unique, so unlike other folktales I had read? Skipping to the Afterword, written by folklorist Kovács Ágnes¹, I found that the book contained (mixed together) tales from two storytellers, one male, and one female, who lived in the same village more than a hundred years ago. Poring over the Table of Contents, my suspicions were confirmed. All the tales that put stars in my eyes came from only one of the storytellers, and her name was Pályuk Anna.²

All I knew about Pályuk Anna came from the Afterword in that one book. She was born in Alsóveresmart (Mala Kopanya, Ukraine) around the middle of the 19th century, possibly in 1858, from a Rusyn family. Rusyns (or Ruthenes), an Eastern Slavic group, formed the ethnic majority of the village over Hungarians, Germans, and some Jewish families. Kovács states that Anna must have been a gorgeous woman in her youth

because her first marriage was the stuff of fairy tales. One day, an important man visited her village. His chariot driver, after taking one look at her, sent people with a marriage proposal as soon as he returned home. They had a whirlwind wedding one week later. Anna moved from Veresmart to Tiszabökény (Tiszobikeny, Ukraine), a predominantly Hungarian village, some twenty miles downriver. She lived there for the rest of her life. Even though her young husband died soon after, she stayed on as a maid, first caring for children and later working as a cook. She was over forty years old when she married again. This time, she was married to the richest landowner in the village. Anna spent the rest of her days cheerfully smoking her beloved pipe, telling enchanting tales to a brood of stepchildren and grandchildren who sat at her feet. The collector notes that she never quite lost her Rusyn accent, but when she was telling her stories, all the pronunciation mistakes disappeared, and she spoke the most eloquent Hungarian. She died at the age of 93.

By now, you might be able to see why I had a bit of a problem with the title of this book. I originally called it “Rare and Exquisite Hungarian Folktales,” and yet, Anica (as the children called Anna) was more than “just” Hungarian and so were her stories. Furthermore, “Folktales from Hungary” also sounded overly simplistic once I took the history of her home region into consideration.

There is a trick history question that has been featured in our high school graduation exams: *‘An old woman has lived in three countries in her lifetime, and yet she never left her house. Where does the house stand?’* That old woman could have been Anna at the time when her stories were collected. Ugocsa County, historically a part of the Hungarian Kingdom for centuries, was split between Czechoslovakia and Romania after the end of World War I. The First and Second Vienna Awards returned Transcarpathia (and Ugocsa in it) to Hungary for the duration of World War II. However, since we were on the losing side of the conflict again, the county was restored to its pre-1938 boundaries after the war’s end. Soon after, the Czechoslovakian part was handed over to the Ukraine where

it belongs today, including both Pályuk Anna's birthplace and her home village. Therefore, technically, after moving from her Rusyn village to a Hungarian one, Anna lived in three different countries between the ages of 60 and 93 without ever leaving her house.

This was the same period (1915-1950) when Szirmai Fóris Mária, first as a high school student and then as a mature and dedicated collector, gathered and recorded all of Anna's tales. Szirmai was also born in Tiszabökény and listened to the stories of the elders as a child, scribbling them down between classes and returning to collect more of them later as an adult. Kovács Ágnes, a folklorist who edited the first book containing these stories and judged Szirmai's collecting techniques, noted that she should be considered a traditional informant herself. She wrote down many of Anna's tales from memory, editing very little, but no doubt re-wording some parts and patching up others. This first book, the one I found in the library, only contained 30 of Anna's tales, but it hinted that more than a hundred had been collected and archived.

I told Pályuk Anna's tales many times, and they worked like a charm with all audiences. Eventually, they became a signature part of my repertoire as a storyteller, and I found a lot of joy in telling them. For years, the knowledge that there were more where these came from kept nagging at the back of my mind like rumors of treasure hidden in the woods. Finally, I went on my own adventure to find them. I received a research permit for the Archives of the Hungarian Museum of Ethnography, purchased a photo ticket, and—after accidentally locking myself out of the research room twice—I managed to dig up the rest of the collection. It was a true treasure trove of amazing fairy tales, meticulously typed, hand-edited, and submitted to the National Folklore Collection Contest. Most of them were never published. I not only learned more from them about the world of Transcarpathian folktales, but also discovered a lot about the storyteller herself.

Pályuk Anna learned her stories from various people. Her mother and grandmother are mentioned many times. I left some of these comments

in the stories, so you can read them for yourself. Occasionally she also credits her father, who went to war when she was little and returned from faraway places with new stories to tell. Traditionally, military service was one of the contexts where storytelling happened, usually in the evenings after curfew. Sharing accommodations with strangers and being stationed far away from home, men exchanged tales, heard new ones, and took them back to their own villages—if they were lucky enough to return. Many of these tales took root in their new homes and flourished in the oral tradition.

Transcarpathia provides an amazingly rich cultural soil for unique stories. Multiple ethnicities and cultures—Hungarian, Rusyn, Romanian, Roma, Jewish, Slovak, German, etc.—have existed together there for centuries. Pályuk Anna’s own personal story is proof that the tales often crossed cultural and linguistic boundaries and mingled together, creating a magical world modeled after the Transcarpathian landscape, both in the cultural and the natural sense. Traces of the flora, fauna, and imagery of the Carpathians can be found in many of Anna’s tales. Alsóveresmart, her home village, lies at the foot of the famous Black Mountain, now part of the UNESCO East Carpathian Biosphere Reserve. It is covered in old oak forests and bedecked with rare species of wildflowers. The southern slopes of the mountain sport rich vineyards and, on one of its cliffs, stand the ruins of a castle built in the 13th century. Plows and shovels have been known to turn Roman era golden jewelry and old swords out of the soil. As a child, Anna inhabited the same world her tales portray with ancient castles hidden in deep forests, nameless flowers growing over buried treasure, and folk beliefs of dragons, witches, and fairies still very much alive long into the 20th century. Moving downriver, she left the mountains behind for the plains, but she never forgot them. It was in honor of this enchanting landscape that I subtitled this book “Folktales from the Carpathian Mountains,” signifying all the cultural and natural diversity represented in these stories and alluding to the name of the region – Transcarpathia (literally, “beyond the Carpathian Mountains”).

“Rare and exquisite” also felt appropriate. Many of Pályuk Anna’s folktales are unique. Many do not belong to any internationally recognized type.³ She seems to have been a true artist of the oral tradition, taking symbols, motifs, and elements from fairy tales and re-assembling them into new stories. It is impossible to tell how many of those she inherited from her parents and grandparents, and how many were truly her own creation - but that is the beauty of a living oral tradition.

Some of the texts I found in the Archives seemed jumbled; bits and pieces were out of order and important elements were lost halfway through the plot. Some of the confusions appeared to stem from the storyteller herself. She was growing old at the time of collection. There were parts framed with “oh, I forgot to tell you,” or “I probably didn’t mention that...” Others might have been the result of Szirmai Főris Mária’s methods, since she wrote down many of the tales from her early memories, fixing them up a little where they had loose parts. Whatever the case, some tales ended up in the Archives somewhat tattered. However, once I began telling them on the stage, they soon righted themselves and came alive with parts clicking into place or emerging to fill in the torn story fabric. This is the reason why I decided not to translate them word for word from the Archives for this book. Rather, I aimed to restore them to their spoken glory, taking some artistic license as the next link in the chain of tradition that has passed them down.

This book does not aim to be an academic publication. I am not a trained folklorist nor do I pretend to be one. I merely use some of their methods to track down tales that intrigue me and find out more about from where the tales came. I am, first and foremost, a performing storyteller. Therefore, the texts in this book are my re-tellings of Pályuk Anna’s tales. They are close to her text and delivery, but restored to what they once might have been and written with contemporary, live audiences in mind. In the Comments after each story, I aim to point out the bigger structural changes I have made, or the parts that I kept intact because they amazed or amused me. I also included explanations for certain

translation choices. I believe this is enough to make the book an entertaining read and a good resource for storytellers of all kinds. If you are conducting more in-depth folkloristic research and need to delve deeper into details, feel free to find me online. I am happy to help.

These tales have been handed down and preserved for us by a succession of exceptional women. Sadly, all of them—Kovács Ágnes, Szirmai Fóris Mária, Pályuk Anna—are gone now. So are the nameless mothers and grandmothers that passed these tales on to Anna, and her father who managed to salvage the humanity of storytelling from the horrors of war. I dedicate this volume to their memory in the hopes that new storytellers, both women and men, will pick up these tales, find beauty in them, and carry them on.⁴

Notes

1. I use all names in this book in their original Hungarian order: Family name(s) first.
2. In case you were wondering, the other storyteller included in the book was a man named Furicz János, about the same age as Pályuk Anna, who lived in Tiszabökény all his life and was regarded as a very popular entertainer. His tales, while they didn't grab my attention as much as Anna's, are also enchanting. I found quite a few of them in the Archives, and some of them are very much worth telling. I hope that, in a future book, I will be honored with the chance to translate them, too. I will mention them here and there in the Comments for comparison to Pályuk's stories.
3. You will notice that many of my Comments refer to folktale types marked with an ATU number. This number refers to the Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification system (see *Sources and Further Reading* at the end of this book). Knowing a folktale's type number can help you locate tales with a similar plot and basic structure from multiple other cultures.

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4. In case you are a storyteller entangled in the ethics of our trade, this is an explicit permission for you to tell these tales on the stage, to your children, your students, or to anyone else who you think would enjoy them. However, my publisher reminds me to share the caveat that these stories, as a body of work or individually, may not be recorded or printed in any form (except for brief passages quoted in academic papers), without prior written permission from Parkhurst Brothers Publishers, whose permissions department may be contacted at the address found online at www.parkhurstbrothers.com.

PART ONE

Spinning Old into Gold

The majority of Pályuk Anna's tales don't fall into any recognized folktale type. She builds her own repertoire from symbols and motifs more often than re-telling entire plots. But even when she does work with old stories, her personality, empathy, and love for embellishment shine through. This first chapter contains examples of Anna re-telling well-known fairy tales, her unique voice ringing loud and clear even at the distance of a long and eventful century.



THE SHOE-SHREDDING PRINCESSES

Once upon a time, far, far across the Óperenciás Sea, there was a great kingdom with a very good king—a king who was always in a somber mood. If someone asked him what ailed him, his eyes filled up with tears. Even though he never told anyone the reason, they could guess easily enough. The King had no son, you see. He did have seven beautiful daughters, but they grew up neglected and did whatever they wished. Their father paid no attention to them in his desperate longing for a male heir. With their wild behavior, they brought much shame and disapproval on his old, grey head, but he resolved to bear it... he could not exile his own beloved daughters, after all.

It was a visit from the royal shoemaker that finally shook the King up from his self-pity. One day, the old craftsman planted himself in front of the throne and took a deep, heroic breath.

“Your Highness, be it my life or my death, I cannot keep silent any longer! The treasurer refuses to buy more leather, the shopkeeper has no more credit for wooden pegs, and I am on the verge of starving to death along with my entire family. I am truly sorry Your Majesty. I cannot keep up with making new shoes for the Princesses to replace the ones they use up every day.”

The King was taken aback by this report. How could his daughters use up a new pair of shoes in a day? His own boots lasted a lot longer than that. Granted, he rode a horse sometimes instead of walking...

but still. How could they possibly ruin them so fast? The only plausible explanation was that the shoemaker was lying. The King decided to test him. The next morning, he visited the workshop to look at the brand-new slippers before they were delivered to the Princesses. All seven pairs were so beautiful, so masterfully made, that the old King laughed as he inspected them.

“These shall last them a month, at least, even if they wear them all day. Even if they sleep in them!”

“No, they will not, Your Majesty,” the shoemaker shook his head mournfully. “By tomorrow morning their soles and heels will be gone, and even the leather will be torn.”

That’s impossible! thought the King. And to keep the shoemaker from replacing them in secret, he put a mark inside all the shoes in a place where the Princesses could not see it. But come the next morning, the King was terribly shocked. Everything was as the shoemaker had said. All the shoes had been shredded to pieces. That is, all except for one pair. The youngest Princess’s shoes were in pristine condition.

The King was baffled by the mystery. He tried to solve it by other methods at first. He spent his entire day with his daughters, for the first time in his life, watching their feet like a hawk. Come evening, the slippers were not even dusty, let alone torn. But even though the Princesses were locked into their room all night under seven locks, watched by seven guards, and with their governess listening for suspicious sounds, they still left somehow and returned by morning with their shoes destroyed. Where did they go? What did they do? It was impossible to tell. Since he could find no explanation, the King announced to his subjects that whoever could discover where and how the Princesses were shredding their shoes would be rewarded with half his kingdom and even one of the Princesses for a wife, if he so wished. Royalty was a lot cheaper back in the day, you see. To balance the scales, the King also announced that whoever tried *and failed* to solve the puzzle would pay with his life.

Despite the looming threat of execution, the court filled with willing

knights, wise men, and all kinds of crafty travelers. But no one could uncover the Princesses' secret. One hundred young men lost their heads in the affair, and the people of the kingdom started to grumble and complain about so many deaths. Even the King himself felt sorry for all the promising young lives lost, but he could not go back on his word. He announced that he did not care where the volunteers came from or what tricks and crafts they used. He wanted to know where his daughters were shredding their shoes and that was *all* he cared about.

Once again, the court filled with all kinds of wanderers. But none of them could bring back any results, and more innocent lives were lost. The Princesses were smart and cautious. They mixed sleeping powder into the food of anyone who wished to spy on them at night. Each morning, shredded shoes piled up outside the castle gates for everyone to see; it was all the kingdom talked about now. People discussed the mystery everywhere, from the royal kitchens to the farthest mountain pastures.

One day, a young shepherd came to the castle and said to the King, "Your Majesty, my life is in your hands and so is my death. I volunteer to guard the Princesses tonight. I only ask two things. First, if I fail tonight, allow me to try two more times. In exchange, I promise that if I succeed by the third try, I will not ask for your kingdom nor one of your daughters. The second thing I ask is that you allow me to take my spotted piglet into the Princesses' bedroom with me."

"What a foolish request from a foolish boy," the King muttered. "Sure, let it be as you wish. We have never had a piglet sleep in the royal bedrooms anyway."

The young shepherd hid the piglet under his fur cloak, and as he sat at the dinner table with the Princesses, he fed everything from his plate to the animal. He never ate a bite. As dinner was nearing its end, he suddenly felt the piglet kick, then go limp.

This would have been me if I had eaten anything, the shepherd thought angrily. He remembered the three pieces of advice his mother had left him when she died (because she had nothing else to leave): "*Never eat*

from the table of noblemen; never look back; always share what you have with someone poorer than yourself.” This was why he didn’t eat a bite, because princesses, although women, were nobility, too. And now his piglet was dead. He mourned it more than any person. He held it gently in his arms as he pretended to sleep.

Around midnight, he heard the Princesses getting out of bed. They told their younger sister to check on the shepherd to see if he was asleep. The youngest Princess returned to them saying that he was sleeping so deeply, he had even smothered that piglet he was cuddling. There was pity in her voice. The shepherd swallowed his bitterness, and lay quietly as the Princesses got dressed.

When they were all ready to go, the seven girls pushed the wardrobe out of the way, revealing a trap door behind it. Agreeing to leave it open—no one was going to notice it anyway—they all filed through the door and down a flight of stairs. As soon as they were gone, the shepherd lay the piglet in the youngest Princess’s bed, tucked it in, and followed them underground.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, the girls broke into a wild run. They ran and they ran far, far away until they reached a forest entirely made of copper. The shepherd reached up and broke off a leaf. The trees rang out and chimed, but all the Princesses—except for the youngest—waved it off.

“It is only the wind. Come on!”

The youngest Princess glanced behind her back, but she said nothing. She was the kindest and the smartest of them all.

. . . This is the end of the preview . . .