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Age of Matthias Corvinus

A crucial period in Rusyn history

For the modern generation of Subcarpathian Rusyns King Matthias Corvinus – rex Hungariae (1443–1458–1490) – is rather known as a beloved folklore character of numerous legends than from historical sources, nevertheless these legends teem with local toponyms and often reflect real historic events and facts. Along with his remote followers, Ferenc II Rákóczy (1676–1735) and Maria Theresa (1717–1780), he was an exclusive representative of high rulers who took their prominent stand in Rusyn common people's memory. Whereas we have plenty of historic evidence from the eighteenth century, it is mainly 500-year King Matthias' persistence in Rusyn folklore which validates such assertion. This persistence is, undoubtedly, an indirect reflection of the fact that he had brought the country to the European standard as for economy, culture, well-being as well as external security, but at the same time preserved a non-national state, satisfying all the people inhabited his kingdom. In the tales, legends, folk ballads the fair ruler delivers justice to common people's liking. Rusyn popular saying "за краля Матяша", nevertheless, means "in days of yore" which will scarcely come once more. (Вархол, Івченко, 1990: 82.) The folklore about King Matthias of every single nation quite distinctly shows which aspect of his multilateral activity has above all been appreciated as relevant to the destiny of the given specific nation. In the Rusyn folklore King Matthias and his military leader Pál Kinizsi are acting as Rusyns; the tales of King Matthias come forth with local national and historic coloring. In this way people unintentionally show King Matthias' great services at the legislative definition of the Rusyns' privileges and rights, which exerted real influence upon the shaping of their national identity.

To be sure, the Rusyns have not arisen in a vacuum. King Matthias enters upon the historical scene along with the recognized subcarpathian Rusyn people. After the Tatar-Mongolian invasion of the 1241–1242 was over, an active colonization of Subcarpathia had been started to turn the province into the front line of the country's defense in case of eventual further aggression; the colonists were mainly the Rusyns along with the Hungarians, Germans and Vlachs. Antal Hodinka (1864–1946), a member of the Hungarian Academy and a pioneer of Slavistic studies in Hungary, a native of Subcarpathia, described and thoroughly studied this colonization in his book, titled *A kárpátaljai rutének lakóhelye, gazdaságuk és múltjuk* (The Place of Living, the Economy and Past of the Subcarpathian Rusyns). (Hodinka, 1923.) Hodinka

wrote this book primarily in Rusyn and published it under the name of *An Orphan From Sokyrynitsa*, supposedly in 1921, a reprint have been brought out in 2000. (Hodinka, 2000.) The historian gives details about King Matthias' law, approved by diet in 1484, wherein the Rusyns were mentioned for the first time as a legitimate subcarpathian people and certain privileges were granted to them. He also earnestly portrays the further 200-year struggle, carried on by Rusyns to retain their rights, in the course of which they steadily relied on the Matthias' laws. (Hodinka, 2000: 55–68.) During the 260 peaceful and successful years of before-Matthias colonization, in other words for 13 generations, having been united by the common task and destiny, the Rusyns formed a mature community aware of its self-dependence. When King Matthias fastened their awareness by promulgation a laws about the Rusyns' privileges and rights and mentioned the Rusyn diocese of Munkács in his charter, he performed a deed of fundamental weight for their history. In the middle of the 16th century, shortly after King Matthias died, at the height of the Reformation, the *Postilla of Niagovo*¹ appeared, a great memorial of the Rusyn literature of Subcarpathia which had stated the Rusyn language that persisted almost unchanged up to the present. This is the further evidence of the great importance of the Age of Matthias at the shaping of the Rusyn national consolidation and culture. Even 200 years after King Matthias' death his laws continued to serve as a guard shield for the Rusyn's relative independence and well-being.

Quite naturally, King Matthias ranked as an outstanding figure of medieval history also in the works of many other pre-Soviet authors, in the same manner of Rusyn, Russian or Ukrainian provenance, such as I. Kontratovics, P. Sova, E. Perfeckij, Z. Kuzelia. Irén Kontratovics notifies of King Matthias' deed, brought out in 1458, designating presbyter Lucacs at the head of the cloister of Munkács "with the habitual own authority", as de facto foundation of the diocese of Munkács, since already in 1491 Ioann, Lucacs' successor, had been mentioned as bishop. (Кондратович, 1924: 44.) Peter Sova in his history of Uzhgorod (Ungvár) portrays the process of the uncontrollable decay which started in the country after King Matthias' death and developed finally in peasant uprising and piecemeal worsening of their situation. (Cова, 1937: 85–88.) Eugen Perfeckij, Russian historian, emigrated to Czechoslovakia, thoroughly studied Rusyn history in the reign of Matthias Corvinus. (Perfeckij, 1995: 35–40.) Like Hodinka, he built his work on a strongly grounded analysis of the social situation and the economy of the Rusyn people in Subcarpathian Rus. He had studied the Rusyn folklore about King Matthias at the same time and he came to unambiguous conclusion: "The Rusyn people struggled for their social and economic situation and were supported in this fight by their defender – King Matthias Corvinus – even not always becoming aware of basic fact,

¹ Postilla, 2006. The manuscript of unknown author was originally published by Alexey Petrov in St. Petersburg in 1914 and 1921 (2nd edition). The book is now a rarity, therefore new facsimile edition has been recently realized by slavists in Nyíregyháza.

that in such a way they fought for their national self-dependency and that their greatest helpmate in the struggle for the reservation of this Rusyn identity in that time was Hungarian King Matthias Corvinus himself." (Perfeckij, 1926: 8.) Zenon Kuzelia similarly wrote, that determinative in people's attitude and appreciation of Matthias Corvinus was social, economic situation, peaceful life and respect for the national culture and traditions. (Кузеля, 1906: LXX, 104-105.)

After the Subcarpathia had been annexed to the Soviet Union it was predetermined for the Rusyns to disappear (they were forced to become the Ukrainians), and King Matthias was predetermined to disappear from their history as well. From now on the Rusyns were to be found solely in museums being shown there as a very old sort of the Ukrainians oppressed by Magyars, while King Matthias himself was supposed to remain only a folklore figure, the fact of his being a real, moreover highly considerable figure of the Rusyn history was to be blurred out in every possible way. Under the totalitarian rule there may not be displayed another thinking besides the official.

The Soviet policy in respect of the Rusyns and King Matthias has not died along with the Soviet Union, it has been adopted and became an official in the independent Ukraine as well. In an all-embracing history of the Subcarpathia published by the State University of Uzhgorod in 1993 (among the authors there are well-known Rusyn historians I. Hrancsak, I. Pop) there has not been made a room for King Matthias and his Rusyn connections. (Гранчак, 1993.) Unfortunately, this misapprehension had an influence upon serious authors from abroad as well: neither in the spacious Encyclopedia of Rusyn History and Culture, (Magocsi, Pop, 2002.) nor in the latest widely-distributed Illustrated History of Carpatho-Rusyns named The People From Nowhere, (Magocsi, 2006.) one can find a single record of King Matthias and his laws relative to the Rusyns. All the more those of the authors who try to get rid of habitual ideological and political approach are to be met with approval. H. Pavlenko, for instance, the author of a short encyclopedical dictionary named Public Men of Subcarpathian History, Science and Culture (Павленко, 1999: 115-116.) not just mentions King Matthias, but highly appreciates his attitude towards the Rusyns. Also reprints of the works by I. Kontratovics (Кондратович, 1924.) and P. Sova (Сова, 1937.) have been published (in 1991 and 1992 resp.) where one can read about King Matthias. It is possible at present not to pass over in silence, but fairly interpret the facts of the Rusyn history and culture. The Ukrainians do use this possibility as well when they are eager to recollect the Age of Cossacks and to make it clear to public consciousness. What the Age of Cossacks means for them, King Matthias' reign means for the Rusyns, and it is worthy of being interpreted truly.

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