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St. Nicholas Processions in Horní Lidečsko as a Part of Wallachia's Cultural Heritage and Testimony to the Survival of the Carpathian Culture¹

*Procesja Świętego Mikołaja w Hornim Lidecku jako część
dziedzictwa kulturowego Wołoszy i świadectwo
trwałości kultury karpackiej*

Summary: St. Nicholas processions are ranked among the most significant traditions and are frequently considered the climax of the Advent. This is definitely the case of Horní Lidečsko, where as soon as the All Saints' Day is over, masked characters come out and walk around villages until the holiday of St. Nicholas. The devils that are present in villages where people incline towards the Roman Catholic faith form an inseparable part of the cultural heritage of the local villages and the entire region. This study outlines the current form of St. Nicholas processions and the masked characters, but attention is paid also to the most significant changes that impacted the formation of the *flying* phenomenon and have shaped the tradition into its existing form. A portion of the paper deals with the historical background of the tradition and the individual characters that are a part of it, their role, and the symbolic meaning of the procession. The aim of the paper is to present the St. Nicholas procession and its attributes by means of an analysis of individual factors that impact its form outside the Czech Republic. The research has also addressed several aspects that have formed this phenomenon, namely the organization of the event and the identity of both the active and the passive participants. The study presents a research sample of bearers of the tradition and motivational elements thanks to which the tradition is still alive and passed from one generation to the next in such a scope as it is. In addition to the above, the paper explores the forms of the support provided by the villages as well as the differing opinions held by inhabitants of the region with regard to entering the St. Nicholas procession on the *List of Intangible Elements of Traditional Folk Culture of the Czech Republic*. A section in the paper also answers the question whether the event is a part of cultural heritage that is present in Wallachia permanently and in an authentic, almost unaltered form.

Key words: St. Nicholas, devil, procession, tradition, Wallachia, Advent

Translated by Author

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Streszczenie: Procesja Świętego Mikołaja to jedna z najważniejszych lokalnych tradycji, często uważana za akme Adwentu. Z pewnością tak właśnie jest w miejscowości Horni Lidecko, gdzie przebierańcy zaczynają chodzić zaraz po Wszystkich Świętych i krążą po wioskach aż do dnia św. Mikołaja. Przebieranie się za diabła, częste w miejscach, gdzie przeważa ludność katolicka, to nieodłączny element dziedzictwa kulturowego okolicznych miejscowości, ale i całego regionu. W artykule opisany jest obecny kształt procesji i typy przebierańców, a także przemiany, jakie wpłynęły na rozwój zjawiska i sprawiły, że tradycja ta przybrała obecną formę. Przedstawione jest również tło historyczne całej tradycji oraz poszczególnych postaci, które stanowią jej elementy, ich rola i znaczenie symboliczne procesji. Autorka prezentuje obyczaj procesji Świętego Mikołaja i jej elementy składowe, analizując czynniki wpływające na jej formę poza terytorium Czech. Jej badania objęły też kilka aspektów rozwoju tego zjawiska, np. sposób organizacji wydarzenia oraz postacie jego czynnych i biernych uczestników. W artykule omówiona jest wyłoniona w trakcie badań charakterystyka nosicieli tej tradycji oraz ich motywacje, dzięki którym jest ona wciąż żywa i przekazywana z pokolenia na pokolenie w obecnym kształcie. Oprócz tego w artykule poruszona jest kwestia pomocy ze strony poszczególnych wsi oraz lokalne różnice opinii w kwestii wpisania procesji na *Listę Niematerialnego Dziedzictwa Kultury Ludowej Czech*. Jedną z części artykułu poświęconą jest pytaniu, czy na Wołoszczyźnie wydarzenie to jest częścią dziedzictwa kulturowego obecnego w sposób trwały i w autentycznej, niemal niezmienionej formie.

Słowa klucze: św. Mikołaj, diabeł, procesja, tradycja, Wołoszczyzna, Adwent

Tłumaczenie: Klaudyna Michałowicz

The Wallachia region in Moravia is a popular one whose ethnographic characteristics are often thought to be unique. Geographically, it forms the westernmost extension of a broad cultural area within the arcing Carpathian mountain range. A number of archaic cultural elements had already been recognized in the area by the 19th century. Today, as a result call the region features a highly structured intangible cultural heritage. Elements of traditional culture significantly contribute to the local and regional identity and are frequently used to present the region to visitors. Besides the standard elements of traditional folk culture – folk costumes, folk music, and folk dance – some Wallachia customs and habits have selected out as significant elements of the Moravian cultural heritage. Among them are the ceremonial processions that precede the celebration of Christmas. Historically, they took place when the farmwork had finished, the harvest had been celebrated after the feast of St. Catherine, and the season of winter rest had settled in. Most important of all was the Procession of St. Nicholas, the climax of Advent. Its significance is especially evident in southern Wallachia, where ceremonial Advent processions came to adopt specific forms that have been actively maintained within the ethnographic region to this day. Close examination makes clear that though they have been modified over the years, the processions in individual villages are still highly authentic and display close ties to historical developmental phases.

The dates of the processions were set in accordance with the liturgical year of the Roman Catholic Church. No such tradition is therefore recorded in villages where

evangelical religion prevails, because members of the evangelical church do not have a cult of sanctification. Although identical in its basic structure, the visual features, character, and manner of organising the tradition vary greatly from village to village, making each procession unique. An in-depth investigation thus demands that each village be addressed individually.

The study is based on systematic field research begun in 2013, building on prior research by Ladislav Buzek, an ethnographer and documentarian who studied the processions and collected extensive photo documentation.



Fig. 1 Death in Lidečko (2015). Photo by L. Navrátilová

First, to set out the basic terminology: whenever the labels *St. Nicholases* (*mikuláši*) or *Devils* (*čerti*) are used, they should be taken to refer to all the procession participants without regard to the character they actually portray. The names clearly derive from the festival of which the procession is a part, or refer to the most prominent character in the group, e.g., the Devil. The term *flying* (*létání*) denotes rapid movement by someone in the group. In Wallachia, this equates to running, something typical for the processions because the entire group frequently moves at a trot. The meaning of *flying* expanded in this case to take in the entire course of the procession. After consulting specialists from the

Institute of the Czech Language, I decided to use lowercase for the names of the individual costumed procession characters (*maska*).

In this study, I describe the form taken by contemporary St. Nicholas processions and the characters in them. I also focus on the most significant changes involved in the rise of *flying* and the manner in which it is currently practiced. With the exception of a brief introduction to the Hornolidečsko region, I focus exclusively on the characters that are part of this tradition, their role, and their symbolic meaning. The study also targets the bearers of the tradition and its viability, as well as the support it receives from the local municipality. In the conclusion, I evaluate the opinions offered by respondents on whether *St. Nicholases* should be included in the List of Intangible Elements of Traditional Folk Culture of the Czech Republic.

Locality characteristics

Southern Wallachia is a homogeneous area in the eastern Czech Republic along the border with Slovakia. The Hornolidečsko region spans the Beskid Mountains, the White Carpathians, and the Vizovice Hills in the Vlary Pass. Villages were formerly administered by Vsetín, Pulcin, and Broumov, but later their administration was put under the Vsetín district alone.

The area has been inhabited since the 13th century, and in the early 16th century a stable asset-holding structure was established. The settlement that unfolded in the 16th century did not focus on rebuilding abandoned villages – their sites were reforested by the peasants and clearings made. Instead, new villages were established in a settlement process that is called “clearing colonisation”. The name refers to the fact that settled local peasants created fields and meadows out of the woods and later built their homes, barns, and sheds there. The inhabitants of eastern Moravia depended primarily on agriculture. Shepherding in southern Wallachia had little influence on farming methods.

The Thirty Years’ War, which ended with the signature of the Westphalian Peace, significantly harmed the local inhabitants: the peasants’ economy suffered, and the structure of asset holding changed as well. Restoration and development of the local economy was further hindered by turmoil in the neighbouring Kingdom of Hungary. As early as in 1663 the area was affected by the devastating Turkish invasion. Although they laid waste to the area, they left as their legacy the custom of the pre-Christmas processions (Nekuda 2002: 111–211).



Fig. 2 Ceremonial procession in Francova Lhota (2018). Photo by L. Navrátilová

The basic settlement structure in the area consists of the municipalities of Francova Lhota, Horni Lidec, Lacnov, Leskovec, Lidecko, Luzna, Pozdechov, Prlov, Seninka, Strelna, Studlov, Usti, Valasska Polanka, Valasska Senice, and Valasské Prikazy. Since 1994, these have formed the Hornolidecko administrative microregion. It spans 165.54 km² and is currently home to approximately 12,208 inhabitants – some 700 more than in 2015. With 1802 residents, the most populous municipality is Lidecko. By contrast, Valasske Prikazy is home only to 300 people (Praha: Český statistický úřad 2015).

The St. Nicholas Procession

In the tradition of the European peoples, there is an old but widespread notion that during the long winter nights, the natural forces struggle madly and demonic beings through the world – a “savage army”. The sun, as the symbol of creativity, has seemingly been defeated. Two types (Frolec 1988: 13) of St. Nicholas Procession exist in the Czech Republic: an older, now archaic, peasant version whose symbolism includes fertility and the traditions of the pre-winter solstice period, and a more recent version practiced in cities. These two phenomena have overlapped in recent years. St. Nicholas, the Devil, and

the Angel grew out of restrictions enforced by Joseph II, the Habsburg monarch in the 18th century. Prior to this era, St. Nicholas Processions had taken a sharply different form, one that remained unaltered in certain venues in Central Europe, the White Carpathians, and southern Wallachia untouched by the restrictions (Popelková). Joseph II deemed it necessary to dampen the exuberance of the winter carnival, which featured many parading costumed characters, including “pupils” of St. Nicholas, i.e., bishops. A parallel to these processions may be observed in Austria in the Krampuslauf, which demonstrates how the methods of preserving the St. Nicholas Procession tradition overlap.



Fig. 3 Devil. Valašská Polanka (2016). Photo by L. Navrátilová

In Wallachia, it is the archaic type of St. Nicholas procession which prevails. Similarly, in Slovakia's Central and Upper Vah River Basin in the Trencin region, there are parades featuring characters costumed as the Devil (called *kubove* in Czech) that look and behave similarly to the Wallachia Devils. They dress in sheepskin garments accented with a prominent vegetation motif (e.g., hay). As with the Wallachia Devils, they are hung with bells to announce their presence throughout the village. During the procession, they do the so-called "Devils' Dance" (jumping in a circle), an archaic custom not practiced in Wallachia. Given the obvious parallels present in the St. Nicholas Processions of the Vah River Basin, it is clear that these demonic creatures were personified using regionally available materials identical to those in the region of Wallachia because of their geographic proximity.

Even today, parades of masked characters in southern Wallachia scare children and adults alike. The supernatural creatures symbolized in this tradition are tied to the cult of dead ancestors returning to the world of the living during the winter solstice. This pagan religious belief was widespread among the people, and the church tried to suppress it. But it failed in its attempts to totally eradicate the cult, and so the church opted for another strategy. It set fixed dates on the liturgical calendar to celebrate the cult of saints precisely when the old pagan rituals had been celebrated.

The following characters are considered key for the St. Nicholas processions: a saint (St. Nicholas), the Devil, Death, a Horse, and a Jew. The symbolism of these costumed characters remains unclear because their origin has been lost in time. We have records of these characters being part of the procession from 1880 thanks to witnesses who were told about them by their parents and grandparents. The costumed characters were created on the basis of our ancestors' imagination, making use of regionally available materials.

In Wallachia, these included sheep, goat, and rabbit skin, wood, straw, and goat or cow horns. Many times, the choice was given by symbolic ties to crops and was related to the farming cycle and fertility. The fur used in the costumes of the characters referred to archaic characters: for some costumes, the eye and mouth slits were lined with red fabric; some masked characters featured a long nose with an extended tongue to symbolise vitality and sexual potency. An indispensable attribute of many of these characters was hedgehog skin, an ancient motif thought to bring good health. It is a bit equivalent to the tradition of getting pricked with juniper twigs on Easter. After pricking someone with hedgehog skin, a person from the procession wishes him or her good health in the upcoming year.



Fig. 4 Carrier talking with children in Lužná (2015). Photo by L. Navrátilová

Similar to the Mardi Gras carnival, the St. Nicholas processions were closely tied to the farming cycle. Symbolism used in ceremonies involving costumed characters was to bring the farmer and the entire estate fertility, reproduction, and protection from demons and bad forces. The element of the tradition in which the devils jump as high as possible may be explained as an act that was supposed to ensure the farmer in question would have high grain and a bountiful flax and hemp harvest, similar to the dance of the costumed bear character with the farmer's wife during the Slavic carnival. The act of symbolic copulation with a masked character, escaping from death, or getting spanked is supposed to ensure fertility, a good harvest, and health (Ebelová 2012: 218).

St. Nicholas

This character is based on St. Nicholas who, according to historical sources, lived in Myra, a city in Asia Minor, in the late 3rd and early 4th centuries. He was born into a devout Christian family and was ordained as a young man. Tradition has it that he died

6 December, probably in 327, a victim of the persecution of Christians. The remaining information available today comes from medieval legends that were part of an extraordinarily robust patronage tradition. Nicholas is seen as the protector of children, the poor, sailors, millers, merchants, peasants and shepherds, the abandoned, the persecuted, innocent convicts, prisoners, and the family. In the procession, the character of St. Nicholas acts as a confessor and judge of offenders. Almost always it is he who talks to children, sometimes he and one Devil. He is characterized by his authority among the passive participants of the tradition but even more so among people in the procession. Often he is the organizer.

The appearance of The Saint, as he is referred to in this area of Wallachia, does not differ significantly from his portrayal in other parts of Central Europe or elsewhere in the arc of the Carpatians. In some villages, however, there are unusual elements such as a twig to punish naughty children and adults.

Devil

The Devil is a key character, the most frequently used in folk customs and the oral tradition. It grows out of our ancestors' notion that there exist evil beings who harm people. The Devil is a demon who originated in Slavic mythology in the pre-Christian area. The spirits of the dead and the characteristics assigned to them are the closest demonic beings to the devil. Through religious belief, these spirits are transformed into demonic deities. In addition to doing good and protecting, they can punish, kill, and intimidate. Ladislav Buzek noted: some of the individual artefacts associated with this costumed character originated in the late 19th century, but most hail from the 20th century. "There are clearly perceptible traces of anxiety, unwitting terror, concern, and a fear of being captured by the group, to experience something unusual, to be free, cleansed and escape it all nevertheless" (Buzek 1974: 162). In the St. Nicholas processions of southern Wallachia, it was the Devil who took over the leading role of St. Nicholas. Inhabitants of villages in the area perceive Devils to be the most striking and most distinctive costumed characters in the St. Nicholas group, probably because they are the most numerous and the loudest. Devils always carry lots of bells, (called *štambrláky* in Czech) to amplify their loud demeanour.



Fig. 5 Death with Devils. Francova Lhota (2018). Photo by L. Navrátilová

All Devils in all villages have sheepskin in common because it was one of the easily accessible materials in the area.

Devils in our region were hairy and ugly. They had horns and were very loud. And they have a long tongue. A gift from mother nature. In this pastoral region, there has always been an abundance of sheepskin. Some examples are black, some spotted, and they look horrible so people started to use them in the costume of the Devil. It is noteworthy that there are marked differences between the costumes worn by Devils in individual villages (Respondent Stanislav Brhel [1936]; 14.03.2016).

In Valasska Polanka, for instance, Devils wear red skirts that symbolize the fires of hell. In Francova Lhota, these fires are represented by colourful ribbons attached to the Devil's face mask, and in Lidesko, Devils are always tall and agile. People can thus always recognize "their own" Devils.

Death

Folk tradition saw human death as separation of the spirit from the body and believed in the spirit's continuing existence. "In the past, each death had been considered an act of violence caused by magic so that the deceased had a sense of injustice and a desire for

vengeance” (Brouček, Jeřábek 2007: 928). Christianity changed this attitude to death: it became a necessary, unavoidable part of life that allowed true Christians to transition to a blissful afterlife. The costumed character of Death probably descends from the late Middle Ages. Researchers deem it a genetic modification of the female demon of the winter solstice. The winter solstice was the time of year that saw the greatest number of deaths attributable to poor living conditions. As a result, the Death character is included among those procession characters whose function is to remind people of this fact and to evoke fear. Virtually across the Czech Republic, particularly in the cities, the figure of Death was replaced over the years by an Angel. In Wallachia, however, Death remains one of the three key procession characters.

Death is mysterious and was originally always dressed in white trousers, white shirt and head cover, and a white face mask. Over the last decade, the character has been seen wearing black in some villages.

Horse/Mare

One of the respondents indicates that this costumed character has been part of the St. Nicholas procession since 1880, similar to the character of the Jew. Ladislav Buzek claims the Mare is a character of ancient origin and the embodiment of a cult animal. In Wallachia, the character was adapted to the local context and transformed into another character designed to induce fear. It was related to the Turkish raids that plundered southern Wallachia. The character does not appear in villages that were spared from the raids like Lacnov, Studlov, and Valasske Prikazy. By contrast, in Francova Lhota, the site of the raiders' camp, the frequency of appearances by the character in the St. Nicholas procession was high.

Historical sources show the area began to be ravaged by Turkish hordes starting in the 14th century, with the largest and bloodiest raids taking place in the 17th century. On the 16th of September of that year, new groups broke through the Lyssky and Vlarsky passes and brought destruction.

On the 5th and 7th of October, 4000 Tartars entered through the Stary Hrozenkov Pass after having killed 200 Moravian Wallachs who were there to protect the pass. An even larger group rolled in through the unprotected Strelensky Pass and set up camp between Francova Lhota and Senice. Both groups did lots of damage to the entire region, from Uhersky Brod to Valasske Klobouky and on to Vsetin (Státní okresní archiv Vsetín, MNV Lužná 1954: 139–140).

Among the villages that suffered most were Francova Lhota, Valasska Senice, Horni Lidec, Lidecko, and Strelna. “The Tartars allegedly killed or enslaved 582 persons” (Nekuda 2002: 197). The devastating raids ended 1 August 1664 under a peace treaty concluded between Emperor Leopold and the Turks. “Wallachia suffered more during the Tartar raids than it had during the Thirty Years' War. Records show 13 houses were

torched in Lacnov, two in Luzna, and 22 in Polanka” (Státní okresní archiv Vsetín, MNV Lužná 1954: 143). These devastating raids were etched deep in the collective memory and have been commemorated ever since in the form taken by the St. Nicholas procession, even if a great part of the local region’s inhabitants know nothing of the origin of the symbolism in the tradition.

A Turk, Mare, Horse, or Horse-Rider frequently leads the group and sometimes is the first to enter homes on the route. It is a negative character since it can hurt people and reminds them of the harsh history of the region. The bottom section of the costume consists of a metal hoop covered with fabric to give the impression of a person riding a horse. As with the Devil, this character may be different from location to location, but these changes are not as evident as with the Devil.



Fig. 6 Mare and Jew. Lidečko (2015). Photo by L. Navrátilová

Jew/Carrier

With the exception of St. Nicholas, all the other costumed characters have negative connotations, that of the Jew among them. The figure calls to mind widespread stereotypes which are frequently distorted in a fantastical manner. The Jew thus symbolised evil as much as did the figure of Death or the Horse.

In the past, the members of the procession received agricultural products as gifts instead of money, in the form of oatmeal, grain, bacon, and similar products. A parallel may be drawn with pedlars who, in similar fashion, went from house to house and received the same items. The Jew character was tasked with carrying the gifts received. For this reason, it is sometimes referred to as the carrier.

In the villages that use this character, the individual always wears old shabby clothes. The first impression is neutral but the character is supposed to be mysterious and treacherous. Among the character's most distinctive features are a large nose, glasses, and a hat. It may feature long hair and a beard. In the broad sense, this is the costume that has undergone the most changes: each village adapted its features freely. Only in Valasska Polanka and Horni Lidec is the character actually referred to as the Jew; in other villages, the character is simply referred to as the money carrier because that is the role it plays. Members of the procession are frequently not aware that the masked character is supposed to represent a person of the Jewish faith.

Analysis of the characteristic elements of the tradition as cultural heritage

Children's Flying

In southern Wallachia, so-called *flying* by children is an inherent part of the St. Nicholas Procession and specific to the region's cultural heritage. Despite this, researchers frequently overlook the phenomenon. It involves boys aged 7–13 dressing up as the Devil, Death, the Horse, or the Jew during the time period before the St. Nicholas holiday. The custom testifies to the principle of copying or imitating tasks carried out by adults taking part in the procession. There is no special date for this children's activity, which may take place multiple times during the period from All Saints' Day to the holiday of St. Nicholas.

The activity of *flying* lacks the characteristics of the procession of costumed adult characters. It is a spontaneous meeting of children in a particular part of the village at which costumed children chase other children who are wearing ordinary clothes. The greatest difference, though, is the absence of St. Nicholas. The only exception being Francova Lhota, where the children's tradition is also a procession just as that featuring the original adult characters. *Flying* thus portrays only negative characters. These specifics point to the authentic nature of the custom, which has been in existence since times of old and whose features remain unchanged. The season of year, shrouded as it is in darkness, and the spontaneous procession around the village point to the survival of a pagan tradition not tied to any particular date or any church tradition.



Fig. 7 Devil. Francova Lhota (2018). Photo by L. Navrátilová

As with the regular St. Nicholas Procession, children's costumes differ from village to village, owing to the fact that they copy the look of the adult bearers of the tradition. Any differences in the costumes of men versus boys are minor. The most visible is the absence of hedgehog skin, a simplified depiction of the Horse with the Horse costume, and the fact that the children's costumes in general are not as meticulously done as those of adults. Many times, it is the father of the family who makes his son the same costume he used to wear as a boy. Thus, men try to attract their boys to the tradition from an early age, and the cultural heritage thus passes from one generation to another.

As with other elements of children's folk traditions, the activity of *flying*, too, has lost currency. Children spend most of their free time in front of a TV or computer screen. "When I was a kid, we'd go flying for a month. Now, it's 1 or maximally 2 weeks. Either there are no kids or there are kids but not much interest" (Respondent PM [1996], cit. 11.06.2018). In addition, the tradition is frequently complicated by bad weather. In the past, it was common to see small costumed Devils and Deaths everyday for months at a time.

Today, the tradition is focused around weekends, and gains intensity during the two weeks preceding St. Nicholas Day. Despite this window of intense activity, it has become increasingly difficult to find children who can be recorded in the course of field research.

Tradition bearers and their motivation

The St. Nicholas Procession is a tradition practiced by a wide range of bearers who may not be clearly identified. It is a purely male custom practiced by men between 20–25 years of age. In the past, only adult men took part in the procession. Over the recent decade, though, some villages have reduced the age because of the lack of men who are of age. Since the procession is characterised by a high degree of anonymity, this is not felt by the local community. Thus you can meet some tradition bearers who have been *flying* since they turned 15. In other villages, it is not permissible for non-adults to take part and the tradition is maintained as in the past. The upper age limit for the procession is another factor that needs to be discussed. Men frequently withdraw from active participation after they start their own family. In the villages of Strelna and Valasske Prikazy, this is a hard-and-fast rule. The moment a man gets married, he may no longer take part in the procession. In some villages, in exceptional cases, retired men join the procession for a time. They never stay throughout but rather join the group symbolically for a short period. “It’s beautiful when you see the youth walk around and all of a sudden a 60 year old joins them. That’s incredible, you can’t describe what it means to us” (Respondent RL [1989], cit. 13.06.2018). The number of people in the procession differs in individual villages. Only in Luzna has the number stabilized at six. In most villages, 15 men go *flying* on average. In Lidecko, Francova Lhota, and Valasska Polanka, the number doubles because the population is much greater.

In small villages (Luzna, Valasske Prikazy, Studlov), we encountered fading of the tradition already in the early years of my research: potential bearers were no longer interested in taking part in the procession. Group leaders faced difficulties in finding an adequate number of men to do so. So far, the situation has not been cause for alarm in that the minimum number of men needed to play the costumed characters has always been found in the individual villages. My concern was that if a lack of interest prevailed in small villages, the entire structure of the procession would change or, in the worst case scenario, the tradition would vanish. Fortunately, my fears proved unjustified and the number of procession members has been on the rise in both small villages and large. The numbers have increased hand-in-hand with rising population numbers and as a result of the cohesion felt by the current generation. In large villages, 40 men sometimes take part instead of the minimum 20. In Valasska Polanka, for instance, the procession group must be

divided into two so that they may stop at every house in the village, which is the key rule. But even though the group is split, the number of people in each subgroup corresponds to the number of participants in 2000. In Lidečko, there are three stable groups. The increased number of costumed St. Nicholas characters has had a positive impact on the event from for spectators, who say that now with more costumed characters, the event is much nicer than in the past when the numbers were reduced (Respondent PŠ [1994], cit. 9.06.2018).



Fig. 8 Death. Lidečko (2018). Photo by L. Navrátilová

Most men taking part in the procession claim their main motivation is to have fun. This is testified to by the fact that many times they take part even if they have an arm or leg in a cast or a brace on their ankles. Men enjoy experiences they reminisce about fondly in the later years of their lives. In general, this is a very popular tradition and everyone in the region is happy to share an opinion on it. In addition to the fun they have, men who take part in the procession are motivated by the reactions they get from people in the village. “I like the frightened look on kids’ faces, I do enjoy that. And the reaction of older people who admit we look fearful, that’s something that energizes you” (Respondent VM [1996], cit. 8.06.2018).

Young men may also be attracted by the alcohol that plays an important part in the event in all the villages. *St. Nicholas*es are frequently offered homemade brandy at individual homes. It should be noted, though, that I have only noted alcohol as a motivation

factor. Possible motivation may also lie in the money Devils collect. In most cases, however, the money collected does not go to the men themselves but is put toward good deeds or donated to charity.

One of the most prominent motivating factors, and something very typical for the event, is a desire to maintain the tradition. A Valasska Polanka respondent says the St. Nicholas Procession is an opportunity for everyone who feels strong ties to their village to meet, regardless whether the person is a football-player, a firefighter, or a hunter: the important thing is that the atmosphere is good and Christmas is coming. Another motivation lies in the fact that the men first became interested in the tradition when they were little boys; they naturally wished to participate and become part of the community without having to be prompted to do so (Respondent JT [1992]; 22.05.2018). Adult members of the procession are aware of these roots and interest in playing one of the Devils has been rising sharply among the youth. The continuity of the tradition, which has been passed from one generation to the next, may be illustrated by a statement from a Francova Lhota Devil who went *flying* for the first time in 2018. Having been asked why he was one of the costumed characters he said only: “My Dad was one, too.”

Support from the villages

The St. Nicholas Procession forms an integral part of the cultural heritage in the Hornolidecko region. Local villages support the tradition and consider it a cornerstone of their cultural life. The procession is a very particular phenomenon, though, and neither local mayors nor members of the village council get involved in its organization. However, bearers of the tradition enjoy the full support of their municipal government and may use village buildings as a base. On the roads running through the villages, traffic signs are mounted throughout the event. Exceptionally, village councils may provide funds, for example, to make new costumes.

Costumes for the costumed characters celebrating St. Nicholas are prepared several weeks before the event. The village provides space for costumes and masks to be repaired and stored for the rest of the year. We provide funds to make costumes for two costumed characters – two Devils – and make village facilities available during the procession. We are interested in supporting and maintaining the tradition as it has been to date – says one of the mayors (Respondent JT [mayor], cit. 16.05.2018).

Although full support is provided for the tradition, the traditional use of hedgehog skin has gradually been dropped. Members of the procession continue to have hedgehog skin attached to their costumes but almost never use it. But they continue to make sure it is cleaned and disinfected regularly. The first impulse came from a decree issued by

a Regional Hygiene Station that dictates hedgehog skin may be an accessory to the costume but may not be used in any other manner. And in some villages its use was dropped as the result of a decision made by the members of the procession themselves. So, there are only a few villages where hedgehog skin is still used in the traditional way. Group members opine that it is better to maintain the tradition without the use of hedgehog skin than to risk having the traditional event prohibited. Some of them are clearly against the use of hedgehog skin (Respondent OP [1995], cit. 20.05.2018). The research showed that individual villages issue decrees in which they put pressure on procession members to abandon the use of hedgehog skin, leading to its prohibition. In contrast are moves to maintain the tradition in authentic form, with hedgehog skin an integral part of the costumes. Tradition bearers perceive it as the symbol of the event (Respondent JD [1993], cit. 21.05.2018). In this line of thinking then, hedgehog skin is considered a regional rarity and one that should continue to be a direct part of the costume or an accessory to it.



Fig. 9 Child as a Devil during ceremonial procession of adults. Lidečko (2014).
Photo by L. Navrátilová

Identity

The St. Nicholas Procession is such an outstanding and significant phenomenon that local inhabitants feel especially strongly about maintaining their identity at both the local and regional levels.

It is a tradition. This has been going on since time immemorial, people could get by without it, but it's part of village life. Some pay no attention, some tolerate it, but if you have your own kids and grandkids there, then you enjoy the ritual. If people don't like it, they don't have to open the door and it's ok (Respondent MV [mayor], cit. 16.05.2018).

It was enlightening to listen to people's opinions as to whether the tradition reinforces a feeling of belonging to a specific village or the Wallachia region as such. I often encountered people who were very proud of their *St. Nicholases*. The never-ending discussion of who has the best-looking Devils confirms that, via this traditional event, people are expressing their belonging to their own particular village. There are some inhabitants of small villages who are not attached to their village identity but realise that the event is part of the Wallachia tradition and feel their belonging to the region. I also noted that some individuals wished to try to take part in processions in other, e.g., neighbouring villages. The majority attitude, however, is that the respondents' villages have the best procession and best costumes. They would not accept any change of location because it is in the nature of the St. Nicholas Procession that the local tradition bearers provoke and sometimes mock those in neighbouring villages. These tendencies to competition do not concern exclusively St. Nicholas processions but are intertwined throughout the entire realm of folk traditions.

My main finding was that despite the social and economic changes experienced by Wallachia inhabitants in the 20th century, the traditional processions have been continually maintained. The tradition persisted even throughout World War II, albeit on a reduced scale, and processions continued during socialism, too. The socialist regime requested that active participants take part in extra work in exchange for a permission to organize the procession, but continuity was not interrupted.² It is pleasing to see that in contrast to some traditions that have not withstood the pressure of circumstances, the St. Nicholas Procession has been flourishing and even gaining popularity. The reason may be in the spontaneous nature of the tradition as it is passed from generation to generation. The greatest role, however, might be played by the ties to identity expressed by inhabitants of the region, who have kept the tradition going even during the toughest of times.

² At this time the length of the procession was not defined or fixed either, similar to the situation today. During World War II, however, procession group members could conduct the procession only on a pre-defined day and time.



Fig. 10 Mask of Jew during procession. Horní Lideč (2013). Photo by L. Navrátilová

Including St. Nicholas Procession on the List of Intangible Elements of Traditional Folk Culture

Over the past decade, awareness of the St. Nicholas Procession in Wallachia has been rising thanks to media promotion, exhibitions, the participation of Devils in the traditional fair in Valasske Klobouky, and their presence in the Wallachia open air museum in Roznov pod Radhostem. Researchers have begun to look more intensively into the significance of the St. Nicholas Procession for the Wallachia region and into the specifics that render the tradition unique. In response, the tradition was considered for inclusion on the List of Intangible Elements of Traditional Folk Culture, a national version of the UNESCO list.

In the course of my research into the issue, I recorded various reactions and opinions on whether the tradition should be included on the list and promoted in this manner. Those who agree with its inclusion see the greatest positive in the fact that awareness of the procession would be heightened and tourism would increase as a result, bringing money into the region. “It would attract people, which means our economy would benefit. One hundred percent” (Respondent JD [1993], cit. 21.05.2018). People not intimately familiar

with the issue nevertheless hold similar views. In their opinion, the main benefit of being included on the list would lie in economic benefits and increased awareness of the event.

The Hornolidecko Association, headed by village mayors, has rejected negotiations on the topic because they are aware of the amount of work necessary to be included on the list and no one wants to be charged with the task. Most active participants also express negative views. The main reason is that the procession differs from village to village and the respondents fear that the form of the tradition may not be sustained. They are also aware of the burden imposed by requesting inclusion on the list. Nor is anyone willing to guarantee that the procession will remain unchanged. The controversy engendered by putting the tradition on the list is evident in the statement of a mayor of a village whose own attitude to the issue is not entirely negative (Respondent KM [mayor], cit. 16.05.2018).

We've talked about this, and people have differing opinions. There is a certain concern about limitations being placed on the tradition. I personally think people should discuss the issue in greater detail but I would not be against it, provided the tradition wouldn't suffer limitations in the future (Respondent JT [mayor], cit. 16.05.2018).

Some respondents seek solutions that would allow the procession to take place as usual even if it did become popular and many people were to start coming to see it. A potential risk might lie in the gradual loss of authenticity of the St. Nicholas procession. In some villages, half of the large group of active participants would be able to walk around the village while the other half presented the custom to visitors. But this solution is not available in small villages where the groups are not as big.

The issue should be addressed and re-discussed with village inhabitants because their negative attitudes are frequently founded on misleading information. I am sceptical myself, though. A key aspect of the tradition lies in its spontaneity, in the fact that the village does not influence either the organization or the event itself. The way the costumed characters look and how the event unfolds differs from village to village. Authenticity is what makes the St. Nicholas tradition stand out and inscription on the list might irrevocably damage this. The statement by the respondent indicated above testifies to this, and researchers should continue to focus on the issue in the future.

I noted voices calling for putting this procession on the UNESCO Intangible Heritage List a few years back. I know some villages were concerned about the potential obligations. Personally, I would not be sceptical. At any rate, whether the event is on the UNESCO list or not, it is important to maintain the tradition, to pass it on to the younger generation and hope they will do the same (Respondent PF [1984], cit. 21.05.2018).

Conclusion

The St. Nicholas Procession is one of the key events in southern Wallachia, although it may be controversial for third-party observers. None of the local inhabitants can imagine that the custom of the *flying* Devils could go extinct. Some fear the tradition because they associate the event to the night. I encountered respondents who were so traumatized by it as children that they still actively avoid any interaction with the costumed characters. Most village dwellers, though, consider the Devils an integral part of the cultural heritage of their village and that of the entire Wallachia region. This holds true as well for the *flying* of young devils in the period preceding the holiday of St. Nicholas.

Despite minor updates and transformations, the continuity of the custom shows many consistencies with the way it was practised fifty or a hundred years ago. Currently, villages and associations represent a key organizational platform for local traditions, whereas organization used to be in the hands of individuals. Spontaneity, however, has been preserved in the case of *St. Nicholases*. In some villages in the region, the procession is organized without support from village associations or other institutions. It therefore differs in character from other types of procession that are part of the annual cycle of customs.

For the local inhabitants, *flying* is not merely an event but an opportunity to reinforce their identity and local ties to ancestors, because in the course of long-term preparations, local communities and active group members are actively drawn together by the tradition, not only during the period of the procession but throughout the year. Tradition bearers experience much in common and form long-lasting or lifelong friendships. The St. Nicholas processions also reinforce local inhabitants' feelings of belonging to their village and the entire region. In Hornolidecko, St. Nicholas processions have always been part of the climax of advent and the entire annual custom cycle. Although other traditions, for instance the Mardi Gras procession, the celebration of St. Lucy, and Easter are subject to change, the St. Nicholas processions have remained almost unaltered and been passed on to future generations in that form. Young men make their costumes themselves and help the young boys with theirs, thereby passing on a type of message that is most likely to survive for many years in the future in decent form. Procession members probably are unaware that their activity shapes the form of traditional culture in the Czech Republic.

During the course of my research, I have come to realise that although this procession is closely tied to the Catholic environment, the residue of pre-Christian beliefs is still present. St. Nicholas is not the main character, though he might seem to be, but rather

the Devils. They are the pivotal characters in the *flying* phenomenon. In some villages, this is testified to by the fact that the entire group of active participants is called *Devils*.

St. Nicholas processions remain, in this form, part of traditional folk culture thanks to the tradition's ability to adapt, its unique role in the annual custom cycle, and the location where it is practiced, which has not been much affected by tourism. However, the St. Nicholas Procession has been evolving. It will greatly depend on the current generation whether this distinctive and unique custom will persevere into the future.

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