

Juraj Jánošík

1 - Intro

What makes a folk hero? Why do we venerate the likes of Johnny Appleseed, Anansi, or Miyamoto Musashi? What does it say about a nation when they ascribe qualities to a historical figure and make them into a myth? What does that say about the national character or even human nature when we warp a person into a legend?

When one looks at the beloved characters of a national heritage, patterns emerge that reveal to us our own character. The origins and evolving narrative treatment of these figureheads fall into place to reveal a common story, one familiar to young and old, near and far. While we might change aspects and story beats along the way, the same premise remains.

Lets take a look at the Morgan Crusader Bible from around 1250 AD. The illuminated manuscript tells a more or less complete version of the traditional bible. However, these stories are shifted to a medieval French perspective. There are many asides relating stories and comments completely unrelated to the text, and many of what is from the Hebrew Christian bible was altered to reflect the views of those writing it. Even visually, the beautiful imagery doesn't depict sandal-clad

Hebrew men from Roman-Levantine heritage. King David sports a colorful surcoat more befitting of Richard the Lionheart than the king of the Jews. Everything is represented as if it were contemporary, medieval. Plate-covered knights joust while David and Goliath fight with longswords. The point is, we view these stories from our own perspective and change them to reflect what we are going through, nationally, politically, personally.

The goal of this podcast is to highlight the similarities and differences between these stories and the people who shape them through the ages ceaselessly. For this first podcast, I figured I would take a look at someone that may be unfamiliar to most people outside of the Balkans and Eastern Europe; one Juraj Jánošík. Try and follow along and see if you can make some comparisons to folk heroes that may be more familiar to an English-speaking audience.

2) The Setting

To understand the origins of an outrider folk-hero, especially like Jánošík, we need to dive into the setting, set the stage for our protagonist.

Modern Slovakia rests north of Hungary, west of Ukraine, east of the Czechia and south of Poland. Its nestled high in the

Carpathian mountains, a landscape dotted with numerous thick, imposing forests that are a mix of deciduous and coniferous trees that often ring the crowns of rocky hill and mountain tops. It's not unlike the alps, but still decidedly unique. This sloped terrain becomes important to our story and understanding the myths surrounding Jánošík.

~~Slovakia was and still is a land occupied by Slovaks, who belong to the Slavic culture group along with Russians, Poles, and Czechs. During the era of the Romans, the area was part of the province of Pannonia, until eventually the Huns took over the entire region around 380. Another tribal confederacy hailing from the steppes, called the Avars, took control of the region after the Hunnic tide receded. It wasn't until~~

The idea of Slovakia didn't exist until the Slavic tribes settled in the area around the 400's, A.D. It wasn't long until the Avars, a group of nomadic steppe tribes invaded the entire region of Pannonia, which includes Slovakia, Hungary, and parts of the Balkans. The Avars often led raids into Roman and Byzantine territory, and when pickings were slim, up into the Slav's lands to the north. These northern Slavic lands were less settled or defended than the Roman lands, and eventually the Avars lorded over most of the Slavic people, including who would become the Slovaks.

Tired of the incessant raiding, a man simply known as Samo organized a confederacy of the Slavic tribes and led a force to cast aside the yoke of foreign rule, and was so successful in doing so, he created an empire comprised of Slavs reaching from Western Germany to Slovenia. In laconic fashion, it was dubbed, "Samo's Empire". This unified force even managed to fend off the massive Frankish Empire in a lengthy conflict.

Time passed, and Samo's Empire evolved into the Moravian Empire, until its dissolution in about 1000 A.D. This period is difficult to pin down for a number of reasons, but here's a general outline of what happened with this, "great Moravia". We know that around 820 or so, a collection of tribes confederated around the Morava river. This collection gradually expanded to include Slovakia, western Czechia, parts of Poland and perhaps even parts of Serbia. This polity of western Slavs had little choice but to swear allegiance to the growing German Empire of the time, led by the aptly named Louie the German. Here, a critical moment for the development of Slovaks and Slavs in general happened; the creation of a written Slavic language spearheaded by saints Cyril and Methodius in around 863. This climaxed in the conversion of the local Slavs of the Moravian empire into Christianity.

Around this time, the Hungarians to the south took control of Slovakia, and the native Slovaks were again under the yoke of foreign, non-Slavic rule.

One may see a pattern emerging - one where a group of people shifts in and out of local national dependence. This friction builds up over time, with local laws and customs becoming replaced by Hungarian ones, or what's referred to as "Magyarization". So these people who would become known as Slovaks centuries later had existed in the area for hundreds of years to form an empire strong enough to withstand the might of medieval Germany and overthrow the yoke of the Avars. They were used to fighting fiercely for independence. It's important to note here as well how different the culture of these people was compared to those to the west of them - they ate different food, spoke a language with practically no basis in latin or german at all like the rest of central and western Europe, and up until about 1000, worshipped a pantheon of old forest gods that were more closely related to the earliest versions of Hinduism than anything even close to Christianity. In other words, you could tell when you were in a Slavic village as opposed to a German or French one.

Ok, so back to the central story. The Habsburg dynasty was at several points in time the most powerful family in Europe,

with relatives ruling over Spain, Germany, Austria, and even parts of Italy. They were based, however, in Austria, just south of Germany. Eventually, the Habsburg-ruled Austria formed a Union with Hungary, which is where we get Austria-Hungary. They'd come to rule over much of eastern Europe, and remember, Slovakia is now a territory in Northern Hungary. The only problem was that the rulership was not equal between Austria and Hungary; Austria often imposed its own set of rules and laws over the nobility of Hungary, which meant that they increasingly lost power over their own land. Understandably, the nobles and landowners of Hungary became disenfranchised with their so-called "co-ruling" Habsburg Austrians. Eventually, this leads to, finally, the very beginning of where the folk-story begins - the Kuruc uprisings.

I apologize for the lengthy digression on the history of the area, but the constant friction of imperialism on formerly independent people is the important take-away here.

Ok, the Kuruc Uprisings. These were a series of rebellions staged by both Hungarian and Slovak peasants and landowners alike. Basically, they were frustrated over a number of things that Austria was doing to Hungary and by extension Slovakia. Decrees from Austria no longer had to be ratified by the nobles of Hungary anymore, and Austrian troops could regularly stop by

your town and simply stay for free, often taking loot and extra food along with them. Among other things, taxes continued to rise. In response to this, came the Kuruc uprisings. They began in 1670 and intermittently continued into another larger breakout in 1711, but the rebellions were eventually quelled. It's in these Kuruc uprisings that we see the actual real historical Janosik.

We know he was baptized on January 25th in 1688, but we don't have records of his actual birthday, which is pretty on par with most records of peasants of the era. He was born to a lower class peasant farmer family and grew up without any incidents until he fought alongside the Kurucs in rebellion against the Habsburgs. We're not sure if he volunteered or was just grabbed by some insurgents and drafted into the fighting force, but as we'll see later, Janosik does have tendencies toward rebellion and independence.

Anyways, he's only 15 and he's in this rebellion army fighting against one of the predominant powers of the world. Somewhere along the line, we know he get's involved at the battle of Trencin where the kurucs are actually defeated in what was a pretty big battle during these rebellions. It was an important battle, and at the very least, Juraj Janosik participated in a part of history. Well, he was on the losing

end of it. He was captured by the Austrian forces and became a prisoner of war.

This was a part of the story I personally had trouble understanding, but nevertheless, it's part of the official story. They actually took Janosik, someone who fought in battles in rebellion, and decided to put him to work. Someone with his experience on the battlefield was pretty tough, even for a 15 year old, but of all the places that his captors could place him, they conscripted him into their own army as a prison guard. That's correct, they put him in charge of guarding the very rebels he fought beside. Needless to say, this was the setup for a jailbreak.

One of the prisoners whom Juraj was charged with was a man named Thomas Uhorcik, and Thomas had stories to tell. You see, he was a former highwayman, a robber of the roads who led a band of robbers seasonally in the late summer and early fall - when local shepherds were active in the area and often would support the robbers - in the mountains of Slovakia. They would lay in wait by the side of the road for wealthy looking people to pass by, then they would jump out and threaten the passerby with their guns and sabers. It was a pretty common practice at the time, especially in that area, and Thomas' stories enticed the young Juraj into hatching a plan - Janosik would help Thomas

escape and leave the prison with him in exchange for entrance into Thomas' highly lucrative robber band of highwaymen. Janosik jumped for the chance at a life of adventure beyond being a prisoner of war forced to work for the other side. This double whammy would mean a free ticket home and a new, well-paying occupation. Of course, the young man took advantage.

Well, what exactly happened was unclear, but we do know that Thomas escaped while Janosik remained as a prison guard for another year until his father bought him out of Austrian service. We might theorize about what happened here - how could Janosik's family afford to pay the ransom and get Juraj out of service, especially if they were poor farmers? We might postulate that Thomas escaped with the help of Janosik and went back to his hometown, where he dug up some of his ill-gotten gains from robbing people on the road. He then might have given the money to Juraj Janosik's father, Martin, who paid off the ransom. Whatever the real facts are, that story is likely the most probably answer to this question. Regardless, Janosik returns back to his little farming town to reunite with his family, Thomas' debt to him repaid in full. But Thomas saw some ability in the military-trained Janosik, and soon after his return, offered Juraj a place in his band of highwaymen, to which of course, Janosik accepted. Thus begins what Janosik is known for - his life as a robber.

Now, highway robbery was quite common in this era from 1000 all the way up to 1800 in Slovakia, and often, the whole town would be in on it. It was quite common practice for the robbers to take turns staying at different houses to keep the authorities from finding them. They'd often come across friendly Shepherds in the mountains who often gave them food or other supplies. Why would the whole town support a group of robbers? Well the answer is two-fold. In this era, there was enormous religious turmoil. Christianity had recently undergone a reformation, and this region of Europe was now predominantly protestant. Following the 30 years war in which near a third of germany's male population died alone, there was much hostility between Catholics and Protestants - and the Austrians happened to be catholics ruling over protestants in Eastern Europe. So the protestant populations of these towns often cheered when the local highwaymen would rob a travelling catholic Austrian priest on the road. It was, in their eyes, practically the moral thing to do. In addition, highwaymen would really only ever rob nobles from Austria or Hungary as opposed to any locals. Secondly, the raids brought plenty of money into the town. Simply put, it was great for business. Janosik's hometown of Terchova was a known haven for highwaymen, so Juraj's origin story makes complete sense here. What we really have are these highwaymen who are acting like robin hood - they take from the hated rich and give

them to the local poor, to people they came from. It was a little bit of what they sensed as justice, a little silver lining to their occupation.

So, this is what Janosik did. We do know for certain that after only one season of robbing, Thomas Uhorcik stepped down and elevated Janosik as the leader of the highwaymen. After only one year! This probably means that everyone in the group really respected Juraj, whether it be because he helped Thomas escape prison, his experience in the army during the uprisings or something else, it's unknown why he became the leader so quickly at his young age. Maybe he was just charismatic.

Of his recorded burglaries, we know that he was accused of allowing his band to kill a clergyman on the road, as well as to have robbed a large amount of nobles. He was moderately successful, and while later his stash revealed only meager items they had stolen, these were items that were really hard to fence in that area, making it reasonable that the stash was just made up of things they hadn't been able to sell yet. He was also known to have robbed a rich officer's wife, which really annoyed the authorities, since when a noble person was robbed, they were obligated to pay the damages of what was robbed, which could really add up. Supposedly, his band had also raided even a few Austrian imperial caravans, one time even gaining themselves a

carriage - a nice catch in that day. And to complicate things just a bit, he's known to have robbed a nobleman who supported the Kuruc uprising as well. Whether this meant he was ultra-class conscious or simply didn't care where his spoils come from isn't something we can determine.

Other than that, there's not much real info we have on what Janosik actually did as a highwayman, and there's a decent reason for that as we'll see. The important thing to remember here was the mention of the priest who apparently had been killed. This would come up later as critical information.

During the off season from his first year as brigand leader, Juraj Janosik was caught in a Solvakian town hiding out with Thomas Uhorcik. They were able to bribe the first set of officers with stolen goods, including the expensive rifle of a baron, but soon after were arrested again, for good. What proceeded was a trial - the records of which are the only way that we know pretty much any of these facts. These court documents are pretty much the only way we know this person was real and not entirely myth.

This was in the year 1712, and in this time period, trials were much different than modern day ones. Although this was a little more than 50 years before the birth of the United States, trials were still almost medieval in quality. Juraj was

subjected to at least 3 days of torture that we know of - but we don't know what kind of torture. Martin Votruba, a doctor at the University of Pittsburgh, suggests that he may have been stretched on the rack, having his arms and legs dislocated. Regardless of the method, we know for sure that Janosik admitted to having committed robberies (although wasn't specific on which ones he was accused of), and still said no to the accusations that he had killed a priest himself. Supposedly, Thomas was not quite as tough, and his statements were used to further incriminate Janosik.

In the end, we know that Juraj and Thomas were both convicted and sentenced. As was typical for the time, the execution methods were particularly brutal. For Janosik, he had a massive hook usually reserved for hanging cow carcasses on threaded in between his ribs, hanging him sideways on the gallows and left to die. For Thomas Uhorcik, he was broken upon the wheel - meaning that he was crushed to death by repeatedly being beaten with an enormous weighted wagon wheel. And that's the story right there - it's pretty grim. The official events as recorded by the court documents paint a dark picture and end for the highwayman.

But this isn't where our part ends. Let's explore the actual myths that were developed around this real historical figure.

While there are plenty of different versions of the myth, many begin with Janosik's childhood, where he longed from the start to be an outlaw robber, to which his father responds, "remember to be the good kind that helps out the poor folks like us". That's an important line right there. Then, he falls asleep one night after a hard days work and dreams of fairies bringing him gifts that make him incredibly powerful, only to wake up to find that his dream had come true! He found some clothes that protected him from danger, a belt that made him jump impossibly high, and lastly a mountaineer's axe that would make him a leader so long as he held it. Important to note here that mountaineer axes are a really common feature of Slovak folk costumes - they are long handled but small headed axes occasionally used for self-defense, but mostly used for mundane tasks.

Anyways, with his enchanted gear, he heads into the forest to find the bandit outlaws so he can join them, and sure enough, he finds them, then challenges their leader to a fight, which he wins. The old leader steps down and awards him the leadership of the outlaw band in exchange for becoming his trusty advisor, and

together the band robbed from the rich and gave to the poor. The villagers would help the band stay out of trouble when the authorities came around. Then, one day, after a large wedding, an evil old woman went to the police to tell them where Janosik was - passed out after a raucous time. Sure enough, the authorities have him arrested and brought to the trial - an event that features in pretty much every version of the story. In some versions, Janosik is at a bar when some officers come in, and as he tries to escape, the old woman throws pea soup onto the ground, on which he trips and is finally caught. At the trial, the poor are made to stand aside as only the rich can give testimony to Janosik's crimes. They accuse him one after the other of heinous crimes while the townsfolk sit sullenly. Finally, at the execution, he's brought out to the hook used to hang him, and before they can pierce him, he declares, "Now you've caught me, you can have me" and jumps onto the hook himself. Not the last words I would've chosen, but sure. There are nigh infinite variations on the story - in some, his father was initially killed by a landlord after not paying his dues, which turns the young man into a robber. Sometimes he has to perform a number of feats of skill to impress the band of brigands and be let in. In almost all versions he gets the three items delivered to him by witches or mountain goddesses, hold-overs from the old Slavic religions that held on in the region

for much longer than one might expect. Sometimes, he dances the Slovak folk dance around the gallows before he dies, and says, "So you've roasted me, now shall you eat me!". There are innumerable versions, but many of them have connections to the real story - the idea of an outlaw leader stepping down in favor of a new young leader, townsfolk helping out the thieves, the method of execution. It's interesting how some of the details you'd expect to get altered stick with it to the very end.

What's quite unique about this figure is how prevalent he became within the Slovak culture. There's a myriad of reasons for this considering the era it happened.

The early 1800s was a time of national awakening in Germany to the west. After Napoleon conquered all of Germany, many of the small city states united together under the idea that they all shared a national heritage. Rival cities that once hated each other rebuilt themselves not just as Hamburg or Bremen or Berlin, but as cities within a country filled with Germans. There would be an explosion of intellectual discussion and literature surrounding ideas of nationalism - in all the negative and positive contexts one might imagine - that spread slowly east and westward. The early to mid 1800s was a time of national revolutions, especially emerging from the lower class. In 1848 and 49, revolutions swept across nearly all of Europe,

almost overcoming many countries and empires, not the least of which was the Habsburg Austrian empire.

From this nationalist revival we saw a fear emerge - the fear of being forgotten or erased, something that was actually more possible than one might think. To the north, the kingdom of Poland had been partitioned among Russia and Prussia, and the governments violently suppressed any mention of Poland ever having existed, which only aggravated the populace. Nonetheless, efforts had been made in the past to not necessarily destroy a nationality, but rather erase the concept from the mind. Smaller countries and Slovakia, Serbia, Croatia, Albania and many others contended viciously with this fear to the point of demonstrations and efforts to "de-germanize" their large cities like Prague. It was a full national effort on the part of the citizens, and it's important to note that many of these countries fashioned their own ideas of what their nationality was. So rather than Czechs making authentic Slavic long-houses and architecture, they made an idealized version of it filled with nostalgia. They left out what they saw as ugly and un-Christian, crafting their own identities from pieces of half-remembered history.

This is where Janosik becomes so overwhelmingly popular - he's someone these people can latch on to and identify with. A

figure who in their mind embodied their struggle against authorities much richer than them that oppressed them. They just leave out the bits where the real man probably robbed former rebels and priests. This is the critical juncture - the myth is fabricated out of what some may have seen as necessity to craft their identities around. Some legends would even say that he would rise again to strike down future oppressors. The national folk outfits adopted around this time includes wide leather belts and buckles harkening back to Janosik's magical belt. They wear tall hats that have a name that literally means "hat of one who steals from the rich". The appearance they gave Janosik became the ideal Slovak male. In the first schools that taught in the native language, many students were brought up on literature that was expressly poems about the outlaw or stories of the past. To this day there are reams and reams of literature about not Janosik the man, but Janosik the hero. The very first film from the country was "Janosik" made in 1921, and from that day on more and more series and movies were made, even by surrounding countries like Poland, which made a fairly popular series that ran for a while in the 70s. Statues gild small and large towns across the Tatras. His imprint is everywhere, even though he may have only thought of himself as a Hungarian who spoke a different language. To this day, there are reverberations of the story in other cultural entities. During

the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, a regiment of freedom fighters named themselves after the hero. Later on, an anti-soviet insurgency cell would do the same. Even today, a computer program that takes aim at larger corporations and government bears the name. It's everywhere in the culture.

This story gives us a unique opportunity to see where we as humans convolute stories to fit them to our needs. We have a good outline of the real person, just as we have even more accounts of the myth. It's as if we had legal records and contemporary accounts of someone like Achilles or Paul Bunyan. We can clearly see the origins and how they kept a hold of what they saw as the important ideas within the story that morphed and changed over time.

And it makes sense why this culture would hold on to this figure. A region that has repeatedly been oppressed by others like the Magyars, Avars, Austrians invoking Janosik like an old spirit to drive away new imperial powers like Nazis. While I may have painted this story to apply specifically to Slovaks, this is an overarching theme we will see in many of the folk heroes' tales. Janosik lives on as a highwayman and a hero, his face forgotten, even his deeds, but the ideas grafted upon him remain.

This has been Heroes of the folks, and I've been your host,
Gaige Tarris. Thanks for listening, and don't forget to
subscribe and follow to hear the next tale.