

## **Hungarian community folkdance groups in Canada**

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When Hungarians in the larger cities of Canada get together to celebrate, a folkdance performance is always a favourite part of the program. From Montreal to Victoria, Canada has over two dozen Hungarian community folkdance groups. To put the significance of this statistic into perspective, one needs to consider that the USA, with its considerably larger Hungarian population, has about a dozen. This study will examine this unusually vibrant Hungarian-Canadian phenomenon and give a detailed picture of the size, artistic direction, and working life of Canada's Hungarian community folkdance groups.

Of the twenty-six regularly functioning Hungarian community folkdance organizations in Canada, many have several constituent groups composed of dancers of different ages. Thus the total number of sub-groups is well in excess of fifty. Statistically, each sub-group has an average of fifteen members. The total number of members listed by the twenty-six organizations of the survey is 801. The following chart details the breakdown of groups, sub-groups and members by province:

Province	Number of groups	Number of subgroups	Number of dancers
British Columbia	4	7	88
Alberta	4	8	128
Saskatchewan	2	4	47
Manitoba	2	7	67
Ontario	11	24	386
Quebec	3	7	85

There are no functioning Hungarian folkdance groups in the Atlantic provinces or in the territories. Canada-wide, the dancers range in age from three to fifty-five, with the average age being sixteen. Females outnumber males by a ratio of 5 to 3.

The larger organizations tend to have a three-tiered sub-group system with a children's group extending from very young kids to age ten or twelve; a junior group of teenagers to age sixteen, and a senior group of dancers sixteen plus. The smallest groups are those in Kelowna, Saskatoon and Oshawa; the largest is Toronto's Kodaly Ensemble with 100 members. The youngest group is the Oshawa children's group; the oldest is Welland's all woman ensemble.

Hungarian community folkdance groups in Canada are now largely an urban phenomenon though there is still an echo of the original turn-of-the-century Magyar settlement patterns in the unexpected strength of the groups in Saskatchewan and Ontario's Niagara Peninsula.

### Community relations

Of the 26 groups surveyed, eleven are organizationally independent, ten have loose ties to Hungarian community churches, clubs or associations and five are totally linked to another, larger community organization. In addition to these five, only two others (in the loosely-linked category) reported receiving some direct funding support from Hungarian community associations.

The independent nature of Canada's Hungarian folkdance groups is reflected in their remarkably open policy towards new membership. Only four listed "Hungarian descent preferred" as a membership restriction and, in fact, in only one case is this a hard-and-fast rule and even there it is imposed by the "mother" organization, not the dance group. The only other restrictions mentioned had to do with age (2 groups) and dance experience, which one group listed it as a preference.

There is an interesting progression discernible in the community relations of Canadian-Hungarian folkdance groups. Most of them were originally founded by various Hungarian clubs or associations and functioned initially within the bounds of the founding organization. Over the years many dance groups split off or broke away, citing meddling and artistic interference, and established independent life, or at least a much less restrictive association with Hungarian community organizations.

Today, Canada's Hungarian dance groups are by-and-large artistically independent. However their community ties are still very much evident. More than half of them hold practices at Hungarian churches or

clubs. These same organizations provide central costume storage for many dance groups. And the Hungarian community continues to be an important part of the audience for the groups surveyed.

### Goals, performing activity, and orientation

The preservation of Hungarian folk traditions emerged in the survey as the primary aim of Canada's Hungarian folkdance groups. (First choice for 17 groups, second for 4). The presentation of these traditions to the Canadian public ranked second. (First choice for 4, second for 15). In third place was a goal that reflected the groups' concern for community survival: To serve as a social vehicle for keeping young people in the Hungarian community. (First choice for 3, second for 7).

Six of the 26 groups reported performing less than ten times per year. Twelve perform more than twelve times per year, while eight listed their performance level at over twenty a year. (One group, the Tulipan Dancers of Ottawa gave 32 performances in the past season.) The total number of stage appearances reported by Canada's Hungarian folkdance groups approaches 400.

Who is the audience for these performers? More than half the groups (14) list non-Hungarians as their primary audience. The fact that fourteen groups mention that they often take part in multi-ethnic festivals and appearances, seems to corroborate this fact.

The orientation towards a non-Hungarian audience attests to the power of Canada's multicultural policy. Its attraction seems to be strongest for the larger groups in Western Canada and the smaller ones in Ontario and Quebec. The other side of the coin is that the smaller western groups and some of the largest eastern ones (12 in total), are more oriented towards their own communities. In fact, of the three groups which listed "parents and friends" as their primary audience, two were the largest in Ontario and Quebec respectively.

Regardless of whether they are inwardly (community) or outwardly (larger, non-Hungarian audience) oriented, Canada's Hungarian folkdance groups share an interest in taking part in Hungarian folkdance festivals. All the western groups belong to — and take part in — the annual Western Canadian Hungarian Folkdance Festival, and all but two of the eastern groups regularly take part in *Pontozó*, a Hungarian festival held annually in southern Ontario. These festivals have an immense effect on the groups. They serve as a venue for performing, a goal for preparing new choreographies, a point of comparison and provide an opportunity for networking. The role of the two festivals in preserving Canada's Hun-

garian folkdance groups might be an interesting study, however it exceeds the scope of this survey.

The festivals also provide an opportunity for the groups to travel. Because the Western Festival is hosted each year by a group from a different city, all the western groups have performed outside their province in the past few years. Many of the eastern groups also travel outside their province to perform. Ontario groups close to the U.S. border seem to find a natural outlet for their talents in the northern states (New York, Ohio, Michigan). The Birmingham (Toledo, Ohio) Hungarian Festival regularly attracts several Ontario groups. All in all, six Canadian groups reported performing in the U.S. in the past two years. Going further back, the Kodaly Ensemble of Toronto has the singular distinction of having participated as the "Canadian" contingent at an international folkdance festival in Puerto Rico in 1980.

Hungary is a desirable but difficult-to-attain destination for Canadian groups. Nevertheless, three groups mentioned having visited Hungary in the past 5 years.

## Repertoire

What kind of material do Canada's Hungarian folkdance groups perform? The uninitiated might think that it is some sort of generic Hungarian national dance. All the more so because the members of the groups come from all parts of Hungary or from the Hungarian minorities of the surrounding countries, so the only common link they have is their national identity. In addition, their non-Hungarian audience — and we've already seen that a "Canadian" audience is very important to most of the groups — knowing little about the complexities of Hungarian regional dance styles, generally expects to see a Hungarian national dance, especially in the context of a multi-ethnic festival. The reality is very different.

Canada's Hungarian folkdance groups perform choreographies based on the various regional folkdance styles of the Hungarian communities that live in the Carpathian Basin. For the most part, these are collective regional choreographies representative of a larger geographic area. (Déldunántúl, Szatmár and Székelyföld being the most popular dance dialects). In addition to these, there are many choreographies featuring the dances of certain villages (Bag, Lőrincréve, Szék, etc.). Only the Vadrózsa Dancers of Calgary retain a few generic Hungarian choreographies in their extensive repertoire. As for thematic choreographies, Toronto's Kodaly Ensemble is unique in featuring Zoltán Zsuráfszky's composition: "*Eddig vendég*".

## Practices and training

The survey asked several questions to gather information about the weekly working life of the groups. Because most responses concentrate on giving data about the senior group, this section of the study does not deal with children or intermediate dancers.

The average senior Canadian Hungarian folkdance group holds practices once a week. Seventeen, in fact do so. Eight — mostly ones from Western Canada — practice more than once per week, while only one group gets together less often. The average practice is three hours long, though some western groups hold five to six hour weekend sessions; but there are some groups whose weekly practice is only 1-1½ hours long. Twenty-one of the groups start practice with warm-ups. Fifteen include dance dialect and styling practice in their regular sessions. Virtually all incorporate singing into their practice time.

Finally, a significant minority of the groups (12) claim to do *Táncház* style improvised dancing during or after their regular practice sessions. This is an unusually high number, bearing in mind that "*Tánc-ház*" dancing makes far greater demands on the dancers — especially males — than do stage choreographies.

## Costumes

With an estimated total value of over half-a-million dollars, stage costumes are a serious business for Canada's Hungarian folkdance groups. How did this wealth of costuming come about? The quality of costuming for a dance group tends to be a function of the group's age, size, and community support. Since a large number of the groups in the survey have been functioning in their community for decades, it is no surprise that they are rich in costumes. In fact, the average group has six or seven different sets of regional costumes at an estimated total value of \$20,000 per group. Of course, there is a great variety, ranging from Oshawa's 2 sets of costumes valued at \$1,000 to Toronto's 17 sets at \$100,000.

Most of these costumes are made in the community by members of the group or their relatives or friends, using local expertise and/or published material on costuming. However, a surprisingly large number of groups (16) obtain at least part of their costuming from Hungary. Two groups did so exclusively.

Generally the costumes are owned by the group (18 groups). However, eight reported mixed ownership. For footwear, it is a different story. Only six groups own boots and shoes, while in ten, members own their own footwear. Ten of the groups are on some form of mixed

ownership, typically the group providing "loaners" to members who cannot or will not buy their own footwear. Where possible the groups keep their costumes in a central storage room, usually provided by the community church or club hall. Where this is not possible, a mixed form of storage evolves, with members keeping some of their costumes while the group leader warehouses extras or less frequently used sets. Only seven groups reported storing costumes totally at members' homes.

### Group leadership and teaching

Leadership and teaching are crucial factors in the success of Canada's Hungarian folkdance groups. The ability to guide the artistic functioning of a dance ensemble — even at an absolute amateur level — requires some amount of expertise in folklore and dance, a talent for leadership, dedication, and a lot of hard work. That so many dance groups in Canada have found a solution to this problem is all the more remarkable because there is no formal training available for these tasks.

In general, the groups have a dual strategy to meet the challenge of leadership and teaching. First, a resident group leader — usually a current or former dancer (or dancing couple) — takes care of the week-to-week functioning of the group. Next, the overwhelming majority of groups imports the choreographic and folklore expertise required for new stage material by inviting a guest teacher/choreographer, often from Hungary.

To establish what the groups considered necessary for leadership, the survey asked them to list the qualifications of the group leader. "Dance experience" was rated first by most respondents, followed by "responsible leader" and "organizational and people skills." Only one of the 26 groups — the Deilbáb Dancers of Lethbridge — has a leader with professional dance instructor's accreditation. In 19 of the groups the leader also dances with the group, while in 7 he or she does not. The ratio is exactly the same for leaders who also choreograph for their groups versus those who don't. (Though, of course, the groups are not necessarily the same). This last statistic is significant, because it is a strong indication that the groups are, at least to some extent, self-reliant. In addition to week-to-week leadership, Canada's Hungarian folkdance groups also face constant need for new material. Increasingly, many of them are turning to experts from Hungary to satisfy this need. Thus, in the past few years, over a dozen instructors from Hungary have been invited to teach groups in Canada. At the moment, the Western groups seem to be using this resource more than the ones in Ontario and Quebec.

Some groups develop lasting relationships with Hungarian teachers. Zoltán Zsuráfszky, Artistic Director of the professional Budapest Ensemble in Hungary, made his first teaching visit to Toronto in 1980 and has been returning regularly ever since, having taught the Kodály Ensemble about a dozen choreographies in as many years. The Buzavirág Dancers of Victoria are building a long-term relationship with Sándor Román of the Honvéd Ensemble of Budapest, the Csárdás Dancers of Edmonton with László Gyalog, the Vadrózsa Dancers with Péter Lévai, and the Szittyá Dancers of St. Catherines with Péter Ertl. Only six of the 26 have not worked with someone from Hungary in the past couple of years. However, even these six have indicated a desire to work with Hungarian instructors if the opportunity arises.

There is one other resource for instruction available to the groups in the survey: guest teachers from North America. Andor Czompo and Kathy Kerr, independent folkdance professionals who have taught some of the Western groups in years past, are at one end of this resource spectrum. At the other are the leaders of some of the groups surveyed — Sue Biro, Ibolya Baulin, Louise and Iggy Kadar, Andrea and Gabor Dobi, Kalman Dreisziger and Zoltan Katona, to name just a few — occasionally guest-teach with other groups.

#### Current concerns, future prospects

Hungarian folkdance was born in a traditional world of relatively closed village societies. The passing of this world was a gradual process that spanned the first half of this century in Hungary and lasted perhaps 20 to 30 years longer in parts of Transylvania. The transformation of live village dancing into a stage artform also took place during the same time-frame. Today's urban teenagers in a Budapest performing group are separated from traditional village life by two generations. For them, a glimpse into the past is difficult but not unattainable. Their counterparts in Canada are separated by the same timeframe, plus the Atlantic Ocean, plus the stuck-on-fast-forward American culture that neither values nor validates their Hungarian roots.

Small wonder then, that Canadian-Hungarian dance groups listed problems that are primarily the consequences of this separation or cultural discontinuity. Lack of motivation and related issues, like sporadic attendance and lack of discipline topped the "problem list" for 18 groups. On the "wish list" side, *more dancers* — more specifically *more boys* — came first for the majority of the groups. In other words, motivation for getting involved with and working hard at an art form, that seems ever more remote from the day-to-day realities of childhood in Canada, is the

number one problem for the continued survival and functioning of Canadian-Hungarian folkdance groups.

Separation from the source continued to be the key for the second issue on the wish list: better teaching (13 groups) or, more specifically, the availability of an expert instructor from Hungary (7 of those groups). Next came the problem of live music, which is on the wish list for nine groups. Here the gap between Hungary and Canada is immense. No self-respecting dance group in Hungary works without live music. Yet of the 26 Canadian groups only three have musicians available. The problem seems so insurmountable, so pervasive, that most groups have come to terms with it — completely accepting the sad solution offered by canned music. That may be the explanation why relatively few respondents have put live music on their wish list. Lack of adequate financial support was cited by nine groups as a problem and appeared, in the form of "more funding," on the wish list of six.

A catch-all category that included trouble with the dancers' parents, personality or ego problems within the group, and lack of help for the group leaders comprised a final set of problems.

What are the future plans of Canada's Hungarian community folkdance groups? The survey data provides an indication in two different areas. Where artistic direction is concerned, the groups are almost evenly split between pursuing authenticity as a goal (12 groups) versus "show" or stage orientation (9 groups). In view of the fact that the respondents are performing groups, for whom the stage is the ultimate venue, and that their Canadian audience — but even the Hungarian community — often values stage showiness above authenticity, even the small majority leaning towards authenticity has to be viewed as a surprise. The explanation can be found in the extensive connection Canadian groups maintain with the folkdance movement in Hungary and the strong influence Hungarian experts bring to bear on them.

Finally, the major concern for the future of any expatriate cultural movement is survival. Here the focus is on continuity and the role children's groups play in providing it. All the 26 groups consider it important to have a children's group — even the seven who currently don't have one. The majority (17 groups) cited the future survival of the dance group as the primary reason for starting a children's contingent. Five respondents broadened the concept to encompass the idea of bringing families into the Hungarian community.

## Conclusion

The mosaic theory of Canadian multiculturalism has received much attention and has invited constant comparison to the "melting pot" south of the border. In reality, the mosaic is a false analogy because it presupposes that the bits of ceramic, out of which the total is made, remain unchanged. This is not the case. Immigrant groups generally change, eventually adapt and ultimately melt into Canadian society. The mosaic theory has initial validity in as much as Canadian ethnic groups have official sanction and even encouragement to keep their cultural identity. However, in the long run it is as if the cement that binds the bits together had the effect of slowly changing the ceramic, first fuzzing the edges, then dissolving the fragment itself.

Canada's Hungarian communities are well along the process of dissolution. The last major wave of Hungarian immigration to Canada took place well over a generation ago. Since then, the ties that might bind individual Canadian Hungarians to their cultural community have loosened, lost their power, and in many cases totally disappeared. In this general environment, one would expect Canadian-Hungarian folkdance groups to be in the same pattern of decline as the community. All the more so, because this is exactly what has happened in the U.S., where there has been a drastic drop during the last twenty years in the number of Hungarian community folkdance groups. In fact, there are some signs of decline in Canada as well. In Ontario, for example, eight to ten years ago there were still active community dance groups in Delhi, Windsor and Kingston. That they have disappeared is lamentable but not surprising. What is surprising is the picture that emerges from the survey: a Hungarian community folkdance network that is extensive, strong and still vibrant.

What are the reasons for this relative success? The first is that, though aged and much weakened, Hungarian communities still exist in Canada's large urban centres and they continue to provide approval and often active support for "their" folkdance group. It is this role as a symbolic manifestation of the communities' cultural roots that provides dance groups with their most powerful *raison d'être*. Next in importance is the role played by the annual festivals. *Pontozó* in the East but especially the Western Canadian Hungarian Folkdance Festival have continually exerted a powerful influence on the participating groups. The need to appear year after year with new material, perhaps with new costumes, with as large a contingent of dancers as possible, has had the net effect of improving the groups' repertoire, widening their horizons, making some of them more resourceful and keeping others alive.

There are two additional benefits that have accrued from the festivals which need to be looked at on their own. First, the festivals have given dancers from individual communities validation for their participation. It might be a very queasy feeling for a teenage boy in Winnipeg, for example, to think of himself as a folkdancer. However, if he sees dozens of his peers from various cities dancing on stage, it is reasonable to assume that the problems he may have had with his self-image might diminish. Second, the festivals are mainly responsible for groups bringing dance experts from Hungary to work with them. These experts have had a deciding influence on the artistic direction of the groups. They are perhaps the main reason why groups in Canada perform authentic Hungarian regional folkdance compositions rather than tending towards the presentation of "national" dance, as had been the case with some Ukrainian-Canadian groups in years gone by.

What does the future hold for Canada's Hungarian community folkdance groups? Given that the communities themselves are in a process of slow decline, it is inevitable that the groups themselves will diminish in strength and size. If we take the U.S. as the advance model, even the stronger groups that remain will go through a process of significant change. Their membership will be increasingly composed of serious, older non-Hungarians whose principal motivation is to add Hungarian folkdances to their repertoire of knowledge. These groups will become ever more distant from the Hungarian community, while paradoxically their ambition to perform at a higher artistic level will increase. (At the two ends of the Hungarian network in Canada, the Buzavirág Dancers of Victoria and the Új Magor Dancers of Montreal are already tending in this direction.)

On the brighter side, the survey reveals that most of the groups have recognized the problem of survival and have made effective plans to assure future continuity. Given that a performing group needs to renew itself every ten years or so, the three-tiered age structure (children's, teenagers' and senior group) adopted by many of Canada's larger Hungarian dance groups is eminently suited to overcoming the problems of survival. Added to it is the strength derived from the increasing cooperation between groups, the growing capabilities of resident leaders, and the beneficial effect of working with suitable experts from Hungary. All in all, the findings of the survey give cause for much optimism. Canada's Hungarian communities will likely be able to enjoy their dance groups for years, even decades to come.

## Appendix

Hungarian community folkdance groups by province:

British Columbia		
Victoria	-	Búzavirág
Vancouver	-	Csárdás
Vancouver	-	Hungarian Folkdance Ensemble
Kelowna	-	Kisfalusi
Alberta		
Calgary	-	Bartók
Calgary	-	Vadrózsák
Edmonton	-	Csárdás
Lethbridge	-	Délibáb
Saskatchewan		
Regina	-	Balaton
Saskatoon	-	Fonyó
Manitoba		
Winnipeg	-	Kapisztrán
Winnipeg	-	Kárpát
Ontario		
Sudbury	-	Heritage School
Ottawa	-	Tulipán
Oshawa	-	Hungary House Dancers
Toronto	-	Kodály
Hamilton	-	27./59. Cs. Cs. Dancers
St. Catherines	-	Szittyá
Welland	-	Hunor
Niagara Falls	-	Bartók
Brantford	-	Csárdás
Kitchener	-	Kossuth
London	-	Hungarian Folk Troupe
Quebec		
Montreal	-	Gyöngyösbokréta
Montreal	-	Százszorszép
Montreal	-	Új Magor

## NOTES:

This paper had been presented at an international folkdance conference in July of 1993 in Kalocsa, Hungary. Data for it were gathered through a questionnaire that was sent to the administrator or leader of each folkdance group in Canada during the winter of 1992-93. No survey has been made of Hungarian community folkdance groups in Canada previously; however, some aspects of the Hungarian folkdance movement in Toronto have been studied. See Stephen Satory, "Táncház: Improvisatory Folk-Dancing and String Playing in Toronto's Hungarian Community," *Hungarian Studies Review* XIII, 2 (fall 1986), pp. 53-62.