

The Devil's Chum

Thoughts on the book by Gyula Vadas and Albert Veress *

– Review –

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Abstract: The author makes a review of the book "The Devil's Chum" by duo-authors Vadas Gyula-Veress Albert. He adorns his reasoning with a multitude of literary examples. He reveals the strong and weak points of the book, praises the rich data substrate and the abundant array of links to professional literature.

Key words: suicide, prevention, social and ethnographic survey, universal literature introspection.

I often feel that we inadvertently restrict the meaning of the term „orderly Szekler community” in our discourses. As if it applied only to the material world and environment and to the economical conduct and not to the social life of the community. As if the human existence fell prey to anarchy. In fact, that is not the case at all. Only that we do not want to recognise the organic unity of things, namely, that there are PEOPLE living behind the land and objects. And the orderliness, as a principle, is also a public need even against the individual's own character.

The community used to remonstrate and sanction not only those who did not keep their houses and the porches clean, who polluted the environment, did not care for the animals or damaged the wealths of others a.s.o., but also those who broke the laws and rules of social cohabitation and ignored the customs of human existence even in case of certain setbacks. Basically there were three expectations in a community, as follows:

- Children should be born and raised in the family.
- Marriage should be preceded by a thorough reciprocal befriending and consensus is needed by the two families.
- Life comes from God and only he can take it away.

So I summarise the basic folk philosophy behind the psychic, behavioral, sentimental, spiritual and social attitude, and behind the orderly responsibility towards the individual and the community.

All those who acted, or are acting against these principles, are sanctioned according to the general and particular popular rule of law by the rural communities. Single incidents are also dealt with, as they could lead to social erosion and so endangering the life of communities, whatever setback generated it. An outsider can easily consider these community laws as being unmerciful, but all those living inside the community know that whoever breaks the norm, in fact endangers the existence of it. I must note that the purpose of the sanctions is to generate a sense of shame. A famous philosopher says that „this is not a sense of guilt, this is a feeling of diminished worthiness.” (Ranschburg 1993. 138). We experience shame - adds the author – „when the defeat or annoyance is produced in the presence of others, or, we think that others could get knowledge of it.”(i.m.137). I also must add that people living together are particularly sensitive to disgrace, to how others see their social performance, and whether they fall into the category of „good-for-nothing” persons, in Szekler phrasing. Although differentiated, the bastard, the sinful girl, the absconded girl, the woman or girl aborting or killing the baby, the suicidal, the bachelor and spinster, - are all seen as diminished worthiness on the rural society's „human market”, using a modern expression.

Well, from this norm did the labelling „diminished worthiness” arise of those who defy the third basic principle. He/she is „The Devil's Chum”, who stepped out of the circle of humanly companionship, turned his back on it and came together with the ugly and evil, with the opposite of God, in other words, interfered with the work of the Creator, bid defiance to it and he himself ended his own life. According to the ancient religion of the old Hungarians well before the Settlement in Hungary, man has to get to terms with both mortals and saints. In this view, the suicidal person broke up the pact with both sides.

As we infer from the previous, otherwise incomplete ethnological description, the deviant behaviour of suicide rises a complex and intricate array of problems within the framework of the universal civilization as well as the local popular culture. And that gains even more importance as this unfortunate human deed, and the mystery that surrounds it, are also studied by other disciplines such as psychology, psychiatry, theology, criminology, statistics, popular religious belief, etc.

Death will always cause some astonishment, induce bad feelings, but the death of a suicide will spark a multitude of questions, forcing us to look for cause-and-effect correspondences; everyone close or far would instantly become a sociologist trying to work out explanations, and so an abundance of folklore generated by gossip will go around. And that will grow, as there is no unanimous official information available. Not even Nature and the cosmic world will remain indifferent to the suicidal deed: „Someone killed himself,/ and that caused this bad weather...” I am quoting Petőfi the poet, but I could as well quote numbers of Hungarian and other writers who, according to common belief, linked some unusual meteorological event with someone’s suicidal act.

With these thoughts I wish to present the outstanding scientific undertaking of VADAS GYULA and VERESS ALBERT, the duo of authors from Pécs, Hungary, and from Csikszereda, Romania respectively. I would also call it an adventure, as the book „The Devil’s Chum” attempts to answer the big WHY?, as this very question dominates the suicidal act both on an individual and communal level. That word makes the title of an essay of the late Transylvanian Reformed bishop Makkai Sándor, in which he struggles to find answers to the causes of the historical lost battle at Mohács. Is there an answer to something so deeply mysterious? Is there an escape from some place where you either hit a wall or fall into a chasm whatever direction you take? And if there is no answer to be found, is it worthwhile trying? Can you just quietly watch with helpless indifference how fatality erodes your community or your nation? THE OUTCRY! – is it only used to encourage work, creation and reconstruction, or is it able to stop self-destruction? Whose duty or moral obligation is to undertake such a task?

Well, this task - with all its virtue and risks - was undertaken by two outstanding intellectuals. One, a sociologist from Pécs, Hungary, and the other, a psychiatrist from Csikszereda, Romania, both having been fighting and studying suicide for decades in their territories.

The authors were the first to undertake the task of exploring the suicidal phenomenon in 1990 in Transylvania, Romania, and were among the pioneers of the Romanian medical sociology. They carried on till 2012, without an institutionalized research establishment, only by attracting colleagues and experts to the cause. So they created the foundation of the scientific research of suicide without antecedents in Szeklerland – Transylvania. They did that by elaborating and building up the methodology of a referential system of study. Besides organizing conferences, they carved out the first milestone of the region’s scientific research - a book with yellow cover to become the main reference for scientific research in the domain for all interested experts. However, the book focuses mainly on several rural communities in Felcsik region, still, it grew to a broader work encompassing the comparative history of suicidal sociology on a European level, due to the wise approach of the authors. In other words, they display the European „devil and chum” panorama before the eyes of reader and researcher in a continental space-time dimension. Still, they never lose sight of life pulsating at home. Using this concentric imaging method they blatantly unearth our hidden preconceptions, stating that we are basically a suicidal nation, while uncovering the contrasting causes and the emerging questions and their national, ethnic, professional, religious, social, cultural and educational aspects. With interdisciplinary methods they search for the tiny lightspot with the help of which they would stumble upon the mysteries of the powers of darkness. In this pursuit do they order and rate the causes of suicide.

B. Brecht says: „there are as many answers as questions”. I believe that the mere listing of the causes can as well be the starting point of any activity program. The book has a great merit – no scientific status could otherwise be invoked – that it also provides solutioning strategies instead of just worthless lamentation. Alcohol is the leading issue in the variants of causes. But the suggested solution is not a mechanical one such as: „Limit alcohol consumption”!, but the gradual restoration of the multi-generation families, and the rethinking of the importance of the family as an institution. All that will encourage the improvement of all other causes as well, directly or indirectly. The differentiated and comparative

presentation of the causes in the local communities, and also in London, even in France and Germany, would raise the need of creating special sections within the ministries of welfare among Hungarians.

„The Devil’s Chum” is also the book of the eternal dilemma of mankind, the dilemma of choice. Is it possible or not to rebuild our lives and return to normal? Cantata Profana by composer Béla Bartok suggests that it is impossible. In the saga, the cursed young men who had been turned into deer can not come back anymore, because their antlers will not press through the door, their feet will not tread ash but only dead fallen leaves, their mouths will not drink out of glasses. They have turned into animals, and the wild woods became their world and territory. So here we see the syndrome of the individual’s diminished value!

Writer Eliade states that „if something breaks, we should return to the origins. We should remake the moment of creation, continuously repeating cosmogony”. I believe I find the authors’ professional credo right in this idea. It reminds me of Zorba the Greek, who teams up with a construction engineer to build a route on rough terrain to bring down huge boulders blasted somewhere very high up on the mountain. The impressive construction fell apart at first attempt, and the intellectual engineer contemplates suicide. But Zorba the carpenter exclaims: „Have you ever seen a more beautiful, more magnificent destruction?!”, while starting to dance to some unheard tune deep down his inner self, dragging the astonished engineer into dancing more and more wildly – and so the idea of a new start emerges from the ruins. Here lies the mystery and the recurring message as a strategical question: paying attention to one another, the effect and moral power of leaning on one another’s shoulders.

I will quote one other example from literature. (by the way, the authors reasonably blame artists and writers, as they often suggest suicide as a means of solution in their works). Well, I am thinking of Svejek the worthy soldier who waves good bye to his fellow mates by saying that they would meet again for a beer at 6 o’clock after the war at their favourite pub. One of them returned from a professional desolation after being grabbed and pulled back by one and being offered an immediate alternative, an other one believed in a return thinking of pleasures of the flesh and an active social life.

I purposefully avoided quoting from the multitude of concrete cases. The readers should find them themselves. They should think about them and look for and even find solutions. My task is to raise a keen interest towards the analyses offered, and towards the multitude of cause-and-effect relations presented in the work. The book entitled „The Devil and the Chum” is actually the outcryng voice of our demographical state. An indirect outcry for life, for the child, for the human being, and a direct one for the appreciation of life, for the rise of the physical strength of our communities, of their creating power, their spiritual and physical efficiency and public morals being in sharp contrast with self-weakening.

Let my appreciation and my thanks to the authors be also an encouragement for you to buy the book.