Tales from Bátorliget

by Nóra Veszprémi

The subject of this Little Book is a series of illustrations by the prolific graphic artist György Buday (1907–1990). He was already an established artist when he moved from Hungary to Britain and adopted the English version of his first name, George. He worked for British publishers, but he also endeavoured to produce his own publications. His series of Little Books – the inspiration for the present series – included some of his previous Hungarian illustrations republished with English texts, as well as new volumes that emerged from the British cultural context, such as compilations of excerpts from old proverbs, chapbooks and manuals.

Buday did not need to reinvent himself; the skills and style he had developed in Hungary were well-suited to earn him commissions in England. His outlook, however, shifted considerably in the course of the decades. He started his career under the influence of Hungarian ethno-nationalist ideas and aimed to present the essence of "Hungarianness" in visual form. His subsequent travels steered his interests towards the common traits of humanity.

Kolozsvár and Szeged

György Buday was born on 7 April 1907 in Kolozsvár, Transylvania, then part of Hungary (now Cluj-Napoca, Romania). His father, Árpád Buday (1879–1937), was an archaeologist and head of the Collection of Antiquities at the Museum of Transylvania in Kolozsvár. From 1911 he also taught at the local university. In 1917 György was enrolled into the Calvinist College of Nagyenyed (today Aiud), a centuries-old institution of almost legendary fame.

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Developing an increasing interest in art, the young Buday spent much of his free time capturing the beauty of the landscape around the town in pastels and watercolours. He took his first art lessons from drawing teachers who worked with his father at the museum. Later, having gained some proficiency in creating impressionist landscapes, he expanded his artistic horizons by devouring the avant-garde magazines he was able to browse thanks to Gerő Daday (1890–1979), an artist based in a studio space on the top floor of the museum. Among these magazines was the famous *Der Blaue Reiter*, the periodical founded by Wassily Kandinsky and his associates. This inspired Buday to start experimenting with the expressive potential of simple forms: lines, curves, parallels and perpendiculars. By 1924 he was respected as a burgeoning artist at his college, where an exhibition of his pictures was organised, filling three rooms.

That year, however, was a fateful one in the life of the Buday family. In the peace negotiations ending the First World War, Hungary had been forced to cede Transylvania to Romania. During 1920 the formerly Hungarian-speaking university of Kolozsvár was turned into a Romanian university. Most of its professors left Transylvania for the southeast Hungarian city of Szeged, where the Hungarian government reestablished the Francis Joseph University of Kolozsvár. Árpád Buday's primary position was at the museum, so he stayed in Kolozsvár for a few more years, but – having lost most of his professional contacts and faced with increasing isolation – he finally decided in 1924 to relocate to Szeged. In 1926, after finishing his high school education, the young György started to study law at the university in his new hometown.

Overwhelmed with the exams necessary for his enrolment into a Szeged high school and then with university admission, Buday had to set his art aside for a while. As a university student, however, he gradually returned to his favourite pastime: roaming the countryside and depicting what grabbed his attention. As he explained in an autobiographical essay published

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in 1970, at the time he had felt that he had strayed too far from natural reality in the preceding few years and aimed to make up for that by only producing studies directly from nature.

This was followed by another shift in his artistic interests. Oil paintings – Buday used the English term “easel pictures”– produced as unique objects could only have one owner and so were sought by rich collectors and art dealers. Aiming instead for an art accessible to a broader range of people, Buday’s attention turned towards printmaking, specifically towards wood engraving. In 1930 his brother, the historian Kálmán Buday (1908–1936), brought him a handy collection of woodcutter’s utensils from Germany as a gift, and the artist immediately set to work.

These changes unfolded organically within Buday’s art, but they did not happen in isolation. As soon as he began his studies, Buday became a very active participant in student life at the university and helped develop one of the most exciting intellectual movements in interwar Hungary. The society known as the Szeged Youth (Szegedi Fiatalok) was formed in 1928 by the most radical members of the Gábor Bethlen Circle of Szeged University Students, whose president at the time was Buday. Influenced by contemporary ideas about the rural population as preserver of the “national spirit,” the Szeged Youth intended to carry out fieldwork among the peasants of the plains around Szeged. By bringing the culture of the city to the villages, while also studying peasant culture and drawing on it in their own work, they believed they could merge these two parts of society and hence rejuvenate the Hungarian nation. In 1931 they established the Art College of the Szeged Youth – not a formal teaching institution but an organisational framework for the artistic and cultural activities of the group.

The ideas and ideology of the Szeged Youth shifted considerably in the following years, as they were faced with the grim realities of peasant life in the hopelessly poor homesteads of the Hungarian plains, but this will be discussed in more detail later. For now, let us just mention the fruitful collaboration between Buday and the ethnographer Gyula Ortutay (1910–

1978), another key member of the Szeged Youth, which emerged from these activities. In the late 1920s and 1930s, Ortutay conducted extensive fieldwork collecting peasant lore, including folk tales and ballads. These were compiled as a series of beautifully-crafted publications illustrated with Buday’s wood engravings. The 1933 book of folk ballads and songs collected by Ortutay (*Mondotta Vince András béreslegény, Máté János gazdalegény – Said Farmhand András Vince, the Master’s Son János Máté*) was followed in 1935 by a book of peasant tales from the Nyír and Rétköz regions (*Nyíri és rétközi parasztmesék*) and one of Sekler folk ballads (*Székely népballadák*), and in 1937 by *Tales from Bátorliget* (*Bátorligeti mesék*), the subject of this Little Book.

In addition to his work with Ortutay, Buday created many other illustrations. His first album inspired by ethnography was *Boldogasszony búcsúja* (*St Mary’s Feast*, published in 1930), which contained Buday’s expressive depictions of peasants arriving at Szeged to celebrate the Dedication of the Basilica of Saint Mary Major, a Catholic feast day. Starting the same year, the Szeged Youth published their annual *Little Szeged Calendar* (*Szegedi Kis Kalendárium*) containing wood engravings by Buday and folk songs collected by the group. These volumes can be seen as predecessors to the Little Books Buday created after he moved to Britain. Other important sets of illustrations included those for the ballads of the great nineteenth-century poet János Arany (1817–1882) and those for poems by Miklós Radnóti (1909–1944), a member of the Szeged Youth now best known for the devastating poems he wrote during the forced labour he had to endure before being murdered in the Holocaust.

Around this time, Buday defined himself as a Hungarian artist who aimed to express “Hungarianness” in his work, but this did not mean he was uninterested in the world beyond Hungary’s borders. Indeed, he yearned to travel. By 1928 he had already visited England and studied the settlement movement, one of the inspirations for the activities of the Szeged Youth. Having graduated from university with a doctorate in 1933, he decided to devote his life to art. For the year 1936, he received the Rome Scholarship of the Hungarian Ministry of

Culture. The following year another scholarship allowed him to travel to Britain. He subsequently settled in London, a decision driven by his long-standing "Anglomania," as well as his dismay at Hungary's increasing political alignment with Nazi Germany. He did not know it at the time, but he was to remain in England for the rest of his life.

Buday and the Szeged Youth

When the movement of the Szeged Youth launched in 1928 it was motivated by a nationalist utopia promoted by influential contemporary thinkers. Hungary's recent major territorial loss was widely perceived as a national catastrophe. In mainstream political terms, this catastrophe was conceptualised as the unfair result of bad, biased decisions made by the victorious powers at the Versailles peace conference, but to some it was more than that: a result and symptom of national decline. One such thinker was the historian Gyula Szekfű (1883–1955), who highlighted the rise of liberal politics as the root of all ills, describing it as alien to the Hungarian national character. His periodical, the *Magyar Szemle* (*Hungarian Review*) was one of the Szeged Youth's main supporters in the early years.

Another important figure was the writer Dezső Szabó (1879–1945), who focused on peasant culture as a source of renewal. In its search for "true" Hungarianness in the culture of the peasants, supposedly "untainted" by modern urban culture and its internationalism, Szabó's ideology was both a direct descendant of nineteenth-century romantic nationalism and profoundly ethnicist in a more chauvinistic, twentieth-century sense. He was a fierce critic of Hungary's right-wing ruling class, but blamed its failings on the supposed German origin of most of its prominent figures. At the same time, he also claimed that economic and financial problems were the result of the supposed prominence of Jews in these areas. Indeed, in the anti-Semitic climate of 1920s Hungary, the typical "Other" in explorations of "pure" Hungarianness was usually the Jew.

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Early iterations of the Szeged Youth's mission statements were conceived within this ethno-nationalist framework. In 1929 Buday himself wrote: "to help our race [fajtánk] to gain a more prominent role in our homeland and our homeland to finally become a self-sufficient [öncélú] nation state it is essential for today's intelligentsia to regenerate from the spirit and blood of the peasantry." It is important to concede this, in order to be able to appreciate the way many members of the group were able to move on from this position within just a few years, as a result of their diligent fieldwork and the open-minded debates they had amongst themselves. Transcending their nationalist starting point, the Szeged Youth grew into an open and, by interwar Hungarian standards, inclusive group which encompassed young people with different backgrounds and with diverse ideas. There were several members of Jewish descent, including Radnóti, as well as the photographer Judit Kárász (1912–1977), whose presence also highlights the fact that the Szeged Youth included a number of women.

When the movement started, the idea was to connect with the inhabitants of villages and homesteads by listening to their songs and stories and reciprocating with their own performances, such as poetry readings. Once there, however, the idealistic students realised that the people they wanted to draw into this high-minded cultural exchange lived in a kind of poverty whose depths they had previously been unable to imagine. As Ortutay put it: "our purely emotional interest, our enthusiastic affection for the people, turned into ethnographic and social interest, which saw the thrashing about of misery, the downtroddenness of peasant life behind the cheerful songs and colourful woven textiles, and sought its roots." Yet they knew they were unable to stop the process that now appeared before their very eyes: these communities, their culture and traditions were dying, partly because of modernity eclipsing their way of life (a phenomenon nostalgic explorers of folk culture had already noted in the nineteenth century) but also because of the derelict poverty into which they had been relegated by a Hungarian political class that simply did not care.

This gradual realisation brought several consequences. One was that, from their original classless utopia of an ethnic Hungarian society in which the peasantry and the upper classes would embrace each other, many members of the Szeged Youth shifted towards class-conscious, left-wing political movements and began to cooperate with Social Democratic and Communist groups in the city. Another consequence – more important in relation to Buday's artistic progress – was that Ortutay and his close associates realised the importance of recording peasant culture before it was irretrievably lost. This was what lay behind Ortutay's collections of folk tales, but it also motivated Buday to collect motifs from the visual culture of the peasantry. His illustrations for Ortutay's works drew inspiration from these encounters.

Tales from Bátorliget

Unfortunately almost nothing is known about the specific study drawings Buday produced in the villages and homesteads he visited. It is, however, possible to gain insight into the character of his interest in peasant visual culture by examining the illustrations he created for folk tales. The example we will focus on in this Little Book is *Tales from Bátorliget*, published in 1937. Completed when Buday had already left Hungary for Italy, it was his first experiment with the technique of coloured wood engraving.

Tales from Bátorliget came into being as a spinoff from one of Ortutay's larger projects. In 1936 the ethnographer had published *Peasant Tales from Nyír and Rétköz*, which he had collected in two adjacent regions in the northeastern Hungarian plains. In the course of this work, in the tiny locality of Bátorliget, he had encountered Mihály Fedics, an exceptionally talented storyteller whose rich repertoire of tales he could not fit into the 1936 volume. Ortutay decided to dedicate a separate book to Fedics's tales, stressing in the introduction

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that, even so, what was printed there was only a small fragment of what the storyteller had to offer.

Fedics's tales are unusual, often bizarre; they far transcend stereotypical ideas of what fairy tales are like. They combine the well-known cast of kings, princesses and clever peasant boys or girls with Christian imagery and playful humour, often bordering on the surreal. They mostly have some semblance of a happy ending, but sometimes they do not end at all, and they rarely have a moral. In the *Second Tale*, a drunkard soldier is revealed as highly resourceful, when he uses a loan from the king to ingeniously obtain fifty diamonds from a flock of birds, and then bakes them into bricks so he can transport them without anyone noticing. Returning to the king's court, he delivers the fifty bricks as a gift, and when his gift is predictably undervalued, he breaks the bricks to reveal the diamonds. As a reward, he is made governor of the country. In the *Third Tale*, the protagonist encounters similar good fortune without any need for ingenuity. The man finds a heavy chest in the ground and, while trying to dig it up, falls into a deep hole and ends up in the basement of the royal palace in a completely different country. When the inhabitants of the palace free him he is finally able to open the chest. As it turns out, it contains treasure, making the protagonist instantly wealthy – there is no riddle to solve, no obstacle to prove that he's worthy of this stroke of good fortune.

At other times, characters have supernatural powers which remain completely unexplained. In the *Fifth Tale*, a young man who has prophetic dreams predicts that the king's rule will soon come under threat from the Turkish Sultan. His abilities are noticed by the court and he is sent to the Sultan to help avert the threat. There, he turns out to be omniscient: he knows things about the Sultan and his court that are new to the powerful ruler himself, most importantly that he is in fact an illegitimate child. The Sultan questions his mother, who brazenly confirms the young man's claim: "Your father was constantly away at war, and there was a tinker here, Uncle Paul. He made you."

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Buday’s second illustration for this tale, with the gallows and its strangely alongated shadow, and the prancing devils in the upper right-hand corner, captures the grotesque atmosphere of the final outcome. The young man had told some of his men to dress up as devils, others to dress up as angels, and proceed towards the gallows to which he had been condemned. He then tells the Sultan that the devils are here for the souls of legitimate children, while the angels have arrived to take the souls of illegitimate ones to heaven, if they are executed. Hearing this, the Sultan pushes the young man aside and volunteers to be hung on the gallows.

In the sixth and most elaborate tale a beautiful girl, Ibronka, is feeling miserable because she is the only one left in her village without a lover. In her desperation she wishes for any lover, even if it’s the devil himself. The next day an attractive young man turns up in the spinnery, where the young women of the village gather and meet their male companions, and starts courting the girl, whose happiness soon sours when she notices that her new boyfriend has horse’s hooves, not feet. On the advice of an old woman from the village, she secretly ties a ball of wool to the man’s hair, and uses it to follow him after they have said goodbye. The young man – the devil – goes to the church, where to Ibronka’s horror he cannibalises a dead body. To escape from the devil, who is now desperate to find out how much she has seen, she performs a series of rites and tricks on the advice of the old woman. These lead to the deaths of her whole family, and then herself, but she is resurrected when a prince picks a flower from her grave and – once the flower is miraculously transformed into Ibronka – promptly falls in love with her. When the devil eventually finds her he tries to force her to tell him what she saw in the church. Instead, Ibronka recounts her whole story again, stating after every sentence that she is addressing this to someone who is dead, not alive. This finally kills the devil, on whose death Ibronka’s family members come back to life as if they had only fallen asleep.

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Buday's images capture this peculiar world through a range of visual devices. Unlike the expressionist prints produced by many of his contemporaries and on other occasions by Buday himself, these images are not made up of large shapes, forceful lines, and big blocks of black and white. Instead they are drawn with fine lines, and the figures are tiny and decorative. Most importantly, they are colourful: printed in green, yellow, blue and red, in addition to black and white. In their pure colours and ornamental effect the images recall folk embroidery, but the similarities end there. Instead of nostalgically imitating motifs, Buday drew on his own artistic inspiration to create an imagery that reflected the spirit of the tales by combining the cheerful decoration of folk art with modern compositional practices borrowed from Surrealism and Expressionism.

The way in which the illustrations aim to recreate the atmosphere of the tales is perhaps best exemplified by the illustration Buday made for the *Fifth Tale*. According to the story, the young man with prophetic powers was at first reluctant to reveal his dream about the Turkish threat to the king and was therefore sentenced to be walled in and left to starve to death. In the illustration, the king is sitting on a throne in the middle of the composition and watching as the wall is built. Surrounding the scene are buildings: peasant houses of the kind Hungarian villagers lived in, and a church with the Baroque tower so typical of the Hungarian countryside. The image conjures up the here and now of Ortutay's storytellers: the present date, 1937, is set into the image in the form of the year of construction on the façade of one of the houses, under a heart-shaped attic window of the kind often found in Hungarian vernacular architecture. This provides the image with a grounding in contemporary reality, but the fairy-tale figure of the king is gigantic compared to the houses: the scope of the peasants' imagination extends far beyond the limits of their material life. The composition is rounded, suggesting that the world of fairy tales is a self-contained world in itself, but in the background the composition opens up towards the landscape stretching beyond the village, signalling additional spaces to be explored by the imagination.

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Literature on Buday has often emphasised how he combined his solid knowledge of international modernist trends with his interest in the local scene and in folk culture. Looking at the illustrations to *Tales from Bátorliget*, the avant-garde movement that comes to mind is Surrealism. This formal language is very appropriate, not just because the French surrealists themselves were interested in "naive" products of culture, including folk culture, but also because of the surreal tendencies of the tales in question. In his illustration for the *Sixth Tale*, the one where the devil comes to court the pretty girl, Buday created an eery image of supernatural evil appearing among unassuming villagers. The devil is stepping out of the spinnery with the woollen string tied to him. He would not seem out of place among the villagers standing opposite him – except for the fact that his shadow is huge, revealing his supernatural being not to the villagers but to viewers looking at the image from outside the frame. The landscape in the background and the villagers' clothes are rendered in blue and yellow, reflecting the moonshine, which shrouds the scene in a mystical glow.

In this image, the form of the spinnery is depicted as a decorative example of timber folk architecture. Such detail demonstrates how Buday incorporated the knowledge of peasant visual culture accumulated on his study trips into his artistic output. This knowledge was there in the background, guiding Buday's hand and sometimes surfacing in motifs like the spinnery, but it didn't serve as the guiding principle. Expressing the atmosphere of the tales in images was a more important aim than showcasing scholarly knowledge.

Buday's entire output as a printmaker is evidence of his great talent for composition: for condensing many details into one image while not losing the expressive effect of the whole. His masterly treatment of pictorial space is more characteristic of works such as his illustrations for Arany's ballads than of *Tales from Bátorliget*, where most images have an open rather than spatially enclosed composition. There is, however, one notable exception: the illustration to *Tale Three*, in which the man plunges down into the royal basement. The image shows members of the royal household venturing to investigate the noise coming from below,

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which they attribute to a devil hiding there. The image shows the labyrinthine basement, the light suddenly streaming in as the group open the door. Gripped by fear, they hesitate at the top of the stairs. The image expresses that fear through the claustrophobic space and by depicting the stairs as staggeringly steep and partly shrouded by mysterious darkness.

The final tale in the book, the *Seventh Tale*, is surreal in a different sense than the others: it recounts a religious vision supposedly experienced by Fedics, but reads more like a dream sequence. Fedics is visited in his room by the Lord Jesus himself, who then leads him out into the courtyard and instructs him to build a chapel on top of the hill visible from where they are standing, Then Fedics's dogs begin to bark, and in the next sentence he jumps off his bed and runs outside – confirming the vision as a dream, yet at the same time continuing to talk about it as if it had been real. Interestingly, Buday's illustration for this tale omits the surrealisting visual devices used in other images. Instead, it is a religious image reminiscent of a Baroque fresco, with Christ and his saints sitting on a cloud that hovers over the hilly landscape familiar from elsewhere in the book. On top of a hill, in the centre, stands the chapel with its Baroque spire. The harmonious illustration ends the book on the gentle note of "naive" rural religiosity, almost recalling the idealised picture of village life the Szeged Youth were, by then, more than ready to deconstruct.

National – International

In his Szeged Youth days, Buday defined himself as an artist who aimed to create an art that was essentially Hungarian. In *Tales from Bátorliget*, this aim was manifested in the subject matter and the employment of folk motifs. For one image the artist went further and included not-so-hidden references to recent Hungarian politics. In the illustration to *Tale One*, a figure stands in front of three hills, of which the middle one has a cross on the top. This motif – the triple mount with a cross – is a central motif in Hungarian heraldry and still features in Hungary's coat of arms. Although it probably originates in Christian symbolism – the Calvary

mount – for centuries it had been traditionally interpreted as symbolising three mountain ranges of historical Hungary: the Tatras, the Matras and the Fatras. After the First World War only one of these, the Matras, remained part of Hungary; the other two became part of Czechoslovakia. The allusion to the geographical symbolism of Hungarian heraldry in Buday's image naturalised the idea of the Hungarianness of these mountains by making them part of the "traditional" and "timeless" imagery of folk tales.

Through this imagery Buday's *Tales from Bátorliget* suggests that places and landscapes can be uniquely shaped by and belong to specific nations. It is revealing to juxtapose this with something the artist wrote decades later, long after he had emigrated to Britain. "Let me say that, by carefully, studiously drawing the landscapes by the river Tisza or the characteristic Szeged houses decorated with sunray motifs, I definitely felt that the peculiarities, landscapes and people of the second home, Szeged and the Plains, were now mine … (Later I took possession in a similar way of Austria's beautiful landscapes, where I took many long walks, as well as of the towns, landscapes and people of Italy, and finally England.)" In this quotation the landscape connects, rather than distinguishes, nations: identifying with it helps the newcomer to integrate and feel at home.

After his sojourn in Rome and his subsequent move to England, Buday's views evolved: he began to search for motifs and modes of expression that transcended national boundaries and expressed what was universally human. He described this intellectual process in the autobiographical sketch published in 1970. By the 1940s he had found a motif that, to him, encapsulated this idea: the human face. Many of the illustrations he created from this time on consisted of a portrait (of a writer, character, etc.) surrounded by other motifs from their work or story. In 1970 Buday wrote that he had perfected this artistic method in his 1940 illustrations for Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, which he created for an edition published by the Limited Editions Club of New York, but it had already been present in his Arany illustrations in the 1930s.

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In this context, it is telling that the illustrations to *Tales from Bátorliget* embody the exact opposite of these artistic pursuits. Not only do they not show faces, but all the figures are so tiny that characterisation is impossible. They reflect a nostalgic view of "the people" as a timeless community, rather than a group made up of individuals. Yet there is something in the project itself that contradicts this view, a view that could so easily spiral into ethnicist nationalism. After all, Mihály Fedics, the storyteller, was such a strong character that his stories had to be published separately, preserving his name and special narrative style for future generations. And the stories themselves, in their playful, bizarre, irreverent nature, transcended lofty models of a solid, definable national identity and culture. Buday's illustrations, too, showed great affinity and perceptiveness for these playful, bizarre and irreverent aspects.

Buday's artistic trajectory, his real and metaphorical journey from Kolozsvár to Szeged, to Rome and then to London, is a revealing snapshot of interwar Hungarian culture in an international context. The activities of the Szeged Youth demonstrate the entanglement of ethnic nationalism and social awareness, progressivism and traditionalism, that complicates the intellectual landscape of this period. Historians of interwar politics, art and culture still have much to scrutinise here to provide a full, critical picture free of preconceptions. The shadows of chauvinism cannot be ignored, but neither can the willingness to learn and change. Buday's case provides a poignant example of a transformation brought about by new perspectives on the world. As far as visual issues such as modes of expression, compositional schemes, genres and techniques were concerned, he was an artist whose principles developed early on and remained constant; he did not need to compromise. Yet, the ideas behind the works evolved as the artist's knowledge grew. He rightly felt that the wood engravings he created in Hungary were good enough to be republished in England and appreciated by a British audience. He did not have to change the images – but he did have to shift towards an enthusiastic belief that they were, indeed, for everyone.

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