

In Remembrance of Zdenka Lechner

Back in 1958, Osijek saw the First meeting of Ethnological Society of Yugoslavia founded in 1957. Ethnologists from throughout the former federation attended that historical meeting, whilst the professors at the Ethnology Department of the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb generously took several of their students with them to the meeting. I was one of them. At the time, I attended the third year of Ethnology study programme and on that occasion, I was given the opportunity to meet Zdenka Lechner. She was a curator at the Museum of Slavonia in Osijek and she had prepared an exhibition for all the distinguished meeting attendees about wool weaving in Slavonia. I was particularly impressed by her presentation of the exhibits delivered for the participants of the Meeting. It was certain that we were faced with a person who showed competence and mastery of ethnographic facts about the addressed issue, as well as much beyond that issue, about the traditional culture of Slavonian villages. On that occasion, behind the cold, hard professional facts that she presented, I could feel her warm relationship with the holders and creators of that culture, permeated with discrete emotions, her exceptional human affection and empathy towards Slavonian peasants. It seems that it was an important component of her personality.

After that impression formed during my youth, during the following several years I only had some superficial encounters with Mrs Lechner, primarily on professional meetings of the Croatian Branch of the Ethnological Society of Yugoslavia. These meetings were held in Zagreb in January every year and they brought together also the ethnologists who operated outside Zagreb.

In 1965 Zdenka left Osijek (due to health issues) and started her activity at the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb, as a Senior Curator and then as a Museum Consultant. Starting from that point our previous superficial contacts transformed into deep friendship, which lasted over half a century until Zdenka's departure from this world on 11th September 2017.

During that period, having gained insight into her heterogeneous and ample professional activity, I was able to provide arguments to confirm my first impression of her as an excellent ethnologist that I had gained long ago. In the presentation of her book entitled *Traditional Culture of Slavonia, Baranja and Srijem (Tradicijska kultura Slavonije, Baranje i Srijema)* published in 2000, I expressed my opinion concerning this issue as follows (Muraj 2001: 194):

“The ethnological approach adopted by Zdenka Lechner included a highly comprehensive, in depth field research, focused also on the overall specific cultural phenomenon and on a large number of details of special importance for museum requirements. (...) Field research findings were enhanced with information from professional literature, with which she was very well acquainted. Simultaneously, she was in search for all the other available sources that she was striving to interpret using her knowledge, whilst also correcting some information from the professional literature. It has to be highlighted that, she showed professional and scientific ethics whilst doing that and pointing out problems that yet need to be solved and even if some of her work did not achieve any final outcomes, it always provided credible background for future research”¹

Moreover, I added that she was “...one of the best connoisseurs of ethnography of North-East Croatia (...), whilst, through her ethnological arguments she contributed to the valorisation of specific traditional values in Slavonija, Baranja and Srijem. In addition, she absolutely exerted an impact on a positive attitude of the wider public towards that specific segment of the national heritage.”²

The Zagreb-based residence of Zdenka Lechner was in one of the houses of the so-called ‘Railway colony’ (*Željezničarska kolonija*). It was a settlement comprising of standard family houses that were constructed by the State Railways Directorate for its workers and other staff between 1924 and 1928 in what at the time was the eastern suburb of the city. During the commencement of the settlement construction around 150 houses, primarily high single-storey houses, were arranged to form streets and each of the houses included a small decorative garden facing the street. Furthermore, each of the houses also had a bigger garden in the inner yard, which at the time was intended for economic use. The ground floor of the house comprised of a small entrance hall and a room facing the street, as well as a large kitchen with a door into the backyard. The internal wooden staircase in one direction provided access to the upper storey

1 MURAJ, Aleksandra. 2001. “Zdenka Lechner, Tradicijska kultura Slavonije, Baranje i Srijema, Hrvatsko društvo folklorista, Zagreb, 2000., 351. str.” *Narodna umjetnost* 38/2: 194-195.

2 MURAJ, Aleksandra. 2001. “Zdenka Lechner, Tradicijska kultura Slavonije, Baranje i Srijema, Hrvatsko društvo folklorista, Zagreb, 2000., 351. str.” *Narodna umjetnost* 38/2: 194-195.

to the loft, whilst in another direction it led into the basement with a pantry. In that romantic residence, which retained its original appearance back in the 1960's, with some minor annexes, Zdenka attributed immense importance to the gardens. She used to grow flowers and decorative shrubs there with lots of love, whilst the backyard, in addition to several fruit trees, also included beds of strawberries. She put all her effort into these gardens, with which she was delighted. It was well-known that she used to cast a glance at her garden first thing in the morning upon getting up in order to find out what had started blooming. She truly enjoyed the sight of each flower. Nevertheless, that did not prevent her from seeing off each of her visitors with a bouquet of flowers picked in her own garden. Another Zdenka's characteristic was cordial hospitality and her door was always open not only to her relatives, neighbours, colleagues, acquaintances, but also to a large number of story-tellers, whose stories she was very interested in and those who hosted her during her research stays and field work in Slavonija, Baranja and Srijem, who often visited her subsequently. Hence, I yet again confirmed by previous impression of her deep feelings for the 'common people'.

In addition to her professional interest in traditional culture, Zdenka showed an equal interest in artistic achievements, primarily in music and theatre arts. We spent several unforgettable holidays in Dubrovnik during the *Dubrovnik Summer Festival* (locally known as *Dubrovnik Summer Games*). We stayed in modest private houses, we had our meals in modest affordable restaurants, yet we attended theatrical performances or concerts, as well as any other events held at the time, every evening. Whilst we used to purchase best seats for theatre performances, we used to purchase the cheapest tickets for the concerts, especially those held at the Rector's Palace and we used to listen to the music sitting on stone stairs. Zdenka was inexhaustible and she enjoyed it full-heartedly, although some of the events used to start at midnight and lasted almost until the early hours in the morning. Moreover, in the morning we had to take a boat to the island of Lokrum for a swim in the sea, as indulging in that pleasure was also imperative.

She retained her lively disposition and different interests also in her old age. We met during the last several years of her life, not in a romantic house, but in a care home, she always listened attentively to my stories about exhibitions, primarily about ethnographic exhibitions, as well as about folklore festivals, recently published books and experiences gained during my journeys abroad. During the last years, every Tuesday at 9 o'clock a.m. we held telephone conversations and I strived to inform her about actualities of this type, as I was aware of how much she enjoyed it both with her heart and her mind. During our last meeting, several days before her 99th birthday, we

still evoked our Dubrovnik memories. She was already visibly exhausted, yet when we mentioned those events her tired eyes glistened, there was a moment of joy. And then she touched my hand and squeezed it weakly and that was the way we parted.

Aleksandra Muraj

