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DORMOUSE HUNTING AS PART OF SLOVENE NATIONAL IDENTITY

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The research deals with the changes in dormouse trapping in everyday life in Slovenia the past and present, and especially in the relation between man and dormouse. It is based on ethnological data of a material, social and intellectual character.

Key words: *Myoxus glis*, trapping, tradition, traps, collection, dormouse products, Slovenia.

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Istraživanje se bavi utjecajem koji je imalo lovljenje puhova na svagdanji život u Sloveniji nekoć i danas, posebno promjenama u odnosu koji se uspostavlja između čovjeka i puha. Ono polazi od etnoloških podataka materijalnog, društvenog i duhovnog značaja.

Ključne riječi: *Myoxus glis*, lov, običaji, stupice, zbirka, proizvodi od puha, Slovenija

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to provide an ethnological outline of the relationship between man and dormouse through dormouse hunting in Slovenia in the past and today. I shall talk about the edible dormouse (*Myoxus glis*), focusing my ethnological attention on the dormouse hunter and the dormouse hunting tradition in Slovenia.

What is understood by a dormouse hunter? What is his identity, or better what defines somebody as a dormouse hunter? These questions are dealt with in philosophy dealing with the identity of the dormouse hunter, with dormouse hunting as a form of being or rather existence through a certain historical, social and spiritual presence.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This paper is based on ethnological material and presents social and psychological viewpoints regarding the past and present nature of the dormouse hunting tradition in Slovenia as well as the relationship between man and dormouse. It is result of a study of museum and archival written material, sources, oral information, the literature on hunting and three years of ethnological field research in the rural regions of Loška dolina. This contribution also provides an overview of dormouse trapping as an economic activity up to the Second World War.

Dormouse trapping used to be the most typical kind of hunting for over two thirds of Slovenia: Inner and Lower Carniola, Styria and part of the Littoral region.

RESULTS

I will start with a historical discussion of the **psychological elements** of dormouse hunting as reflected in folk literature.

Among the rural population in 17th, 18th and 19th centuries a **myth about the devil** represented by the dormouse shepherd was widespread. The Devil, the dormouse shepherd, clicked, whistled and made a hullabaloo while chasing dormice through the woods. The famous historian VALVASOR (1689) was the first to describe dormouse hunting, still believing the devil was herding dormice. Even after Steinberg, Hacquet and Kordesh had found an explanation for the myth, that the clicking, whistling and hullabalooing was produced by an owl, even in 1840 the original myth was still deeply hold by simple people (KORDESCH, 1840). The myth was the basis for the novel of Josip JURČIČ: »An Autumn Night Among the Slovenian Dormouse Hunters«, published in 1865. It is interesting that the story was still alive after the second world war in the forests of Kočevsko. It is fascinating that even today the myth not only functions as a part of the collective memory of dormouse hunters but is also a typical and very popular Slovenian myth.

Returning to the myth I would like to comment on the analogy between the dormouse keeper – the Devil – and the god of shepherd cults – Pan, who expresses animal cunning. Is animal cunning also typical of the dormouse? Panic, which is derived from Pan, confuses the spirit and brings disquiet to the senses. Does this state of mind of dormouse hunters turn them away from the Devil, as is described by Valvasor? Is this the restless libido that according to medieval morality should be suppressed, or is it allowed to be transformed into a passion for hunting. The neoplatonic and Christian philosophers saw Pan as the synthesis of paganism. The mysterious clicking in this example foretells the death of the Great Pan, which at the same time also means the death of pagan gods. The myth brings us into contact with the elementary nature myth about the birth of Dionysus from Jupiter's thigh (CHEVALIER, 1994), which is as hollow as the tree hole where the dormouse lives. Could the dormouse be regarded as Dionysus and what are the roles of the Devil and the dormouse hunter?



Fig. 1. Valvasor's myth, 1689: Dormouse hunt; Devil chasing dormice. VALVASOR, J. W.: Die Ehre Dess Hertzogthums Crain. I/3, Laybach.

Maybe the myth could be explained if we knew the initial reasons for dormouse hunting; the attitude of people towards the dormouse and the symbolic meaning of the dormouse. The literature offers us no answers to these questions. It is interesting that my informants did not show much pity for the dormouse, but they do feel compassion when they are talking about deer, for example. We could say that people show an **ambivalent attitude** towards dormice. On one hand they suppose it to be bad, disgusting; on the other hand, they like its fur, admire its intelligence.

This discussion of the **ethnological material and the social aspect** of dormouse trapping may continue with some brief consideration of its nature and identity.

Dormouse hunting is **widespread** in Slovenia, and is typical of over two thirds of the country: Inner Carniola, Lower Carniola, Styria and a part of the Littoral region of Slovenia (Primorska).

»Bartholomew of England« in the middle of the 13th century (around 1240) was the **first** to **mention** dormouse hunting indirectly in an article »On the State of Things« describing the Slovenian regions: » People eat edible dormice even if they are very similar to mice. Their meat is tasty and greasy.«

Dormouse hunting is described extensively for the first time by VALVASOR in his book »Die Ehre des Herzoghtums Krain...« in 1689, and subsequently by HACQUET in 1801 (HACQUET, 1801–1808). The first drawing of dormouse hunting goes

back to 1758 when STEINBERG illustrated his »Die Gründliche Nachricht Von dem in dem Inner-Crain gelegenen Czirknitzer-See...«

The 19th century saw several more articles about dormouse hunting: by KORDESH 1839, HEINKO 1842, ERJAVEC 1870 and KOPRIVNIK 1886, as well JURČIČ (1865b). The 20th century brought numerous expert articles that complement our knowledge about the history of dormouse hunting (ŠVIC, 1926; KOS, 1928; MIŠIČ, 1939; LOŽAR, 1944; ŠUŠTERŠIČ, 1965; UMEK, 1970; NOVAK, 1960, 1974; MLAKAR, 1977; ŠUMRADA, 1977; ANONYMUS, 1972, 1979; BAŠ, 1984; ŠULER, 1985; KRYŠTUFEK, 1991).

Dormouse trapping directly depended on the **hunting right**, as serfs had to report dormouse trapping to feudal authorities, who gave them permission to trap in certain dormouse holes – polšine (UMEK, 1970). To get a hunting licence, bondsmen either had to give the proprietors a fixed number of dormice or to pay. We can find **taxes** put down in registers (KOS, 1954): in the land register in Senožeče 1460, Vipava 1499, in the Poljane and Bela Krajina register 1576, Kozje and Pilštajn land register in the 1588 and in the 1622 annual account of the Celje forest administration. Several authors, like Valvasor, Steinberg and Kordesh, mention the taxes paid by the trappers in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Even more, between the 16th and 18th centuries in the Pletenje and Kostanjevica demesnes a special court was established to intervene when serious conflicts arose. The court even had its name: »Dormouse suit – »Polšja pravda« (UMEK, 1970). It was not until March 7, 1849, that taxes for dormouse trapping were abolished. From then on, dormouse trapping was free of charge but after the second world war a close season was brought in; dormouse trapping was permitted from September 25 to November 15 (URADNI LIST, 1976). The hunting law of 1976 made dormouse trapping permissible for all citizens under conditions defined by the law (ŠULER, 1985).

Dormouse trapping is considered to be the most characteristic kind of hunting practised by the rural population. The main reasons for dormouse trapping were **economic** – the dormouse gives tasty meat, grease and nice fur. These are good reasons for an increase in the passion for the hunt. We could say that this inherited passion is the only element that has consistently given dormouse trapping its identity since ancient times.

In regions where dormouse hunting had a tradition, you can still find **local names** using attributes connected with this animal: Polhov Gradec, Polhovica, Polšnik, as well as surnames like Polh, Povh, Polšak, Pilih, Polšnik (BOJC, 1974; ANONYMUS, 1982). Dormouse in Slovenian is called »polh«.

I will literary translate some **expressions for dormouse hunting**, used in Slovenia: dormouse trapping, »go in dormice«, »go and make a look out for dormouse«, »to put traps in the fresh air«, etc.

For dormouse trappers, **knowledge of the territory** was of great importance. Trappers could tell whether an area was rich in dormice by the amount of beech mast-husks left under the trees.

Traditional dormouse trapping started some days before St. Michael's day (September 29) and lasted until St. Simon and Jude (October 28), or till the first snow. As spring dormouse fur is highly prized, some trappers used to trap during the spring as well (ŠUMRADA, 1977).

Until this century, dormouse trapping was limited to the **rural population**, but during the wars they were joined by **town-dwellers**, so today's dormouse trappers have different social and professional profiles.

Different **methods of dormouse trapping** are known: hollow tree trapping, flat stone trapping, trapping at dormouse holes (polšine) and trapping by traps in trees. Most probably, originally only hollow tree trapping and flat stone trapping were practised. These kinds of trapping have almost died out because hollows can only be found in old trees which unfortunately, due to excessive felling, are less and less common (ŠUMRADA, 1977). Flat stone trapping died out after the second world war. For trapping in front of dormouse holes several gadgets were used: the pail-box-barrel trap, the wired tunnel trap (sak). Today barrel traps and wired tunnel traps have fallen out of use because of their size and clumsiness.

There are several different traps for trapping in trees; the self-triggering trap or the bow-trap (samojstra) and dormouse trap-chest (skrinca, škatla) and box traps (single, double- toplarca, triple, quadruple, sixfold).

Self-triggering traps are an authentic peasant invention introduced in the 17th century at the latest in Inner or Lower Carniola. In the Dobrepolje region it was in use until the second world war (ŠUMRADA, 1977). Their names and structure suggest that the invention was inspired by the crossbow, a bow and arrow introduced in the 11th century (MAKAROVIČ, 1982). The single trap triggered by a bow is the oldest version. In the first part of the 19th century the bow of the self-triggering traps was replaced by a steel spring (ANONYMUS, 1979). Double, triple and quadruple traps were made with various small improvements. The last version of the self-triggering trap originates from the middle of this century; it is a trap without gates combined with the basic steel spring mousetrap mechanism (ANONYMUS, 1979).

The traps are usually made of beech, maple, lime or walnut wood. From the beginning of the 19th century, iron and steel traps have also been used (ŠUMRADA, 1977).

Trappers used to make traps by themselves. Today we can buy them at certain trapmakers, for trapping or as a souvenir.

The oldest traps showed carved **household signs** for marking ownership; these signs were later replaced by monograms. Today's chest traps are decorated with branded, carved, painted dormouse-images, names of teams and individuals and organisations. Many of the above mentioned traps are sold as gifts.

Dormouse **baits** differed according to place and individual trapper. Mostly, fresh or dry fruit was used: apple pieces, pears, plums, quinces or crab apples, carobs, walnut kernels, hazelnuts and acorns. The bait was scented with olive oil, cloves in oil, gin or grape brandy. A piece of bacon or cloth soaked in brandy also served as an effective bait (ŠUŠTERŠIČ, 1965).

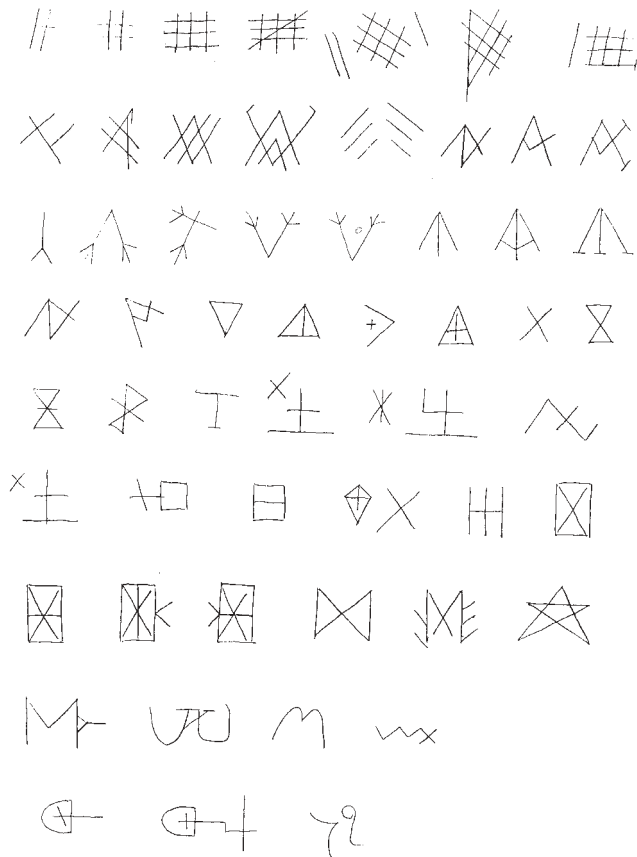


Fig. 2. Household signs from the Notranjska region

The methods of dormouse trapping have not essentially changed since the 16th century. Similarly, the trapping process has also been preserved.

Hollow tree trapping was performed during the daytime, while traps were used at night. Traps were set from afternoon to midnight, the prey being picked up in the morning. During night-trapping in a group, the game was picked up several times and the traps were reset. The first check was usually made at 7 p.m. It takes roughly two hours to check all of the traps. The average number of traps laid in one evening is 40–50 (ŠUMRADA, 1977). Before setting the traps, every trapper examines the territory and cuts some poles (sticks) for the chests (MRKUN, 1939). In order not to lose his way at night in the forest, he marks the access to the traps with pine tree branches. Trappers have a whole system of how to mark the traps. Usually they put branches of fir every half a meter and thus mark the traps in a circle (ŠUMRADA, 1977). After marking the path and setting the traps, they make a fire, around which many thrilling stories have been and still are told.



Fig. 3. Trapping in front of dormouse holes (polšina)



Fig. 4. Setting the trap on the branch of a high tree

The usual **equipment** of the dormouse hunters was: torches, rucksack with a little axe, knife, tinder and of course traps. In the 20th century torches – »fagla« (ŠUMRADA, 1977) were replaced by lamps, lanterns, small flashlights, candles and matches (ŠUŠTERŠIČ, 1965).

While hunting the hunters had very simple meals. They **took food with them** only if they planned to stay in the wood overnight. Before the 20th century they took with them potatoes, maize flour and a kettle; ham or brandy was supposed to be a luxury (PIRC, 1958). Nowadays the hunters eat the same food in the wood as they eat on other occasions, the only thing that shouldn't be missed is »something strong« (brandy).

The amount of game of the trappers depends on the quantity of beech mast. In good trapping seasons trappers caught from 200 – 400 dormice, some of them even much more. There are documents proving that hunters using bow traps could get up to 100 dormice per night, hunters using a chest in front of a dormouse hole up to 160 dormice per night (FABER, 1930). According to data from 1873 in Inner and Lower Carniola where dormouse hunting was most widespread, the annual catch was around 800,000 animals (ŠIVIC, 1926). Or another example: in 1889 in Kočevsko 100.000 dormice were caught or in 1926 well over 100.000 dormice in Kočevsko according to the report of Šivic. Yet these are rare exceptions. Between the two wars in Slovenian territories governed by the Italians the trappers were awarded 1 lira per dormouse tail (ŠUMRADA, 1977). There are reliable reports about the great numbers of dormice caught before the Second World War, but today we have no information about the game, because the hides are not for sale.



Fig. 5. Self-triggering trap (bow trap) – *samojstra*: the oldest type for trapping in trees

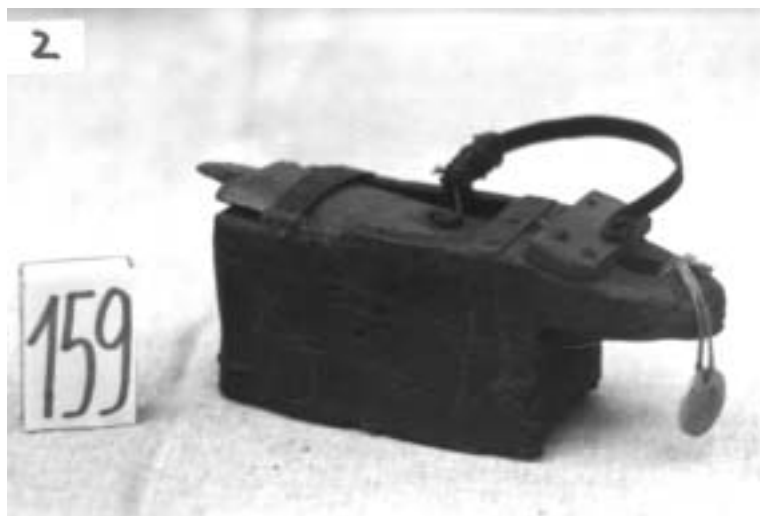


Fig. 6. Single trap with steel spring – skrinca for trapping in trees

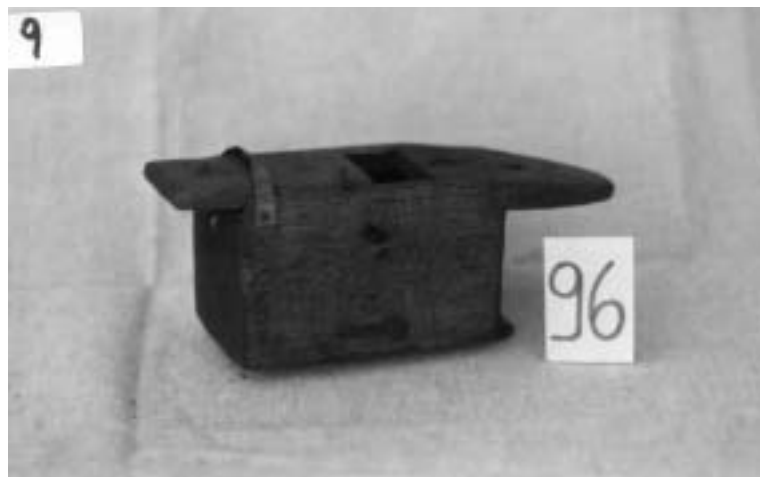


Fig. 7. A trap with carved – household signs

Since its meat is used as well as its grease and fur, the dormouse is, in an economic sense, fully exploited.

In the 19th century dormouse **meat** was a very important supplement in the nutrition of country people. Dormice were cooked, baked and roasted. They were eaten together with cabbage, carrot, turnip, rice and hard-boiled corn mush (DOLENC, 1921). In the 17th, 18th, 19th and sometimes in the 20th century dormouse

meat was also preserved by being salted and put in pots and barrels (HEINKO, 1824). Besides that, until the second world war they smoked dormouse like ham (ŠUMRADA, 1977). KORDESH (1839) said that the liver of the dormouse is a real delicacy. Today we still find dormouse meat delicious in soups with rice, noodles, dumplings or more traditionally with potato or buckwheat hard-boiled corn mush. Rice is good with young dormice caught in the first week of October (ŠUMRADA, 1977). Goulash and stew are very tasty. Today, dormouse meat is considered to be a speciality.

Dormouse fat has been used for medical purposes since the 16th century, not only for people but also for cattle (MIŠIČ, 1939). Dormouse fat is semi liquid, even at -36°C (ŠUMRADA, 1977). It has a confirmed healing effect in some diseases, yet its actual medicinal qualities remain largely unknown. About 10 fat dormice are needed to get half a liter of fat (MRKUN, 1939). Today, very few dormouse trappers render fat. Sales are common only in the tourist industry.

From the 17th to the 20th century dormouse trappers made quite good profits by **selling the hides**, because the prices were high and the export ran to most European countries (MRKUN, 1939). Since 1970 (ŠUMRADA, 1977) it has become difficult to sell the hides, so today people tan the skins just for their personal needs.

At the end of the 18th century the production of **dormouse fur hats** started and soon they became a part of men's winter costume. Until the early sixties of our century dormouse fur hats could often be found in towns (BAŠ, 1984). They were a typical element of Slovene dress. Today only a few tanners make dormouse fur hats for sale although the interest in it has recently increased. At Opkovi in Lož (MLAKAR, 1977) the 300 years old dormouse tradition is still preserved. Today the dormouse fur hat still has its ethnological value. It is an object of national identity, and is therefore especially appreciated by Slovenian emigrants. It is also interesting for tourists.

In the last decades, dormouse hunting in a traditional sense drastically decreased due to deforestation, migration of villagers to big cities and unstable economic policy. So dormouse hunting is losing its original **economic meaning**, but it is gaining a role in **social life**. **Preserving the dormouse tradition** is the main occupation of dormouse associations of which we have four in Slovenia today. Till 1990 the most active was the oldest, the 1972 established **Javornik Dormouse Association** which in 1976 set up the **Inner Carniola Dormouse Collection**, which first presented dormouse hunting in Slovenia. The dormouse trapping collection comprises 260 different dormouse traps and 30 objects related to dormouse trapping; it can be seen in at Snežnik Castle. Until 1993 this collection was under the supervision of the **Museum of Notranjsko**, which renovated it in 1995.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper was to give an outline of the past and present relations between dormouse and man (dormouse hunter) through an ethnological analysis. In particular I tried to introduce the following subjects:

- dormice in Slovene folk literature: an analysis of Valvasor's myth about the Devil as a shepherd herding a flock of dormice in Slovene folk literature,
- the first mention of dormouse hunting in written sources,
- dormouse hunting laws,
- dormouse hunting in the past and nowadays,
- the methods of dormouse trapping with different kinds of traps,
- the dormouse trappers' game,
- the usefulness of the dormouse and dormouse products: dormouse meat, fat, hide,
- the dormouse fur hat as a Slovenian curiosity,
- traditional dormouse hunting today,
- Javornik Dormouse Association and the Dormouse Trapping Collection.

Traditional dormouse hunting has lately become increasingly interesting as an affirmation of Slovene national identity. On the other hand, the expanding ecological consciousness raises questions about this kind of affirmation. Therefore it has become a topic for ethnological research, the basis of newly-founded societies and clubs, values and norms, popular knowledge, communications, a relevant element in leisure, identity and last but not least ecology.

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Sažetak

Lov na puhove kao dio slovenskog nacionalnog identiteta

M. Peršič

Lov na puhove (*Myoxus glis*) ima u Sloveniji dugu tradiciju. Najstarije podatke imamo iz 13. stoljeća. U prošlosti lov na puhove bio je isključivo iz gospodarskih razloga. Seljaci su ih lovili zbog mesa, krzna, masti, i kao izazov u međusobnom nadmetanju. Otprilike koncem 18. st. počeli su od njihova krzna izrađivati krzne kape koje su postale dijelom seljačke zimske odjeće, a danas su dio slovenske narodne nošnje.

U Notranjskoj lov na puha je još uvijek prisutan u svakodnevnom životu, iako danas ima uglavnom društvenu funkciju. Tako je poznata tradicionalna Noć puhova u Dvorcu na Snežniku.

Ovdje se spominju razne metode lova na puhove; neke su stare i do 600 godina. Neke se više ne rabe. Razni oblici stupica kućne izradbe svjedoče o velikoj domišljatosti običnih ljudi.

Summary

Dormouse hunting as part of Slovene national identity

M. Peršič

Dormouse (*Myoxus glis*) trapping has a long tradition in Slovenia. The oldest mention of it dates back to the 13th century. In the past, dormouse trapping was an exclusively economic activity. Peasants used to catch dormice for their meat, hide, fat and the challenge of hunting. Around the end of the 18th century they began making dormouse fur hats, which were to become part of the peasant's winter outfit and today are part of Slovene folk costume.

In Notranjsko dormouse trapping is still a feature of contemporary life, although today it has a merely social function. A testimony to this is the traditional Dormouse Night at Snežnik Castle.

Various methods of dormouse catching are presented; some of them having been used as long as 600 years, others are practised no longer. The many different types of home-made traps show us the extraordinary inventiveness of the simple local people.