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Disarming the Bandit - Pacho, Brigand of Hybe and the Attempt to Neutralize an Ethnic Symbol

Martin Ťapák's *Pacho, Brigand of Hybe* (*Pacho, hybský zbojník*, 1975)

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Despite its original aim as a country formed as an equal partnership between its two main Slavic ethnic groups, Czechoslovakia was often times beset with internal quarrels throughout the 20th century between the Czech and Slovak communities. However, such conflicts were not merely limited to discussions of self-rule and politics – they often entered the cultural arena as well. Slovak frustration with Czech chauvinism often boiled over in the realm of film, where Slovak themes (such as the folkloric and romantic celebration of rural life) were dismissed by Czech critics with, as director Stanislav Barabáš put it, a "kind of condescending paternalism towards Slovak cinema"[1]. In this charged atmosphere of often outright ethnic hostility, Martin Ťapák's 1975 film, *Pacho, Brigand of Hybe* remains a bit of an anomaly – a thoroughly Slovak film, which grapples with the problematic notions of ethnic identity by attempting to demystify a national and folkloric icon.

Pacho, Brigand of Hybe is, on the surface, a parody of the story of Slovakia's most famous outlaw son, Juraj Jánošík. Ťapák's film follows the eponymous Pacho (played by the prolific Jozef Kroner[2]), an ordinary Slovak returning from a long journey to find the cruel Hungarian Count Erdödy (played by another prolific icon of Slovak stage and cinema, Marián Labuda) mistreating his relatives and fellow Slovaks. Through dumb luck, good timing, and a prodigious talent for the consumption of hard alcohol, Pacho suddenly finds himself as the head of a band of outlaws, bent on plundering nobles and carousing their days

away. In *Pacho*'s cinematic world, all the tropes and cliches of folk legends manifest; drunken nobles travel with wagons full of Roma musicians, every activity threatens to break out into song and dance, and ethnic antipathy is elevated to comic extremes. Pacho's journey from singing wanderer to reluctant outlaw and his final transformation into a larger-than-life local legend serves not only as a comedic satire of the romantic adventure film, it also attempts to defang a troublesome ethnic myth – namely, that of Juraj Jánošík, one of the most beloved (and problematic) folk-heroes in the Slovak lands.

Jánošík, Template of Rebellion

It is impossible to talk about *Pacho, Brigand of Hybe*, without first discussing Juraj Jánošík, the archetypical Slovak folkhero whom the film so directly and consciously attempts to parody and "de-mystify"[3]. Much of Ťapák's film relies on the inherent knowledge of the Jánošík myth – a myth that, by 1975, had crystallized through countless theatrical retellings and 3 prominent cinematic adaptations. Although a discussion of the cinematic retellings of the Jánošík myth and their complex relationship to Slovak cinema culture, is much too broad for the scope of this essay, it is essential to note that the history of Slovak cinema has been heavily defined by this mythos. The 1921 feature film, *Jánošík* (the first commercial Slovak film on record), was produced by Slovak immigrants from Chicago. The 1935 film *Jánošík* by the Czech director Martin Frič made the Slovak actor Paľo Bielik into a bona-fide star and set records at the box office[4]. Finally, in 1961 and 1962 Bielik himself directed an epic two-part adaptation of *Jánošík*[5], in which *Pacho*'s director Martin Ťapák played a supporting role. By 1975, Jánošík had become a well-regarded Slovak cultural phenomenon in Czechoslovakia, despite opposition from some Czech and Marxist critics who saw him as culturally divisive.[6]

Of the historical bandit Juraj Jánošík, we know little[7]. With some degree of certainty we know he was born in the village of Terchová in the northwest of Slovakia, not far from the modern-day Polish and Czech borders, and through parish baptismal records, we can tentatively date his birth to 1687 or 1688[8]. According to recorded proceedings at his trial for banditry, we know that a teenaged Jánošík participated in the Hungarian separatist/anti-Habsburg rebellion of Rákóci for an unknown length of time before serving in the Habsburg army, possibly as a conscript or prisoner, where he eventually was employed as a prison guard. It is during this time he made the acquaintance of a Tomáš Uhorčík, the former leader of a brigand band and eventual comrade in arms. Following Uhorčík's release (or escape) Jánošík returned home to Terchová, where he began a short career as a highwayman. He was arrested once in the fall of 1712, only a year after becoming the leader of his band of brigands, and a second time a few months later. His loot, as cataloged at his trial was meager – small amounts of cash, noblewoman's dresses and wigs, and rolls of cloth – and, as far as we know, nothing was donated to the poor or

needy[9]. Following a well-documented trial in 1713, Jánošík admitted to banditry, was found guilty by the court of being an accomplice in the death of a priest during a robbery, and was sentenced to death by a most diabolical means of execution – a hook was to be threaded through his side and then he was to be hung until dead -, a sentence carried out almost immediately post-trial. The outlaw's death, not surprisingly became one of the most enduring visual symbols of Jánošík, the martyr, one that lingered on into the present day.

Mere decades after Jánošík's death, ballads and legends collected by amateur philologists and Slovak intellectuals reveal the almost total erasure of the historic figure, and the ascendance of Jánošík, the legend. While originally told as more of a cautionary tale in its earliest incarnation, the Jánošík mythos morphed through its spread and popularization into something else entirely. Juraj Jánošík was transformed from unsuccessful bandit and accessory to the death of a priest, to a swashbuckling Robin Hood figure, a former theological student throwing handfuls of stolen Hungarian gold to peasants, courteously sparing poor travelers and clergy, entertaining captives with his wit, and melting the hearts of local maidens with his legendary good looks. As celebrated in folk songs and poetry, Jánošík's death stopped the passage of time, with trees refusing to bloom in mourning[10]. This transformation from bandit to folk hero became a mass cultural phenomenon. As Martin Votruba writes:

> [Juraj Jánošík] is the local embodiment of the pervasive myth of a hero who takes from the rich and gives to the poor, and he had other quite universally idolized trappings, the ones that, for example, helped generate Hollywood's legendary rebel stars – he was good looking, single, made a stash of money, lived wild, and died young.[11]

Moreover, as the years rolled on following the death of the historical Juraj, other more Romantic trappings were added to the Jánošík myth by storytellers for audiences hungry for the exploits of a larger-than-life bandit – Jánošík had magical powers and gifts, he was capable of feats of great strength, and his birth was a supernatural event[12].

By the late 19th century, even Slovaks outside of the Kingdom of Hungary celebrated Juraj Jánošík as one of Slovakia's favorite sons, with retellings of the legend published as far afield as Pittsburgh[13]. The consumption of such published ballads, poems, and fairy tales inspired by the legend grew rapidly; by the beginning of the 20th century, Jánošík's status as a defender of Slovakia was solidified. No longer just a Robin Hood figure, Jánošík's magical connection with Slovakia and (by extension) Slovaks had transformed the bandit into an Arthurian protector in the public imagination. In one particular tradition, Jánošík's corpse was believed to lie uncorrupted in St. Martin's Cathedral until

his people needed his services as protector again, ready to defend his beloved land even in death[14]. Other movements tried to capitalize on Jánošík's status as a protector of the people in armed insurrection. Perhaps the most striking example is that of the Jánošík partisan brigade – a band of guerrilla fighters active in the Slovak National Uprising, who framed their struggle against the Fascist Slovak state in terms of the Jánošíkian tradition.

However, Jánošík's influence on Slovak cultural identity could often be problematic. Bandit heroes arose in the face of oppression by larger ethnicities or political powers and as such, were often seen as a bulwark of identity. As Graham Seal notes, such figures are created in social situations where an oppressed group sees "its sense of identity, as coded into its traditions, customs, and world view, is being outraged, ignored, or threatened."[15] The Jánošík myth, with its emphasis on anti-Hungarian prejudice and willful rebellion against any attempts at outside governance, was linked to Slovak culture's fervent belief that the ethnicity itself was constantly besieged by a rotating cast of more powerful groups bent on forcibly controlling and assimilating the Slovak ethnic group – Hungarians, Czechs, and (post-1968 especially) Soviets. In the case of Jánošík, then, it is no surprise that the bandit's status as a cultural icon often waxed in times of cultural and political upheaval in the Slovak lands – periods such as during the Magyarization and cultural repression of the mid-19th century, the halting first steps of Czechoslovakia in the 1920s, the ethnic tension of the 1930s, and the thawing of cultural controls in the early 1960s were fertile soil for the bandit. By 1975, Jánošík's deep connection to the Slovak countryside and his association with an often-quarrelsome desire for Slovak independence had once again become a problem in a nation where the "Slovak Question" – or Slovakia's status within Czechoslovakia – had proven to be an often insurmountable object to Czechoslovak unity.

Pacho, the Accidental Brigand

As Slovak film scholar Václav Macek notes, *Pacho, Brigand of Hybe* is at its heart an ironic enterprise, one designed to take a cherished national myth, that of Jánošík, and defang it by making the hero (and the process of creating a hero) one that is inherently farcical. Macek writes:

> The construction of the cinematic [*Pacho, Brigand of Hybe*'s] narrative generally draws on the familiar background of the national myth (popular folklore, the romantic idealism of the Šťúrovci[16], and also Bielik's film version of *Jánošík*), which form the foundation for parodic techniques and for demystification. At the same time, the film ironically depicts the birth of legends of the titanic hero in the hyperbolic optics of the folkloric

phantasy.[17]

Given the amount of tension surrounding Czech and Slovak relations in the 1960s and 1970s, such a decision to skewer a beloved Slovak cultural institution could be problematic. Slovak attachment to Jánošík was more than just that of a beloved folk-hero – he represented in many ways the last line of defense against larger, more powerful ethnic groups (such as Czechs or Hungarians) who had historically tried to absorb Slovaks. In times of crisis, Jánošík myths gain even more cultural relevance for Slovaks as both a symbol of their home territory and as an identity which remained unbowed and defiantly independent in the face of more powerful factions. As Pacho functions as a thinly-veiled analog for Jánošík, the satirization of Pacho's own motivations functions as an attempt to undermine Jánošík's moral authority.

Pacho's journey into the realm of brigandry, much like the mythical Jánošík, stems from a simple act of defiance against Hungarian authority. Shortly after Pacho's return to his home village, he chances across the often-drunk and cartoonishly cruel Count Erdödy whipping (quite unsuccessfully) a villager, Matej, who has decided to look for firewood instead of laboring in the noble's fields. Pacho's attempts to halt the beating are hindered by Matej's insistence on being beaten; he actively steals the whip back from Pacho, and Pacho spends much of his time wrestling with both his fellow villager and Erdödy in a slapstick routine. Such an act is a clear satire of the Jánošík legend, where a returning Juraj witnesses his aged father being beaten by Hungarians. The young Jánošík's righteous indignation at his father's mistreatment fuels his desire to act, leading to his eventual martyrdom on the end of a hook. However, whereas Jánošík's intervention is cast in terms of a classic opposition – the cruel Hungarian against a helpless Slovak – Pacho's is more complicated. Here Ťapák makes the Slovak Matej not only complicit in his own mistreatment, but comically enthusiastic about it, begging the incompetent tyrant to hit him again and even helpfully directing the count's fury back upon himself instead of the hapless bush upon which Erdödy was venting his spleen. This game between oppressor and oppressed sets the stage for much of *Pacho*'s subversion – unlike the Jánošík myth, where oppression is visited upon hapless Slovaks unfairly, the film treats Slovak oppression as a collaboration where Slovaks tend to participate in their own mistreatment willingly, or by adhering to prescribed roles within the context of bandit-noble relationships. Pacho's rebellion, if it can be termed as such, exists in the moment where he finally turns the whip upon the count, because it disrupts the agreed-upon dynamic of oppressor and oppressed, placing him outside of one particular social system and into another – that of the rebel.

This rebellion has its own dynamic, of course. One cannot possibly rebel in the Jánošík myth without becoming a bandit, and as the titular hero of the film soon discovers, these bandits have their own regulations and bylaws. Pacho's

rebellion is observed by groups of hidden bandits, who then attempt to coerce him into joining their band of marauders. Pacho, terrified of denying their request and altogether unwilling to step into his expected role as a *zbojník* (or highwayman), attempts to bluff his way out of joining, demanding to be made captain of the group with the expectation that he'll be turned down and let go. But Pacho's challenge is accepted, and through a series of lucky accidents, he not only defeats the group's previous commander, but convinces the entire assembly of bandits that he possesses magical powers. Again, Pacho's elevation to the status of bandit chief is not one of physical prowess or moral authority; rather, it is born of native superstition and happenstance, denying Pacho the divine favor and natural connection so important to the Jánošík myth. Pacho, as so often happens in the world, just happened to be in the right place at the right time.

Pacho, the Symbiotic Bandit

Unlike other Romantic bandits such as the English Robin Hood, Pacho does not originally steal from the rich as a means of combating oppression, but merely because he consciously feels he must play his role as a the leader of a brigand group acting in a symbiotic system to the fullest. As Pacho's aged father notes during his son's emotional homecoming following a successful raid on Erdödy's wagons: "Wherever there are noblemen, there too must be bandits!", a natural order in which both sides depend upon each other in order to survive. Without nobility, a bandit becomes a thief; furthermore, a bandit is a symbol that can only exist within an oppressed populace. To defeat the nobility would also destroy the heroic highway man, but the inverse is true as well – to celebrate the bandit, one must preserve the noble oppressor.

Indeed, Pacho often displays this symbiotic relationship during interactions with his adversaries, who despite the outlaw's predations, remain comically cordial in their interactions. In one notable scene, Pacho invites the Hungarian nobles, their wives, and their daughters to his hidden compound in the mountains. The invited nobles meet with Pacho, and politely introduce themselves as equals. Despite the noble's superficial animosity toward the bandit, they politely and excitedly discuss his interior decor, commenting on how comfortable his cavernous base is. Their stated purpose, of course, is to deferentially request that Pacho cease burning their castles and robbing their carriages, to which they offer large sums of money to buy his loyalty. Pacho, in turn, is genteel and hospitable; he serves his "honored guests" an excellent vintage of Tokai wine, inquires about the difficulty of their journey to his mountain home, and both brigand and noble talk politely about the joys of fresh mountain air and the ripening alpine strawberries in the meadow. Here, the line between rapacious bandit and noble becomes blurred – both sides share similar tastes (unlike the simple delights more often afforded bandits in legend), array themselves in finery, and have a rather mutual understanding of their situation as two

necessary components of the social system. Where Jánošík was often portrayed in legend as the Platonic embodiment of a morally and physically superior Romantic simplicity, Pacho is urban and indistinguishable from his adversaries.

The noblemen are not the only ones delighted by Pacho's ministrations. Wives and daughters gaze eagerly upon the bandit, subconsciously stroking the ears of cork hanging for storage in Pacho's cave. As the film progresses, the women eagerly carouse with the highwaymen and Pacho, seducing and being seduced by the bandits equally – paralleling myths of Jánošík's physical beauty and his effect on noblewoman and peasant girl alike. Even after their return to luxury, the countesses and princesses return home smitten with the bandits, singing bandit songs and dancing on top of the elegant furnishings in the castles. Naturally, the virile powers possessed by Pacho and his men have wide-ranging effects in the world of the film. Erdödy attempts to seduce his wife (who has become smitten with bandits and their masculine power) through fetishistic role play in the boudoir, where he appears in bandit garb, dancing Slovak folk dances while waving the traditional shepherd's axe[18], and threatens to ravish her to her obvious delight – failing only when Erdödy's lack of manly chest hair punctures the illusion. Pacho himself even becomes the object of desire for Empress Maria-Therese, who seeks his hand in marriage (a legitimization of the bandit as a member of the noble ecosystem). However, the fascination and sexual power inherent in bandit bodies in *Pacho* does not just underscore the connection between bandits and nobility, it also casts the fetishization of banditry in Slovak culture as something decadent and foreign. To long for a bandit is something only done by decadent nobility, not the honest peasants of the world.

Slovak-centrism and Pacho

For Ťapák, the love of Slovakia and intense connection to the country, which are so often viewed as heroic in the Jánošík myth, are also vulnerable targets in *Pacho*, where they are lampooned as small-minded concerns which spring from Slovak xenophobia and provincialism. While the legendary Jánošík was content with the limited glories of Slovakia, Pacho himself is a widely-traveled man, who has been "all the way to Constantinople… a place that's so far away you can't walk there in a year!", a claim that impresses the bandit's father but earns the ire of Pacho's brothers who see little value in traveling. This regional-centrism, itself a common internal critique among contemporary Czechs and some Slovaks, is a common trope within the film. The bandit, like Jánošík, should be content with their isolated communities. To travel, as Pacho did, is a betrayal of the homeland.

Even Pacho's own band lacks perspective and vision. After celebrating the destruction of Erdödy's chateau (in revenge for Erdödy putting a Slovak village to the torch for ruining his ball clothes), the brigands gather and talk of the

future. Pacho threatens the noble lords with further retribution, threatening to burn “every castle in the world!”, to which his band responds with incredulity and disbelief, as if they had never considered the possibility that there might be more castles in the world. These new frontiers of destruction intrigue the bandits. One bandit asks if they can burn the castle in Lehota (near Slovakia’s western border), another wonders if, perhaps, they can also set fire to Revúca, slightly to the east. Swept up in emotion, another bandit cries out that they “will set fire to the end of the world, even as far as Kežmarok!”, a city in Slovakia’s south. Although they can conceive of nothing more pleasant than burning every noble chateau and castle in the world, the bandit’s world is one of incredibly small boundaries, stretching only as far as the villages they know in the immediate area of the Slovak countryside. Even the possibility of a world existing beyond these demarcations is baffling to them; one bandit stoutly maintains that his grandmother told him that at the edge of the world (Kežmarok) exists a large fence and then nothing. Pacho’s travels to Constantinople are irrelevant, and not believed. If a larger world exists outside of Slovakia, Pacho’s men cannot conceive of it. Like Jánošík, these bandits can only exist within the confines of Slovakia.

Defeat and Mythmaking

The great scholar of bandit folk heroes, Eric J. Hobsbawm once noted that: “[The noble bandit] dies invariably and only through treason, since no decent member of the community would help the authorities against him”[19], and Pacho is no exception. As benefits any story about a heroic bandit, Pacho is eventually betrayed by the band’s former captain, who is tempted by a desire to regain his position as leader as the sizable reward offered for Pacho’s live capture. However despite this setback, Pacho’s true identity as the legendary Brigand of Hybe remains undiscovered due to a rather comic mismatch between a painting of Pacho (drawn from local rumor and closely resembling Jánošík) and actor Jozef Kroner’s short stature and rather homely features. Furthermore, Pacho’s attempts to take responsibility for his men and spare them their fate are completely ignored. Indeed, Pacho’s inability to measure up to the collective imaginings of a bandit hero leads to him being buried in the earth with only his head remaining visible as punishment for his presumption to declare himself the legendary Brigand of Hybe. Pacho’s defeated men are paraded through their home village en route to the royal prison in good spirits; they know in their hearts that Pacho will never be caught and moreover, they are now afforded the chance to fulfill the bandit’s ultimate and traditional destiny: a heroic suffering in jail or martyrdom in the marketplace. Adding to the farcical nature of the procession is a captured “Pacho” – a bandit who more closely resembles the fanciful descriptions of the outlaw – who wishes Pacho’s very confused mother good luck. This ersatz Pacho, it is implied, will eventually achieve the heroic end destined for his real analog.

Pacho's fate, however, is again an inversion of the Jánošík myth. Even before the advent of cinema, Jánošík's death was one of the favorite subjects of Slovak poets, thespians, and artists, ultimately becoming one of the most widely celebrated events in Slovak culture. The massive successes of cinematic adaptations of Jánošík further ritualized this event. Although minor variations exist between depictions of Jánošík's painful demise on the hook, many aspects remain consistent: Jánošík is marched to the gallows and looks longingly on the Slovak mountains. Then, in a feat of strength he breaks his chains and dances one final dance, spurns the mercies of his Hungarian captors (who wish to recruit him into the army), and in defiance, flings himself willingly on the hook, crying "As you have baked me, thus you shall eat me!", as the crowd looks on in sorrow[20]. In many versions, the bandit dies surrounded by recognizable symbols of the Slovak countryside, in particular, Slovakia's legendary mountains.

Pacho, however, is buried in the ground and forgotten about – metaphorically and functionally disarmed. As a talking head in the ground, he is reduced in stature and usurped by the false Pacho who is paraded around the village. A group of children find Pacho, who has been reduced to a plaything for the youths – "a head", bereft of identity and "forgotten about", to use Pacho's own words. While the body of Jánošík was, in legend and ballad, a sacred and incorruptible thing with its own mystical powers, Pacho's head is a children's toy: they yank on his hair, twist his head to and fro, and poke him in the face. Pacho's identity is even stolen by one of the boys, who proudly proclaims that he, himself, is Pacho the Brigand of Hybe. Pacho himself is just a head. Like Jánošík, Pacho's body and (inferred) death are intimately connected with the Slovak countryside – as Jánošík's spirit inhabits the mountains, Pacho himself is quite literally a part of the Slovak countryside. And since Pacho is unable to perform any feats of strength or dancing, as a last defiance before his martyrdom, he chooses the only available option for a head – he sings one last song.

A Delicate Balance

Martin Ťapák's *Pacho: Brigand of Hybe* functions not only as a comedic parody of an iconic national figure, but as an attempt to temper and disarm rising social tensions between Czechs and Slovaks through the demystification and satriziation of Slovakia's most enduring symbol of ethnic identity. The specter of Slovak nationalism had long been a problematic aspect for Czechoslovakia, one often fed by perceived cultural tendencies inherent in Slovaks which were supposedly absent in the Czech lands. As tensions in Slovakia rose during the 1960s, future Czechoslovak president Gustav Husák warned his fellow Slovaks to "moderate the somewhat fiery and wild tendencies which can offend the Czechs."[21] Jánošík's celebrated qualities – his legendary passion, his reputation as a lover, his intense living and romantic death – were precisely the

same “tendencies” that Husák warned against. The repeal of reforms and political repression that followed the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia only heightened Slovak antipathy towards external groups, which were frequently seen as oppressors in the same historical lineage as the Hungarian nobility.

The popularity of Jánošík in Slovak culture was a political and social quandary for Socialist cultural authorities in 1970s Czechoslovakia. On the one hand, Jánošík represented the hopes and identities of a large constituency of Slovaks in Czechoslovakia, who identified their own marginalization by more powerful political and ethnic groups with the legendary bandit’s struggle against Hungarian nobility. To ban or forbid Jánošík outright would have been difficult on a practical level, but would also have raised the possibility that the ethnic tensions between Slovaks and other residents of Czechoslovakia might become even more strained. On the other hand, Jánošík was an ideologically problematic hero: despite the legends of his service to the poor and oppressed, he was also a figure heavily associated with armed insurrection and Slovak independence – possibilities which were equally unpalatable to the Czechoslovak government and the Soviet Union at the time. Furthermore, Jánošík was also connected in the popular mind with anti-Hungarian sentiment, another ideologically problematic concern for the uniting workers of the world. Due to the bandit’s intimate connection with Slovak culture, the only way to combat the problems presented by Jánošík would be to undermine his worth as a symbol, indirectly. In this vein Martin Ťapák’s film functions on two fronts – one, to ridicule the process by which such problematic heroes are created and mythologized, and perhaps most importantly, to underscore the paradoxes inherent in the worship of such figures.