



# Hungarian Folktales

*The Art of Zsuzsanna Palkó*

Edited by Linda Dégh

Translated by Vera Kalm

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WORLD FOLKTALE LIBRARY—VOL. 2

Garland Reference Library of the Humanities—VOL. 1736

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Carl Lindahl, University of Houston

**Volume 1.** *Cajun and Creole Folktales: The French Oral Tradition of South Louisiana.* Collected, transcribed, translated, annotated, and introduced by Barry Jean Ancelet.

**Volume 2.** *Hungarian Folktales: The Art of Zsuzsanna Palkó.* Collected, transcribed, annotated, and introduced by Linda Dégh. Translated by Vera Kalm.

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*The Art of Zsuzsanna Palkó*

Collected, transcribed, annotated, and introduced by  
Linda Dégh  
Translated by Vera Kalm

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# Series Editor's Preface

There has been no more important relationship between folk artist and folklorist than that between Zsuzsanna Palkó and Linda Dégh. Extraordinarily humble and modest, Mrs. Palkó would probably have concealed her great narrative gifts from all but her village circle—if it had not been for Linda Dégh, whose years of fieldwork in Mrs. Palkó's village nurtured both a consummate body of scholarship and a very special friendship. Dégh's painstaking collection of Mrs. Palkó's tales attracted the admiration of the Hungarian-speaking world. In 1954 Mrs. Palkó was named Master of Folklore by the Hungarian government and summoned to Budapest to receive ceremonial recognition. The unlettered 74-year-old woman from Kakasd had become "Aunt Zsuzsi" to Linda Dégh—and was about to become one of the world's best known storytellers, through Dégh's work.

Mrs. Palkó would tell stories literally from sundown to sunup to wide-eyed listeners, but she had never yet visited a place where thousands fell asleep each night listening to radios. She had performed magical healing rituals (Dégh 1989:126-28), but she had never experienced the underground marvels of a subway ride. In her tales she had shown her listeners castles that stood on rooster's feet, but she herself had never seen a full-length mirror: "First she thought that her neighbor was coming to meet her, and then slowly she recognized herself" (Dégh 1989: 188).

Although her words had conjured up countless enchanted castles, Mrs. Palkó had never seen a modern city. Just as she would take an unfamiliar story like "Prince Sándor" (tale no. 12 in this collection) and transform it into her own personal masterpiece, she took on Budapest and remade it as a magic world. As a judge of character, Mrs. Palkó was acutely realistic (Dégh 1989: 204); she could make the most improbable incident seem real in a personal way. With similar artistry, she made Budapest an enchanted city in order to make it real. In Linda Dégh's unforgettable account of the peasant woman's entry into Budapest, a great artist calls upon her own verbal magic to make sense of a place she has never been before:

Her fantasy, which knew so well how to infuse life into a world never seen, was revived by reality. She arrived by night, by car, seeing the lights of the city ("It was as if the stars had come down from heaven to light my way; there must have been hundreds of thousands"). . . . Whenever a new view opened before her, she identified it with the concept she had of it in her mind: "This is the palace of the king;

in just such a one King Lajos lived.” “Just such a flower garden was the one owned by the King who cast out *I Don’t Know*.” “What a beautiful equestrian statue! Such a beautiful horse! Maybe the little prince owned such a one.” “You have a telephone like in the King’s Palace?” (Dégh 1989: 187-88)

Without Linda Dégh, Zsuzsanna Palkó probably would not have had the opportunity to turn Budapest into a magic kingdom. Vladimir Propp would recognize Linda Dégh as the donor who helped Mrs. Palkó cross the threshold to another world.

Yet, somehow, like the Man Who Had No Story (AT 2412B), Mrs. Palkó sent everything except her Székely tales to the world beyond Hungary. One of the greatest ironies conceivable to folklorists is a great storyteller known only through the words of others. Yet, beyond the Hungarian-speaking world, we know nearly everything about Mrs. Palkó but her stories. Linda Dégh’s loving and meticulous studies acquainted readers with Mrs. Palkó’s personal history, family relationships, work in and out of the house, moral and religious philosophy, traditional medical practices, reputation as a village wisewoman, and status as a master storyteller. Dégh’s *Folktales and Society* (1989), the most important study of traditional narrative yet published, devoted far more attention to Mrs. Palkó than to any other storyteller and made her a familiar figure among folklorists worldwide.

Yet Mrs. Palkó’s growing fame did not make it any easier for Linda Dégh to make the tales known. Through Dégh’s insistence, four of Mrs. Palkó’s tales were translated from Hungarian to German to accompany her study *Märchen, Erzähler, und Erzählgemeinschaft* (1962). When that landmark work was translated into English as *Folktales and Society* (1969a)—much to the disappointment of Linda Dégh and the thousands who have read the book—not one of Mrs. Palkó’s tales appeared with the text. The revised English-language edition of 1989 also lacked Mrs. Palkó’s stories.<sup>1</sup>

The present collection, published more than forty years after Zsuzsanna Palkó was named Master of Folklore and more than thirty years after her death, bears unimpeachable testimony for the central importance of story and presents compelling evidence that even folklorists must continually remind themselves of story’s worth.

Dégh’s research into Mrs. Palkó’s Székely community—which viewed storytelling as responding to and expressing a full range village life, performance settings, and individual personalities—radically refigured the ways in which folklorists view traditional tale-telling. American contextual studies of the late 1960s and the 1970s followed Dégh’s lead in emphasizing the circumstances of narration and the social roles of the tellers within their communities.

Yet, like folklore publishers, many of the narrative scholars who followed Dégh stressed the notion of context to the exclusion of the text, producing a number of articles and monographs that never threatened a theory with a tale. Folklorists seemed to want to know everything about storytelling except the stories.

In contrast, Linda Dégh’s scholarship has never allowed its readership to forget either the texts or their social properties and potentials. On two continents, she has

performed at least two lifetimes worth of work dedicated to demonstrating the interdependence of the tale and its surroundings. Whenever she has found theory straying too far from the facts, she has gently led us back to the stories, reminding us that they are a narrative scholar's reason for being.

A case in point occurred when Linda Dégh first came to the United States from her native Hungary to accept a professorship in folklore at Indiana University. She could well have consolidated her career as the world's leading expert in the contextual study of European traditional narrative, but instead she embarked on a new career as a specialist in American belief legend. When Dégh arrived at Indiana, the standard folklorist's judgment on American legendry was that, like American culture in general, it was rationalistic, shorn of supernatural traits, rooted in realism, distinctly nonmagical. Rather than simply accepting that opinion, Linda Dégh tested it at length. She and her students undertook one of the most intensive narrative fieldwork enterprises in the history of American folklore, documenting thousands of versions of numerous legend types focused on the supernatural. The incontrovertible evidence, published in the early volumes of the journal *Indiana Folklore*, refuted the scholarly stereotype of a fully rational American folk (see, for example, Dégh 1968, Dégh 1969b, Dégh 1980). Delight in, fear of, fascination with the supernatural pervade these texts and the explanations and attitudes of the tellers: American society is no stranger to nonrational attitudes. For those who would doubt, Linda Dégh listened to, collected, and published the stories, the ultimate proof of her claims.<sup>2</sup>

Since redefining American folk legend (see particularly Dégh 1971), Linda Dégh has produced a series of explorations into new and old manifestations of folklore, always focusing closely on the effects of a changing world upon folktales. Among her most recent works is a book titled *American Folklore and the Mass Media*, which examines märchen and legends in advertising as well as the ways in which oral folktales, storybook fairy tales, and the contemporary media represent women's careers (Dégh 1994). A late twentieth-century folklorist's texts are no longer exclusively oral, and Linda Dégh's most recent research finds folktale texts in the midst of television commercials and news items from *Time Magazine*—contexts far removed from the Székely village where Linda Dégh first met Zsuzsanna Palkó in 1948 and, lacking even the most primitive taperecorder, first set down Mrs. Palkó's words with pencil and paper, in shorthand.

But in 1994, as in 1948, Linda Dégh's greatest work comes not from the "texts" that she reads on TV screens and magazines, but from her intensive fieldwork, her skill as a listener and observer of storytellers. One of the chapters in her recent book examines the stories of an Indiana woman named Lisa Wells—a member of a Pentecostalist church community who recounts tales affirming her beliefs. Lisa Wells may at first seem to live a world apart from Mrs. Palkó. Yet it is interesting to note the similarities between the two—both are deeply religious women with great oral gifts; both became not merely the "informants," but rather the long-time friends of Linda Dégh. In both cases,

Linda Dégh spent years listening to her narrator friends before publishing their stories and her studies of them.

As far as Linda Dégh and world technology have come since her first fieldwork in Kakasd, she continues to return to the Hungarian village where she first met Zsuzsanna Palkó. There, she has found powerful affirmation of the value of her work as a folklorist: the two volumes of tales she collected there have become a village treasure, “widely read in Kakasd, not so much because of Mrs. Palkó, but because she was the voice of the storytelling tradition of the Andrásfalva Székelys” (1989: 292). If, until now, Linda Dégh has been unsuccessful in getting the world at large to hear Mrs. Palkó’s tales, she has succeeded brilliantly in a task of even greater importance: she has helped keep these tales alive for those who love them best and need them most, the community that created them. One of the happiest ironies in folklore studies is that of Linda Dégh’s role in Kakasd. She began by studying Mrs. Palkó, the guardian of a great oral tradition; but she has now succeeded Mrs. Palkó as guardian. Story remains central in Linda Dégh’s life, as she continues to influence the world as much with tales themselves as with her studies of them.

A major premise in Mrs. Palkó’s tales, as in Linda Dégh’s scholarship, is that tales do not lie. Some of the magnificent tales that follow end with a story within a story: after many dangerous adventures, a woman—like Fairy Ilona (tale no. 20)—returns home incognito, disguising her identity because she has been wrongly accused of crimes. A storytelling session begins, and the woman is invited to tell a tale; in the guise of fiction, she presents her own, true story. In growing astonishment, the listeners slowly recognize that this “made up” story is real; the truth is recognized and the long-suffering heroine is rewarded. Like these heroines, Mrs. Palkó put her most important life experiences into her stories—leaving no clear or useful distinction between autobiography and story, truth and fiction.<sup>3</sup>

Mrs. Palkó’s tales do not lie: they are everything that Linda Dégh told us they were, decades ago. Those who find them first here, retold in a new language, will ask themselves why they have had to wait so long. This remarkable collection, a gift to every English-speaking lover of stories, is also the long overdue reward of Zsuzsanna Palkó and her most avid listener.<sup>4</sup>

Carl Lindahl,  
General Editor,  
World Folktale Library

## Notes

1. Aside from an earlier translation of “The Serpent Prince” (Ortutay 1956), tale no.7 in this collection, the only tale of Mrs. Palkó’s available in English has been “Lazybones,” first published in Linda Dégh’s *Folktales of Hungary* (1965: 142-47, 319-20) and reprinted in Dorson’s *Folktales Told around the World* (1975:114-18).

2. Further information on Linda Dégh's career and scholarship can be found in the introduction to Burlakoff and Lindahl (1980: i-iii) and in the contributions of Grider (1979), Kish (1980), and Voigt (1980).

3. For discussions of the autobiographical nature of Mrs. Palkó's tales, see particularly Linda Dégh's introductory notes to tales no. 8, 19, and 35, below.

4. I thank the University of Houston for awarding me a Limited Grant in Aid to support editorial work on this series, and Katherine Oldmixon for her expert editing. Special thanks are due as well to Vera Kalm, whose extraordinary diligence and skills as a translator have brought these tales from one world to another with great vividness and power.

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Photograph by Andrew Vazsonyi

Zsuzsanna Palkó

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# Foreword

The thirty-five tales in this collection represent a selection from the repertoire of Mrs. Zsuzsánna Palkó, a Hungarian peasant woman from Kakasd, a village in the county of Tolna, not far from the Austrian and Slovenian borders. But this village was not her native land. Like the other residents of Kakasd and thirty-seven other surrounding villages in Tolna and Baranya counties, she was a new settler in the region. Like the others, she came from the multiethnic Bucovina province, annexed by Romania in 1918, after the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire. As a member of the Bucovina Székely subculture she was relocated to this region in southwest Hungary in the migration of 1946-1947.

Because of their isolation from the motherland, Bucovina Székelys preserved a unique, archaic Hungarian cultural tradition; therefore, soon after their arrival, the newcomers attracted the keen interest of folklorists and ethnologists. The opportunity arose to study the Székely settlers in the process of economic, social, and cultural adaptation to their new homeland, different in every respect from their native land. In the company of other folklorists, I myself first conducted fieldwork in Kakasd in 1948, beginning an almost lifelong association with its people. I began as a novice folklorist, an apprentice, who learned the trade through continued visits with the villagers of Kakasd. Each visit—those made during the first eleven years and those made later from 1981 to 1987, after a pause of seventeen years—brought new insights. As time passed, old generations succumbed and new generations emerged, posing new cultural enigmas and puzzles, showing the inexhaustible vitality of tradition and the futility of the scholarly illusion that one can gain full knowledge of a people even in a lifetime.

The settlers of Kakasd (pop. ca. 5,000), Roman Catholic natives of Andrásfalva (one of the five Bucovina Székely villages), came to inhabit fertile farmland. Herds of grazing cattle, rich pastures, well equipped farmhouses, full pantries, barns, and sheds awaited the new arrivals, but no resident was there to welcome them. The former occupants—descendants of migrant laborers from Germany who populated an area devastated during the 150 years of Turkish occupation—had settled here, in the eighteenth century, in what was later known as *Schwäbische Türkei* (Swabian Turkey), but were accused of collaborating with the Nazis during the Second World War and deported back to Germany. When the Székelys arrived, authorities distributed wealth among them according to family size, not according to their former economic standing in the Bucovina. They came almost emptyhanded, running through war zones between the German and the Russian fronts. Countless personal experience stories recount their

adventures; these tales are characterized by the famous Székely deadpan humor. Anna Sebestyén recalls a brief example: When the frightened, hungry, aimless wanderers were passing through West Hungary, villagers treated them to hot soup and potatoes, asking: “Where are you going, brother?” “Towards ruin!” “Where is that?” “Where we are going.”

As a Hungarian subculture, the Székely sustain a proud, historically shaped sense of ethnic identity. Their habitat—the valleys, plateaus and ranges of the southern Carpathian Mountains in Transylvania—was ceded to Romania in 1918. Yet the Székely’s Hungarian roots are extensive and well remembered. Originating in a nomadic tribe of cattle breeders, the Székelys became an important military contingent for the kings of Hungary during the Middle Ages. Earning privileges and land, their sib organization later developed a specific social order based on units called *széks* (sites), composed of six extended families divided into two branches. To defend their own land, they formed a military unit with its own rules, leaders, strategies, and uniforms. Under feudalism Székely society developed a land-holding aristocracy, while those with small or no holdings lost their ranks and freedom from taxation. Poor have-nots regressed to serfdom.

In the eighteenth century the Székelys supported uprisings against the Hapsburgs. In retaliation, Vienna dissolved their military organization and took away their privileges. But since the defense of the southern borders was crucial, the government ordered the formation of a 15,000-man Székely border guard, under the jurisdiction of the Austrian army. The Székelys resisted the recruiters. On the morning of January 6, 1764, military units stationed at the village Mádéfalva opened fire on the protesters, killing 200. Despite other economic factors, this incident remains in folk memory the sole cause of mass emigration from Székelyland (*Székelyföld*).

Many refugees fled to Moldavia, then under Turkish sovereignty, and established scattered villages on fertile riverbanks, near lush grazing grounds. Others eventually returned to Székelyland. Finally, in 1774, the Austrian government offered amnesty to the deserters, liberation from serfdom and free land to those who would settle the uninhabited Bucovina (North Moldavia), newly annexed from Turkey. About 800 Székely families settled in the five villages, named Fogadjisten (“God-Receive-Us”); Istensegits (“God Help Us”); Józseffalva (“Village of Joseph”, after Emperor Joseph the Second); Hadikfalva (after András Hadik, the Governor of Transylvania responsible for settling the deserters); and Andrásfalva (“Andrew Village”, after Hadik’s given name). Soon the settlers found themselves surrounded by other exiles: Germans, Romanians, Gypsies, Jews, Poles, Ukrainians. They all built their own communities and interacted with the other groups, exchanging goods, skills, and ideas, broadening their cultural knowledge and world views. Isolated from their homelands, expatriots of diverse countries preserved their archaic folk traditions while borrowing from each other and creating new forms of folkloric expression resulting from new experiences in the multilingual, multiethnic Bucovina. The Bucovina Székelys’ exposure to cultural diversity for more than two centuries is largely responsible for the richness and the peculiarities of

their exquisite oral art.

By the time the Székelys left the Bucovina, life had grown very difficult for most. The distribution of property determined the social structure. Due to economic decline and population growth, living conditions slowly deteriorated. My informants recalled that four well-to-do Andrásfalva farmers owned 60 to 80 acres, twenty families owned twelve, and thirty possessed eight. The majority, victims of crop failure and other calamities, lost their holdings and had to earn their living from sharecropping on the estates of the landed Moldavian aristocracy during the seven-month agricultural season. During the winter, they found other ways to complement their meager incomes. Men and women peddled goods, bartered produce with other ethnic groups, hauled timber, and sold dried fruits, cucumbers, and onions. Women made rugs to sell. Marketing, hauling, and working in lumber mills often took people back to the Transylvanian homeland, keeping a nostalgic attachment alive. Andrásfalva's poor district became increasingly crowded as more and more people found themselves unable to buy arable land.

Drought, famine, and cholera epidemics took their toll on the population and contributed to the success of the Hungarian government's resettlement action in 1883, which brought the exiles back to the motherland, to a site on the lower Danube gained by draining the river's floodplain. Four thousand people arrived and turned the wilderness into a human habitat. They built their villages and farms, but within four years they had lost everything to the flooding Danube. Penniless, they had to return to Andrásfalva and accept the charity of neighbors and relatives. Repeated attempts were made to return to the homelands, mainly to Transylvania, before the outbreak of World War I in 1914. Some of the resettlement sites remained viable in the early decades of the century; nevertheless, as early as 1906 many Székely left to seek their fortunes on the Canadian prairies.

After the war, conditions in Andrásfalva deteriorated further. In addition to suffering a general depression and shortages of basic necessities, Hungarians in the new Romanian state were relegated to minority status. No wonder that when Bucovina Germans were relocated to Germany during World War II, the Székelys accepted the Hungarian government's resettlement proposal. In 1941 inhabitants of the five Székely villages vacated their homes and moved with all their belongings to a beautiful fertile area in the Bácska, a multiethnic region incorporated into the newly created nation of Yugoslavia after World War I, but returned to Hungary by Hitler in 1939.

During World War II the Hungarian government settled the Székelys on the land of hostile Serbs; in the words of György Andrásfalvi, nephew of Zsuzsánna Palkó, "they settled us on the bear's back—the bear shook himself and shook us all loose." On October 8, 1944, the Bácska became a battlefield, and the Székelys had two hours to flee their villages with hastily packed belongings loaded on their wagons. The Székelys badly needed new homes, but they felt guilty about occupying the abandoned houses of German farmers in Kakasd. Furthermore, the Székelys feared that they would soon

have to run again.

The migrants from Andrásfalva adjusted to the new land in Kakasd under extremely difficult conditions. They had to learn new agricultural techniques, adjust to new Communist-style cooperative farming methods, and develop a family entrepreneurial system that incorporated cooperative farming, contract herding, raising pigs, and working in the nearby coalmines, the state farm, and an enamel factory. After initial mismanagement leading to crop failure and clashes with authorities over the harsh Communist ideological system, the Székelys learned to cope. Particularly after the mid-1960s, when liberalization of the agricultural system opened a free market economy, the Székelys became affluent. Moving from the old German houses, families built comfortable modern homes and developed technologically efficient farms. At the same time, they maintained their clannish, extended family ties and continued to distinguish themselves from non-Székelys. The features they see as markers of traditional Székely identity are taught as primary education to children at home and in early schooling; these same traits are also foregrounded in educating the general public about Székelys through staged cultural displays. Among the most cherished features are the archaic Bucovina Székely dialect, the elaborate Christmas mumming drama, the farewell lament for the dead, certain pieces of the traditional costume: woven rugs, embroidered towels, pillowcases displayed in the front rooms of Székely homes and, above all, storytelling.

Storytellers were always held in high esteem as artists, public entertainers, and performers of the magic tale, the most elaborate form of oral prose narration. I have collected many tales in Kakasd, from many people: men and women, young and old. Some were specialists in diverse tale genres; some original talents possessed large repertoires while others told only a few tales; some narrated only occasionally; others told stories at public ceremonies of various kinds. I was lucky to arrive at the right time to capture the exceptional art of Zsuzsánna Palkó as it evolved and received center stage during the last fifteen years of her life.

I was able to trace storytelling as far back as eighty years prior to the Kakasd settlement; throughout this period narrative art was a practice highly esteemed among the Bucovina Székelys. Almost everyone was able to recite a tale or list a few favorites and cite cherished narrators; yet villagers unanimously pointed to the district of Andrásfalva, where the poor resided, as the hotbed of the magic tale. The poor families, who travelled in boxcars to the Moldavian estates and spent seven months together as a work team, lived together in barracks. After long working hours, they cooked their evening meal and then shared leisure until they fell asleep. There could not have been a better diversion from back-breaking agricultural labor than telling folktales: stories leading them away from harsh reality to a world that miraculously fulfilled otherwise impossible wishes. Traditional peasantry developed the folktale into a unique oral prose genre fulfilling the need for aesthetic delight. What literary fiction offers to reading, movie- and theater-going, TV-watching urbanites, the orally performed folktale offers to small groups of illiterate and semiliterate people isolated from the technology of mass

communication. For the Andrásfalva poor, as for other agricultural laborers elsewhere in preindustrial Europe, the sharecropper's work schedule offered the opportunity to learn and develop storytelling skills, trade stories, compete, and entertain fellow workers at night, after the evening meal. While telling a story, an expert narrator would call out "soup" from time to time to see if everyone was still alert and listening. If the answer "bone" came from many voices, the story continued, but if the answers became fewer and the audience seemed to be lulled to sleep, the teller stopped, only to continue next night, after finding out at what point in the story the audience fell asleep. The storytellers were all men, addressing an audience of both men and women, but women were not accepted as public entertainers: their specialized narrative art was confined to the nursery. Sometimes children managed to sneak in unnoticed, but they were not welcome at this serious adult entertainment, partly because it was not "for their ears", partly because children, unable to sit still for long, disturbed the fun of the adults.

I have traced the careers of many good storytellers of the past. Their memory was very much alive during the first period of my fieldwork in Kakasd. I could even trace repertoires because stories were handed down in families and considerably altered by the individual taste of the recipients. I was able to identify the community corpus of the Székelys of Andrásfalva and Kakasd, living in active use, in latency, or recently revived. In addition to my texts published in 1955 and 1960 and my unpublished recordings made from 1981 to 1987, there is a third source that fills the gaps and completes the body of community heritage: the collection of Ádám Sebestyén. These three complementary sources document fully the intricacies of the storytelling network, as well as the creativity and variability of storytellers over time; there is much to be studied by future generations of scholars. Sebestyén, a Székely farmer, was born in Andrásfalva in 1921. Although he had only two years' grade-school education, he followed his father as lay church singer and master of rituals at weddings and funerals. In his dedication to Székely distinctiveness, he became the chronicler of his people's history and recorder of oral poetic tradition. His systematic and extraordinarily valuable collection was published in four volumes (1979, 1981, 1983 and 1987) containing 466 texts from 50 narrators.

This representative material reveals the lasting impact of a storytelling dynasty: the Zaicz family. József Zaicz, Mrs. Palkó's father, was a farm laborer who worked on the land of wealthy Andrásfalva farmers and told stories to his employers. He often boasted that he knew 365 stories, one for every day of the year. His son János was equally well-liked; even when crippled by old age, he was welcomed to a good meal in exchange for his delicious stories. He was more than just a storyteller. Through the years, his magic-shamanistic powers and knowledge were often mentioned in conversations. His powers are cited even today, when modern technological inventions are mentioned. János was a wise man, a prophet: a visionary who could see into the future. He believed in the Revelations of St. John and continually drew parallels between biblical prophecies and recent events. People believed that many of János's predictions came true, such as that

people would engage in wars causing mass destruction; that “iron birds” (airplanes) would ply the skies and “iron horses” (cars) would race on the streets; and that see-through glass (nylon) dresses would be invented. People still believe that other of János’s predictions are bound to be fulfilled, and that in the end the earth will perish by fire. János was an avid reader and an eloquent speaker, respected by educated villagers. At wakes, he led the rosary and the singing of hymns. József Zaicz’s grandson, György Zaicz—a small, hunchbacked man whose pride in his ancestral village led him to change his family name to Andrásfalvi (from Andrásfalva)—inherited his grandfather’s talent for telling stories. György was the only male member of the Zaicz family of Andrásfalva raconteurs whom I knew.

Mrs. Palkó, daughter of József, knew all the tales. She heard them throughout her life but did not tell them publicly until she was nearly 70 years old. She was a plain, modest woman, dressed always in black, wearing a black headsquare; yet her blue eyes sparkled from her wrinkled face. She never learned to read and write, she never went to school, but she helped raise her younger sisters and brothers. As a woman, she could listen to the tales, but she had no opportunity to capture an audience. Her rise to recognition could happen only under extraordinary conditions. When the Székelys settled in Kakasd the social hierarchy of old Andrásfalva collapsed. Prestigious rich families lost their status with the new distribution of the land. The poor people were singing: “Thank God, the world has turned; from poor people, big farmers have grown.” Public storytelling, previously confined to the poor district of Andrásfalva, now traveled to the most prominent social occasion: the wake.

It was an essential element of respect for the dead that family members, neighbors, and friends gather in the house of the deceased and spend the night with the body before burial. Storytelling was a major event; the narrator’s task was to keep all the mourners respectfully awake from dusk till next morning’s dawn. Wakes of important people were highlighted by the performances of the most noted storytellers; for children and young people, however, anyone could be asked to tell tales. At the time of the settlement, however, none of the Bucovina greats were functional. Márton László, author of *The Book of the Dead*, settled in another community and died in 1949; János Zaicz was ill, unable to speak; he died the same year. It was time for Zsuzsánna Zaicz, the daughter of József Zaicz, to assume her father’s role.

She was born in 1880, the third of ten children. When she was one year old, the family moved to the settlement on the lower Danube; six years later they lost everything to the flooding Danube and returned to continue seasonal work in Moldavia. When she was eight, she started to work in the sugar beet fields. After turning thirteen she worked in the households of well-to-do families in the country and in the nearby city, taking care of children, cleaning house and helping in the kitchen. She also worked harvesting wheat and rye at the threshing machine and serving clients at the general store. She could not expect a dowry from her parents; she had to provide her own. At eighteen she married István Dobondi, who died of tuberculosis after three years of

marriage; their two children also died within one year. Five years later she married József Palkó, the foreman of a sharecropping band whom she met during seasonal work. After a good life with her, raising eleven children, József died in 1927.

Life became a struggle for the widow, and she was determined to win. She worked wherever she could. Like a man, she got into the horse-drawn wagon, hauled wood and a variety of goods which she sold or traded. She accepted day labor, went hacking, wove runners, hired out for spinning. As her children came of age, she took her older sons to help her on errands. When the family moved from Andrásfalva to the Bácska in 1941, the children went ahead with their possessions while she stayed on to sell the house at a good price. In Kakasd, she moved in with a daughter's family. That daughter died a year later, so she took up residency with her oldest son's wife, but moved out again when he did not return from the war, "so that the young widow could get a chance to remarry."



Linda Dégh dressed in the traditional native costume in 1986.

At the time I met Mrs. Palkó, only four of her children were still alive. Erzsi Fábíán, her sickly youngest daughter, needed her most. The Fábíán family worked nine acres; with five young children—aged 12, 8, 6, 3 and nine months—there was much to

do and Mrs. Palkó's was the greater share. She did all the cooking, cleaning, and laundry; she took care of the cow, the pigs and the poultry; she cut wood and hay; she took on herself all the responsibilities she listed as woman's work in her tale "Peti and Boris" (number 28, below). I never saw her idle or resting, even while she was telling a story. Sitting on the low stool in front of the iron stove, she fixed her eyes on the pans so as not to burn the food that was cooking; she wiped the children's noses and washed their hands. Telling her tale, she would hold one child on her lap while rocking the baby in the cradle. She was always smiling, cheerful; she had a way with children.

In the tiny, crowded, steamy kitchen the children were quiet, well behaved, polite, governed by their grandmother's calm words and many tales. These children knew all her tales; it was their privilege to remind Grandmother of what she had not told me yet. I usually came in the evening, after dinner, when I did not disturb the family's work schedule because it was now time to relax. Erzsi sat on one of the two beds, mending socks or embroidering shirts; her husband Antal sat on the other bed with male visitors. Visiting women brought their low stools and distaffs; while listening they would spin or knit. There was no electricity yet available in the section of the village where the Fábians lived. I sat at a small table with the only tiny gaslight on it, barely sufficient for taking notes and operating the battery-run tape recorder that was an extra sensation, drawing a curious audience—everyone wanted to hear his or her own voice emerge from the machine. A number of ambitious village children begged for the privilege of carrying the tape recorder for me.

Mrs. Palkó left her home only if her three daughters-in-law needed help with the laundry, pig-slaughtering, or major housecleaning. Her hands were too full with running the Fábian household; she could do no more for her own pleasure than attend church services, funerals, and wakes, as is expected of old women, close to eternity. She was deeply religious, at peace with the world.

As a storyteller, she was modest, unlike the men who would usually boast and exaggerate their knowledge of tales and claim to have invented them. She never claimed authorship but always made reference to her source. Mrs. Palkó did not see herself as a great artist. When she was awarded the distinguished title, Master of Folk Arts, by the Hungarian Minister of Culture in 1954, she was surprised. "I did not deserve this," she said at the ceremony, "my father and my brother told stories all their lives and they did not get any recognition."

Aunt Zsuzsi's repertoire numbered 74 stories: 45 magic tales, 19 jokes and anecdotes and ten stories belonging to diverse genres. Among known storytellers there are many, men and women alike, whose repertoires greatly exceed this number; many told more than a hundred tales and some knew as many as 300 and even 500 (Farágó 1971). Nevertheless, her artistic embellishment of content and style, her thematic originality, her way of blending experienced reality and poetic fantasy mark her as one of the greatest known traditional storytellers. What makes her narration particularly attractive is its variability. She specializes in magic tales, elaborates the plots meticulously in di-

verse ways, characterizing her actors and detailing situations without stagnating or making repetitions dull. She has many voices: she takes the women's side, pouring out her own feelings, but she is no less convincing as she pursues the dangerous journey of the male hero. She accompanies her stories with commentaries that reveal personal beliefs, opinions, personal positions concerning the order of the world and how it should be. Her sense of humor emerges in her anecdotes, particularly those that criticize the objectionable behavior of girls, young women, and men. When talking about bodily functions, she sometimes uses what urbanites would view as four-letter words. Yet her audience did not consider such terminology coarse in any way. Her speech reflects the typical usage of Hungarian peasant dialects, which lack refined alternatives. Actually, she disliked vulgarities and the obscene jokes popular at older women's work parties and men's gathering at the "father's store" (the pub). I saw her once send a young man away after he came to the door directly from the pub, visibly drunk, and began telling a spicy anecdote.

Aunt Zsuzsi died in 1964, at the age of 84, but her tales, now in print, are continually nurtured by posterity. For the Kakasd Székelys folktales are identity markers, sources of great pride; narrators take great pains to preserve the indigenous archaic dialects of the ancestors. Mrs. Palkó's language is consciously preserved by today's star narrator, Mrs. Mária Fábián, a nurse in the Kakasd kindergarten, who teaches her preschool wards how to tell tales in the time-honored fashion by preserving Székely terms and gleaned "foreign" (Hungarian) words from the tale (Kovács 1980).

It has been difficult to choose only 35 tales from Mrs. Palkó's extensive repertoire. Because her tales are of consistently high quality, the major principle of selection is variety. The stories that follow present a representative breadth of genre: women's tales, hero tales, jokes, legends, pious tales, and realistic tales. A second principle is distinctiveness: I have favored characteristically Hungarian tales and left out those which vary little in plot or subject from tales well known internationally. For example, Mrs. Palkó's "Rupcsen-Hencsen" is very similar to—and probably derived from—the Grimm Brothers' *Rumpelstilzchen* (AT 500); and "Pihári" is derived from a standard book-tale treatment of "The Youth Who Wanted To Learn What Fear Is" (AT 326); in spite of their excellence, these two tales were omitted in order to make way for such uniquely powerful masterpieces as "The Twelve Robbers" (tale no. 19, below) and "Margit" (no. 35).

So much should suffice to introduce readers of English to the cultural background of Kakasd and to make the following selection of Aunt Zsuzsa's stories enjoyable reading. A headnote prefaces each tale, describing its place in Hungarian and Western traditions, providing specific cultural information, and commenting on Mrs. Palkó's unique narrative touches. A glossary at the back of the book explains unfamiliar concepts, terms, names and sayings and presents a catalogue of formulaic phrases.

If oral tales are by nature international—traveling easily and naturally across linguistic borders—literary translation is always a problematic venture. Vera Kalm's translation, however, is remarkably smooth, preserving the spirit of the original insofar as possible.

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# A Note on the Texts

Each of the tales is preceded by a headnote provided by Linda Dégh to place the story in its Hungarian and international contexts, as well as to explain terms and situations unfamiliar to non-Hungarian readers. The notes contain some abbreviated scholarly references; the full citations are found on pp. xxi–xxii of the foreword.

Within the tales themselves, certain words and phrases are italicized: for example, *dog-headed Tatars*, *shako*, *their eyes popped out*. Italics refer readers to the glossary provided by Linda Dégh on pages 371–79, below, where the special significance of each term is explained.

“The Twelve Robbers” (tale no. 19) ends with a complex tale-within-a-tale told by the son of the heroine. In order to avoid overly complex punctuation and to set the embedded tale apart from the rest of the narrative, the boy’s retelling is rendered in italics.

In six of the tales—nos. 2, 6, 12, 15, 18, and 20—Linda Dégh recorded not only the words of Zsuzsanna Palkó, but also comments from the listeners. Mrs. Palkó clearly responded to some of these comments as she proceeded with her storytelling. In this translation, listener comments are rendered in bold type. For example,

**[Listeners:] I’d have snuffed out that girl’s life!**

**They were really heathens.**

Mrs. Palkó’s responses to her listeners, as well as her asides to the audience, are placed in parentheses; for example, after this audience comment—

**[Listener:] He didn’t know about his wife’s illicit dealings?**

—Mrs. Palkó’s response is rendered

(No, he didn’t know about it.)

## From the translator

As there is no cross-cultural equivalent of the Bucovina Székely dialect in which Mrs. Palkó’s tales were narrated and transcribed, I had no choice but to offer them in the English vernacular. While I attempted to retain the “spoken” quality of the tales, avoiding embellishments, I found that compromises, especially in grammar, were inevitable to make the texts readable. Moreover, as the glossary also attests, some expressions defied transference into another context, another language. For instance, in tale no. 25, “The Wager of the Two Comrades,” the terms “friend,” “pal,” “comrade,” “neighbor,”

variously used to render *koma* (masculine) and *komaasszony* (feminine)—do not capture the quality of the “elective kinship” these words represent in a traditional Hungarian village community. Above all I have tried throughout to preserve the distinctive rhythms and patterns of the narrator’s speech. Mrs. Palkó often used long, complex sentences, stringing together many phrases. These proved difficult to punctuate. The series editor agreed, however, to use dashes—instead of the commas of the original transcriptions—to set apart asides, false starts, and sentence fragments, to allow the voice of this master storyteller shine through.

—Vera Kalm

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# The Tales

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# 1. I Don't Know

AT 532 (*I Don't Know*); a complex combination of elements of 314, 510A, 530, and 532, particularly widespread in Central and East Europe. The Hungarian subtype, MNK 532 (*Nemtudomka*), lists 34 variants, some identified as "Male Cinderella" because of the close parallel with episode III of 510A (*Cinderella*).

Tape-recorded in 1949 at the home of the narrator. It was one of those cold winter evenings when a few neighbors came over to listen to her tales. It was usually one of her grandchildren who asked for a particular story, and if she was in the right mood for that one, she began to talk, sitting next to the cradle and occasionally rocking the baby with her foot. She learned the story from her godfather, the farmer Mátyás Mátyás, for whom she worked when she was young. "We don't want to be bored," he would tell her while she was hacking beets, "I shall tell a story if you listen." In the course of time, this tale became one of the most popular pieces that she told at wakes, entertaining mourners at the vigil, during which attendance was obligatory from 6 p.m. until the morning bell-ringing. The need for a long story made this extraordinary narrator expand her godfather's original version and display her unique creativity. Six years after Mrs. Ambrus Jordáki's wake, villagers still recalled Aunt Zsuzsa's poignant performance on that occasion.

The original was a retelling of the five-page storybook version of folklorist and writer Elek Benedek (1859-1929). Only the title of the booktale—"Timberland Castle"—as *I Don't Know's* ambiguous reference to his residence, remained unchanged.

This was the longest and most elaborate tale I recorded from Mrs. Palkó. Even this lengthy telling cannot be called "complete," as episodes and motifs were borrowed from other tale types and the threefold repetition of events is not consistent; nevertheless, it is representative of her superb storytelling art. Her performance is characterized by colorful, artful use of language and style; masterful character descriptions; carefully depicted sentences and mental dispositions; elaborate fast-breaking dramatic dialogues and elaborate details constructed through meticulous description of landscapes, environments, and physical conditions. She often stops or slows down the tempo of events to explain and interpret, and prepare her audience for what is forthcoming. For her the tale is not a cool, objective outsider's account. Deeply committed, she lives in the tale, identifies with her heroes, suffers with them through their ordeals—as if she herself would try to find words of consolation for the steward, as if she would teach *I Don't Know* the chores of the kitchen help. Her narration is realistic, mirroring experiences of her personal life, yet she keeps the magic world of the tale intact. Like other expert storytellers, Mrs. Palkó knows that the mingled presence of reality and fantasy is essential to magic tales. In her stories, the actors act according to the tale logic; the flow of events is governed by the *märchen's* world view, and style and form utilize the folktale's vocabulary and inventory of formulas. Mrs.

Palkó frequently uses the same words, sayings, and formulas describing identical situations in diverse tales as, for example: "We are not born all at the same time and shall not die at the same time" (also in "The Sky-High Tree" and "The Princess" in this collection, as well as in her untranslated tale, "The Flea Princess"); "when the others eat oats, then he gets hay" (also in "The Sky-High Tree," below, and "Ej Haj," untranslated). But her resort to formulaic vocabulary does not make her prose repetitious, or dull; on the contrary, it gives her style a specific rhythm and flavor as documented in her special treatment of the following episodes: 1) the consolation of the widowed king; declaration of war and the king's departure; the steward's gradual change of heart; 2) I Don't Know and the soldiers in the stable; 3) the magic horse instructing I Don't Know; 4) descriptions of the city, people on the street, the royal family, and the princesses; 5) the portrayal of the cook; 6) the mockery of the brothers-in-law; and 7) description of the splendor and parade as the young couple enter the royal palace.

Once upon a time, beyond seven times seven lands, there lived a king and a queen and they had a beautiful little son. The boy wasn't more than four. He was four years old. They loved him so dearly that they found all their joy in the child. He was very lovely, with a head of golden locks. They delighted in him but their happiness didn't last long for the queen fell ill and died. The child became an *orphan*. Oh, how grief-stricken the king was! He wept bitterly night and day. He couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, all he ever did was weep. He just couldn't control himself. There was a beautiful statue of the queen in the palace. Every single day the king went to kneel before it to pray for her soul but he couldn't pray for all the weeping and sobbing. He was overcome with tears all the time.

The king had a steward whom he had always considered to be very, very fair-minded. The steward visited him every day for he knew that he would always find the king weeping. He went to console him:

"Your Royal Highness, why are you crying so much? Surely you know that *we were not all born at the same time and that we cannot die at the same time*. So accept the will of God, who let her live this long and has now let her die. Such is the order of things. Your Majesty will wed again, take another wife, and go on living. So why keep crying so much?"

And so he tried to comfort him day after day, but the king just continued grieving for his wife. He would never find a woman as beautiful and as good as his first wife was, he said. Well, one day, when he was once again in tears, crying until his heart nearly broke, the steward came to see him and said:

"Great king, can't you compose yourself—do you want to destroy yourself too? And who will look after the little boy if he doesn't even have a father? You may want to die, so deep is your sorrow, but have pity on your small son!"

"Well, if it has to be, it has to be," he said, "I have to accept my fate for I see that I can't get her to come back no matter how much I cry, or even if I kill myself."

"I believe," said the steward, "that one can't forget, for he who truly loves his

wife has trouble forgetting. Just accept that *we don't come into this world together and we don't leave it together!*"

Well now, the king asked that the steward should come to see him more often to reassure him, for when he was alone he kept remembering his wife and was always weeping. So the steward visited the king more frequently and consoled him so he wouldn't go on crying forever.

Now then, the boy could have been about six years old. He had grown well and become unusually tall. People might have thought the child was ten, he had grown and developed so beautifully.

One day a courier arrived, bringing a letter, a letter with a seal affixed to it—and handed it to the king. The king accepted it, looked it over and, God Almighty, he found that he was summoned to war. They were warning that the country was about to be invaded by the *Tatars*. The courier said that the king should muster his troops and if he wanted to save his country, he should confront the enemy. If he didn't, they would invade and take away his country.

Well, the king wasn't as sorry for his country or for anything else, as he was for having to take leave of his young son. Most of all he was worried that the boy would have neither a mother nor a father. What would become of the child if he were to lose his life? In those days kings too had to do battle, not like nowadays when only soldiers, officers and noblemen do—the country's "greats" don't go to war. Then, to be sure, kings had to take up arms.

For a while the king was in deep thought.

Then he said: "My heart is breaking for my little boy."

And the steward said: "No, it isn't, no, it isn't breaking, why should it? No harm will come to him."

"To whom can I entrust him? Who would be as good to him as I was," said the king. "Look, steward, I know you as being the most faithful to me, you were the one who consoled me, so I believe you will not treat the boy badly if I place him in your care."

"I'll treat him as if he were my own," said the steward.

It happened that the steward's son was as old as the king's. They were the same age.

"Well, mine is going to school, they can go together. Or, better still," he said, "I'll get a tutor to come to the palace to teach him. I'll not let him go to school. He'll get a good education while Your Majesty is away. Don't worry about the boy," he said, "he'll not have a bad life here, with me. I'll treat him like my own, even better."

"Then," said the king, "if you keep my son, take good care of him, have a priest and a teacher give him an education so that he will learn and develop and not suffer any want while I am away—then, God willing, upon my return I shall elevate you to a high position. You will be second only to me."

The king would make him prime minister, if he cared for his child.

"That's agreed, your Majesty," said the steward, "the smallest of your worries should be larger than this, for no harm will come to your boy."

Now then, one day the drums started rolling, the time had come to go to war. They were beating the drums and *calling up the soldiers*, assembling them. When they were ready to leave, all the horsemen gathered in front of the palace, waiting for the king to lead them. But the king was weeping inconsolably, he just couldn't, couldn't part with the boy. He started for the gate, perhaps even ten times, always returning to embrace and hold the child, lamenting that he was unable to leave him. And the steward continued to comfort the king, reassuring him that the boy would have a good life in his household. Finally, after urging the steward once again to be kind to the boy, he was ready to leave. They set forth to the sound of the band playing loudly. And the boy stayed behind. He, too, shed bitter tears for he could now understand that his father had left for the war and God only knew if he would ever return. The steward called the boy pet names, talked to him endearingly, took him to his own mansion which was nearby and brought him over to his son to play, so the child would be cheered. He even let the boy attend school a few times so he could enjoy the company of other children and forget. He was so good to the boy that he couldn't have been any better to him had he been his own.

About a month had passed when suddenly something evil took hold of the steward's heart. He said to his wife:

"Wife, wouldn't it be better if we took less good care of this boy and gave him only the bare essentials? Just enough so he wouldn't die of hunger. Why should we be so good to him? Maybe, somehow, he will perish and then my son would become king. If the king's son were to die, my son could succeed to the throne. We needn't tend to this boy's comforts so much," he said, "and, who knows, he may just die."

Then the wife said: "I don't mind."

So they cut down on his meals and food. They gave him less and less every day. They didn't even let him share what they ate but always gave him something worse. Then they no longer allowed the boy to eat in the room with them—they chased him out into the stables. It is there he had to eat the small slice of dry bread he received. The boy realized the bad turn his life had taken. The servants, too, noticed that the child was always sent out to the stables with only a piece of black bread to eat. They noticed that the steward wanted to put the boy's life in danger. The soldiers felt sorry for him—there were soldiers working in the stables—and he grew to like them so much that he could hardly do enough to please them. He tried to be near them all the time, watching them work and shovel manure, so he took a pitchfork and helped them. They told him in vain that he was the king's son, that such work was not for the likes of him, that he needn't do it.

"Never mind," he said, "I like to work and to help you. You'll get done sooner."

The stable was filled with two rows of horses, horses so fat that they seemed to be bursting. And there was a scrawny colt lying on the floor in a corner. It was so skinny

that its legs were dangling criss-crossed and it was too weak to disentangle them. The boy saw it and said to the soldiers:

“Uncle, uncle soldier, what is wrong with this colt, why is it so thin?”

“Well, son,” he said, “it is like that.”

“Why is this colt not eating like the others?”

“Because they are not giving it the same feed as the others.”

“Why aren’t they? Poor thing, it could use something better.”

“Son,” he said, “when the others get oats, this colt gets hay, and when the others get hay, then he gets oats. But we are never allowed to give it the same amount as the others or as much as it would want. Yet it knows how to ask for more. But it is forbidden, once and for all, to feed it the same as the others.”

The boy was saddened. He could see that the colt couldn’t stand up on its legs, it was just lying there. Every time he went to the stable he spent a long time standing by the colt’s side, then by its head, looking at it and feeling sorry for it.

“Oh, poor animal, how scrawny it is,” he said. “I am sorry for it.”

Well, the soldiers got used to having the boy around. They saw how kind he was, how he helped with giving the animals water and with everything else. No sooner did a speck of manure fall on the floor than he rushed over to pick it up. He wanted to make sure that the royal stables were as clean as the inside of a house. So the stablehands grew very fond of him. Then one day they said to him:

“Son, little prince, it is Sunday and we can’t even remember the last time we went to church. We ought to go.”

Every Sunday the steward and his wife put on their best clothes, took their son and set out for church. They locked up and let the soldiers keep watch over everything.

“We always have to stay home and keep watch,” they said, “we can never get to church. Would you be so kind as to stay here, in the stable, while we go to church so we can attend mass for once? But,” they said, “we’ll leave ahead of the others and hasten back. In the meantime you’ll stay here and look after the horses. Should one of them break loose, all you need to do is get over to the telephone, push the button and somebody—a soldier—will come and tether the horse in its stall. You just take good care!”

“Sure, I will,” said the boy, “you may go, I’ll keep an eye on everything, I’ll even tether the horses if need be—I can do it.”

“Don’t you try that, son—the horse could kick you, or bite you. Just go and push that button and help will come at once.”

So they got dressed and left for church. The boy stayed at home. As soon as the servants were gone, he locked the gate behind them. A big iron gate it was—he locked it, locked it securely so that no one could enter, and went back to the stable. He walked straight over to the colt, stood close to its hindquarters and gazed at it:

“Oh, poor animal, I feel so sorry for you,” said the boy, “I am sorry that this poor animal is so scrawny.”

All of a sudden the colt began to speak.

It said: "I see, little prince, that you have a big heart, a very good heart. You feel sorry for me, but I feel sorry for you too, as sorry as you are for me. The steward is as wicked to me as he is wicked to you. He is threatening your life and mine, he wants us to perish. But if you listen to me and do as I say, you'll be set free and I'll be set free too. If not, we'll both be destroyed."

"Go on, please, what's on your mind?" said the boy. "I'll listen to you and obey."

"Look, son, today it's already too late," said the colt, "but I'll tell you what you must do. Come next Sunday they will leave for church again and you should let the stablehands go too. Be very careful until then. If they don't find anything wrong, they'll want to go to church again and you'll stay behind. Then I'll tell you to light a fire, burn a cord of wood and bring me the embers, maybe two shovels full, and the rest I'll tell you later. Everything will be fine—but don't talk to anyone about this. No one must know, for if they betray you it means the end of you and of me, at once."

The boy could hardly wait for Sunday—and when it came, the steward and his wife took off again in festive splendor. They went to church. All along the little prince had been staying close to the stablehands, eating with them, sitting around with them, day after day.

Then they said to him: "Well, little prince, you took very good care of the horses, you watched over everything and there was no trouble. Would you agree to do it again?"

"Sure I would, you may go to church every Sunday. I won't go anyway, they wouldn't take me. I'll just stay here quietly and see to it that nothing goes wrong," he said.

So they got dressed up in a hurry and left for church. As soon as they were gone, the boy rushed over to the colt, and the colt said to him:

"Well, little prince, light the fire at once and let it burn."

The wood was dry and on this warm day it burst into flame and burnt to embers in no time. When the embers started glowing the boy took a good shovelful and placed it in front of the colt. The colt gulped down the lot and three more shovelfuls besides, in a matter of seconds. Then it rose up on its legs. Until then it couldn't stand, it just lay there.

"And now," it said, "let me out of the stable."

The boy let the colt leave the stable. It headed straight for the large pile of smoldering embers remaining after all the wood had burned down. The colt swallowed the whole big heap and by the time it finished, it had turned into a golden-haired steed, so shiny that it made the *eyes of whoever was looking at it, pop out*. Its hair was glittering gold and it had five legs.

"Little prince," it said, "you saved my life, now I'll save yours. Go at once and find the cellar key hanging on a nail, take it and unlock the door. As you enter you'll see on your right a sword, a pair of spurs, a saddle and a bridle. Take them and bring them out in a hurry. Then put the bridle on my neck and the saddle on my back, get dressed

and climb into the saddle. We'd better start out right away, or else they'll find us here!"

The boy ran down to the cellar, unlocked it, opened the door and found everything, as the colt had said. The saddle was hanging there, as were the sword and a pair of spurs.

"When you are ready to leave," said the colt, "look into my ears."

He reached into the horse's ear and drew out a set of silver garments.

"Now," said the colt, "put on these clothes, the whole suit, and when you are done, climb on my back and let's go. But before we do, I'll tell you also that there is plenty of gold and silver in the cellar, in barrels here and there. Take as much of it as you can stuff in your pockets. Take only the pure gold—it is worth more—not the silver. Fill your inner and outer pockets with all they can hold! Then come, get up on my back!"

So the boy dug into the gold, stuffed his pockets full, went out and leaped up on the colt's back.

"And now we are off—shut your eyes!"

The horse flew, its hooves not even touching the ground. It galloped at such speed that it rose into the air. They traveled until they came to the end of their kingdom. They reached the neighboring land. But just before they entered, when they were at the border, where one realm ended and the other began, the colt stopped and said:

"Now dismount and take a rest."

Well, he was tired—although he had been sitting, he had grown tired.

"Have a rest, my little boy!"

The boy was so beautiful that, as the saying goes, *you could sooner look straight at the sun than at him*, so dazzling was his beauty. His curly locks fell gracefully over his shoulders, his complexion was fair, his eyes a deep blue and his round cheeks had a rosy glow. Although he had been treated badly, he had developed better than the steward's son and grown taller.

"Well son," said the colt, "now I'll tell you what you must do. Here is the gate to the palace. Go there and you'll be admitted by the guards who are standing there. Enter the palace grounds and continue walking. I should also tell you that this is as far as I can bring you and no farther. I must now return, but I'll leave you a small whistle. If you get into trouble, or if you need anything, I'll come at once. You must hide this whistle so carefully that no one will ever find it. But if you are in trouble, or want help, use it and I'll be there. And now I tell you, son, you must go into this city. It is the *capital city*. No matter whom you encounter, do not greet them! If you do, just salute, like the soldiers do, but do not open your mouth and do not talk to anyone, no matter who asks you: 'what is your name, son?' or 'whose son are you?' or 'where are you from?' All you must ever say is 'I don't know.' Nothing more, no matter what they ask. Just say 'I don't know'—not a word more, and keep on walking!"

The colt gave the boy an affectionate kiss and licked his face. Then the boy kissed the colt, over and over again.

Said the colt: "May God be with you, son! I won't say more. If you get hungry, you have sufficient money. There are merchants around here, selling everywhere. This is a capital city. Whatever is good for you, whatever you desire, you'll find it here. They sell everything in the market place, go there and buy what you need and the quantities you want—be it fruit, or baked goods, or other food, sausages, or whatever else. Buy what you believe will be sufficient for you and pay with a piece of gold. The merchant will keep the cost of your purchase and give you back the rest. But you must not talk, not even ask about the price of anything, for then you would have to speak. Just hand over the gold without words and you'll get back your change. This is how you must act everywhere," said the colt. "I trust that you will do your best—I can teach you no more."

Then they took leave of one another and the little horse disappeared, like a whirlwind—it just vanished and the boy entered the city. He approached the gates of the palace and the soldiers let him in, so he went on. But whomsoever he met stopped to look at him. They didn't know the boy but neither had they seen one in their big city as beautiful as he was. There were some who were brave enough to ask:

"Where do you come from, son?"

Or: "Where are you headed?"—"where are you traveling?"—"what is your destination?"—or "where do you come from?"

"I don't know."

"Well, what's your name?"

"I don't know."

This is all he ever answered. And people were wondering what it was with this beautiful child, so clever, yet unable to say more. He could say this much clearly, but nothing else. This astonished them greatly. But he paid no attention to anyone—he went on and did everything the way the colt had taught him. He got into the city, into its very center. It was Sunday: people were going to church with their books and missals. He thought they were headed for church because the bells were ringing. He was on his guard, watching everything since he was a stranger. The men were gazing at him and so were the young women, wondering who this boy was, he was so exquisite looking. He was dressed in fine clothes and was very handsome and no one knew him, no one had seen him before. So several people asked:

"Beg your pardon, young Master, may I enquire where you are from or where you are going?"

"I don't know," he said and uttered not another word.

He wandered over to the market, as he was hungry. There he picked out some rolls and sausages, along with some cold cuts. When the food was assembled, he took a piece of paper and wrapped it all up, as if he were the vendor. He made a nice package. Then he reached for a gold coin and gave it to the merchant, who returned the change, after subtracting the amount of the purchase. He didn't check it, just slipped it into his pocket. Then he turned around and ate his food. He ate as much as he needed. He

ought to go back to church—he thought to himself—he should go where the others were going. Why, God wouldn't punish him if he entered His house. So he started on his way to church. Many people were headed that way, forming one long line. It was a great big church, already full of worshippers. He walked up to the front, bravely, as if he were a native of these parts. The priest was just delivering his sermon from the pulpit. He stopped directly in front of him and stared at the priest's mouth, without once averting his eyes. And the same way the people stared at him, not at the priest, not at the church, nor even the altar. All eyes were fixed on the boy, wondering who he was, how smart he was, and why they had not seen him before. Who could he be, what could he be? The king himself was at the church, since this was a royal city, the king, his wife, and three daughters were all there. He, too, just gazed at the boy intently. Who is he, what is he? Soon the mass was over and the people began streaming out of the church. The boy was in no hurry, he let everyone go ahead. In the end he came out, too, and continued on, minding his own business. But one of the people called over to him:

“Where are you from, son? Tell us, young Master, where do you come from?”

“I don't know.”

“Well, who is your father?”

“I don't know.”

“What do they call you? What is your name?”

He went on his way while the people were watching and wondering whether he could talk or say only those few words. As he was walking, the king caught up with him in his carriage, in the royal coach in which he was riding and ordered it to stop.

Said the king to the boy: “Where are you from, son?”

“I don't know.”

“Well, whose son are you?”

“I don't know.”

The king didn't take the boy with him then—he drove away. But at home they all started talking about him, who he could be, whether he could be a lost child? He could have gone astray, wandered off, and, who knows, his parents might be searching for him. “The boy should be brought here and kept here until someone comes looking for him. Surely someone from his family will come and then,” said the king, “we'll hand him over. But we must get him to come here now, so he won't go on wandering. He must be lost, that seems certain.”

So they dispatched two soldiers, sent them out to comb the streets and find a boy of such and such a description and bring him back to the palace. The two soldiers left at once, ran up and down searching the streets until finally they came upon the boy.

They said to him: “Well, young Master, his Royal Highness the king has sent for you. Will you come?”

“I don't know.”

“You better know, because you are coming with us. We are taking you to the royal palace. He told us to bring you there, before him.”

The boy said: "I don't know."

"Never mind, just come along, you won't have a bad life there."

They took the boy with them, went straight to the palace and announced to the king that they had arrived, that they had found the boy and brought him back. Right away the daughters started clapping their hands:

"Oh my, oh my, what a beautiful boy, what a beautiful boy! Dear Father, don't allow him to leave the palace—we can bring him up here. Who knows where he is from, perhaps someone lost him, let him be ours," they said. "What a lovely boy!"

The princesses were enthralled by him. The king himself was moved. He said: "My son, tell me, where are you from?"

"I don't know."

"Do you have a father?"

"I don't know."

"And your mother, is she alive?"

"I don't know."

He couldn't get anything else out of him.

"Come here, son. I know you are hungry," he said, "come and eat!"

They sat him down at the table in their midst, as they were having their midday meal. The boy ate nicely. He knew how to behave, how to use the serving spoon, how to help himself from the dishes. He ate amply, to his fill.

Then the king said to him: "My boy, you'll stay here with us."

He said: "I don't know."

"Never mind, son," said the king, "you'll find out after being here for a while. You won't be treated badly."

He told his wife that the child must be taught to converse, somehow he had to be taught.

"We don't know what his name is, so let us call him 'Little I Don't Know.' Since all he ever says is 'I don't know', let his name be 'Little I Don't Know.'"

Then the king summoned the chief cook and said to him: "Look, I place this boy in your hands. Take him in the kitchen, let him be with you, let him fetch water, when you need water, or wood, or anything you may want for cooking. Send him to the pantry, or to the larder—let him bring you what you need and little by little he will learn to speak. But first," he said, "take him to the pantry and show him everything, what this chest contains, what that one has, this bag has wheat flour, that one holds rice-meal, the prunes are stored here, the figs there, and God only knows what else there is, almonds, oranges, lemons, and many other things."

She showed him everything: "Well, son, this is here and that is over there."

But each bag had its own little label and just by looking at it, one could tell what was in the bag. Then there was a chest of drawers, as in the stores: one had candied peels, the other orange peels, yet another had sugar, and so on—God knows what else. And on all these drawers too, it was written what each one contained: this

one held paprika, that one something else—it was all nicely marked for the cook, when she needed something.

Said the cook to the boy: “Little I Don’t Know, go to the pantry and bring me this and that—the things I need.”

The boy jumped to it. The cook thought he couldn’t even have reached the pantry when he was already back, so fast did he move. The cook grew very fond of him, she wouldn’t have parted with him for anything. He was helping her so well. She was astonished that he understood everything, no matter what she said or asked, he understood it and made sure that she always had at hand what she needed. He was so able, yet he couldn’t speak. He even knew how to read. He just had to glance at the labels and he knew, he knew what they said.

The king went over to the kitchen every day, sometimes five or six times, to ask the cook how the boy was doing.

“Very well. He is clever beyond words. Whatever I ask for, he goes and does it immediately. I am amazed,” she said, “and yet he cannot speak. Maybe he’ll learn little by little, from one day to the next.”

Weeks and months went by, a whole year had passed since the boy had come to the palace. Everyone grew to like him and the daughters’ hearts were filled with love for him. They embraced him, accepted him as their own brother:

“Dear Father, we can never allow you to let him go—even if someone should come looking for him, we will not consent to your letting him leave. He must stay here, with us.”

And so the boy continued to develop and to grow nicely. As time went by, he filled out and grew visibly taller. One day the cook talked to him about how he had been with them for years now, about how clever he was and how he understood everything he was told. During this time, the king, his wife, and their daughters drove to church in their carriage every Sunday.

Said the cook: “Little I Don’t Know, would you let me go to church? I am never able to go. I can see that you are smart, that you listen to everything I say. You are an obedient child. So,” she said, “I’ll go to church and I’ll give you no other task but to watch the fire. I have put on the soup—it is already boiling and has been skimmed off. I have added to it all that was needed, except salt. So, look, Little I Don’t Know, let the meat simmer for another half an hour after I have gone. Then put in the salt, I’ll show you, about a tablespoonful or so, and let it simmer some more with the salt, so it can absorb the flavor. But be careful, the flame mustn’t be too high and the soup shouldn’t bubble, but just simmer on low fire—it’ll get richer that way. And don’t let it boil over, or it will lose all its fat. So listen my boy, until now you have always been obedient,” she said “once again do as I say. Just add a log or two to the fire—it shouldn’t be blazing. Do you understand me?”

He said: “I don’t know.”

“Well, you’ll see, it’ll be all right if you do as you were told. Look, Little I Don’t

Know, I'll leave the church ahead of time—when the priest makes the sign of the cross and gives his benediction to the people, I'll start on my way back.”

With these words the cook left. She waved to the boy as she was going. The boy waved too, but didn't say a word. The cook got dressed, delighted that for once she was able to go to church.

As soon as the cook was gone, the boy set to it; he threw the cat into the pot of soup, covered it and let it simmer. Soon the church bells signaled the end of the service and the cook came back.

“Well, Little I Don't Know, has the soup been cooking?”

He said: “I don't know.”

The cook ran and quickly stirred the pot with a large spoon and there was the cat, turned upside down, scalded; its hair and skin were all gone and its eyes had popped out, only the sockets were visible.

“Oh dear! Little I Don't Know, what have you done?” she said, “how did the cat fall into the soup? Oh dear, dear! The king will be back shortly and what am I to serve him? What have you done, Little I Don't Know?”

He said: “I don't know.”

“I told you to cover the soup and to keep it covered. The cat must have jumped into it.” (She thought the cat had jumped into the pot.) “You must have taken the cover off, forgotten about it—and the cat jumped in.”

“I don't know.”

“What a fine mess you got me into!”

She grabbed the ladle and struck the boy on the back of his neck. She struck him in anger, so upset was she that they would be coming home soon, expecting the soup and there wasn't any. The boy started screaming and wailing—he had never been hit before. Just then the coach pulled into the courtyard. And it had to pass right in front of the door. Sure enough, they heard all the crying. Right away they stopped the carriage; first the daughters jumped off, then the king:

“What is the matter, what is the matter, why is the boy crying?”

“Well,” she said, “let me tell Your Majesty what he did. I relied on him to watch over the soup, since until now he has always been obedient. And now, there is a cat in the soup! I don't know how it got there, but there will be no soup for midday.”

Said the king: “If there is no soup, there isn't any. Don't we have something else to eat? There are other things to replace the soup. The boy shouldn't be beaten.”

The daughters, too, were complaining: “Don't hit the boy! How did you dare hit him?”

Well—said the cook to herself—it is all right if they are angry that I whacked him. That isn't too great a worry, as long as they don't harm me.

Plenty of food was found to serve for the meal, many different things. A king need never be concerned about having enough to eat. And so the incident passed and another week went by. During this time the boy behaved well, he wouldn't have dis-

obeyed for the world. He did everything he was asked to do immediately. He was so good that the cook began trusting him again. Then Sunday arrived.

"Well, son," she said to him, "will you let me go to church today? Will you do again like last Sunday?"

He said: "I don't know."

"Son, will you watch the soup today? Look, it has to be kept covered," she said, "and when you add something to it, like salt, you must put the lid back on the pot right away. And don't build too big a fire! So, my dear boy, do as I say and I'll love you and the king will love you, too. You can see how fond the princesses are of you, but if you misbehave, they won't like you."

He said: "I don't know."

"Well, may I go to church?"

"I don't know."

So the cook prepared to leave again, got dressed in her best clothes, left repeated instructions about the meat, to which only salt was to be added in half an hour, and off she went. Little I Don't Know kept the fire going. Then, all at once, when the half hour was up, he poured salt into the soup, a large amount of it, but he used three big ladles full of ashes instead of salt! He poured three big ladles full of ashes into the soup. When the cook came back, she went straight to the soup and stirred it with a spoon. It was as thick as pure lye.

"What is this? Are there ashes in here? Oh dear, Little I Don't Know, this liquid is all murky," she said, "what did you do?"

He said: "I don't know."

"Look at it," she said, "I can't serve this and what will the king say when he finds out?"

He said: "I don't know."

She slapped the boy in the face so hard that the crack resounded.

"This is so you learn to do as you are told. You must not spoil the food! What will the king say to me when he sees that there is no soup?"

"I don't know," he said.

He screamed and yelled that she had slapped him, he screamed so loud that it could be heard in the street. Again, the royal coach was approaching—the king, his wife, and daughters were coming back. Once again they found the boy crying.

"What's the matter, what's the matter, why is the boy crying? Maybe you hit him?"

She said: "I just slapped him once. Look at what he did! He filled the soup with ashes."

"So what if he did, we ate soup all week long, every day, and we'll have it again—don't hit the boy, don't hurt him, I told you before not to hurt the boy!"

"Don't hurt the boy," begged the daughters, they felt so sorry for him.

Well, once again she was out of trouble. They ate their midday meal peacefully,

nothing went wrong. And once again the boy started to please the cook by helping her in every way. He swept all over and worked as hard as a slave. He had improved and seeing how diligent he was, the cook began trusting him anew. Then the third Sunday came.

“Little I Don’t Know, will you let me go to church?”

He said: “I don’t know.”

“Look son, this time there is no soup. I wouldn’t trust you with it. But,” she said, “there is a pig roasting in the . . . ‘thing’, in the oven, and you, my boy, must watch so the fire doesn’t get too big and burn the meat. You see,” she said, “it’s already done nicely on one side. I’ll turn it so the other side will brown slowly and be ready for noon. You don’t have to add salt, or anything else, just make sure that the fire is kept low. And I’ll go to church.”

He said: “I don’t know.”

The cook left for church but as soon as she was gone, the boy heaped wood in the stove, as much as it could take. The fire grew to be as big as an inferno. He used up all the dry logs so they burst into flame right away. The roasting pig got scorched and started to smoke. Soon the smoke was so thick inside that one couldn’t see. Then the cook came back. She was still out in the street when she was struck by the smell. “Oh, this time he burnt the pig,” she said. “He burnt it—now what will I put on the table, what kind of roast?” She ran indoors, the kitchen was filled with smoke, she had to wave a kerchief around to disperse it. They were choking, suffocating from it. She opened the oven door, the roasting pig was in flames, burning and smoking so fiercely that it had turned into pure charcoal.

“You, Little I Don’t Know, once again you fixed the midday meal! Now what can I put before the king? And what will they say when they discover that I ruined a meal yet another time?”

He said: “I don’t know.”

Again she slapped the boy in the face so hard that he started to scream, beside himself. Then the king arrived and stood in the doorway.

“What happened this time,” he says, “what is going on here?”

The cook burst into tears: “Great King,” she said, “I am thankful that until now I was able to serve you well and I was hoping to continue but ever since this boy was placed here, I cannot put a decent midday meal before you on Sundays when he is asked to watch over it. He built such a big fire that the roasting pig became completely charred. I ask you to take him away from here, or I’ll have to leave your service,” she said. “If you don’t remove him, I’ll have to go.”

“I’ll remove him. He’ll go, you just stay, but don’t hit the boy,” he said. “You shouldn’t beat him, you should come to me when something is wrong so I can help. You must not beat him!”

And the daughters were crying and complaining that the boy had been beaten. So the king said to him: