

Sherpas in High Tatras as a Touristic Phenomenon (Analysis of a specific Alpine Profession as a European attraction)

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Abstract—The objective of this paper is to summarise present knowledge of alpine transport, formation and function of socio-occupational group of mountain porters as the inevitable result of development in hiking and tourism, seen from the perspective of ethnology. Due to the absence of infrastructure, manual transportation of goods represents a possible means of supplying tourist huts and tourist hostels. We study the group of mountain porters in the alpine environment in Slovakia, the last location in Europe to meet this profession in a place where it still exists. Being a mountain porter means hard work and full understanding of society one lives and works in and cooperates with. It requires following the rules to exist in such place and position.

Keywords— Development of tourism, mountain porters, sherpas, socio-occupational group, transport.

I. INTRODUCTION

IN the course of 20th century, travelling – including its institution-based and organised mass forms became an inseparable part of life in modern society. Tourism represents an important social and cultural phenomenon that forms many aspects of everyday life, social relationships and also economic and political processes. In Europe, tourism, as the “key component of western modernity” [1], was developed and influenced by the processes formed by industrialisation and urbanisation of society. We use the High Tatras, the second most attractive mountain’s range after the Alps in the perspective of tourism, as an example to present the need of mountain portering, a new and specific occupation that comes hand in hand with tourism.

This profession, now rare in Europe, can be seen in the alpine environment of the High Tatras, the highest mountain’s range in Slovakia. It is transporting goods that makes the distinguishing mark of this profession in the mountains and we call the group of people who work in this specific field mountain porters. Presently, these people usually use the term sherpas to identify themselves as members of this unique

socio-occupational group. In this context, this term is used to describe the profession rather than an ethnic category. The name is based on the similarity of profession, carrying loads in the mountains, and is not to be confused with the ethnonym Sherpa. [The Sherpas - members of the Sherpa tribe, a small Mongolian tribe of Tibetan descent from Solukhumbu district. The name Sherpa comes from Tibetan word “shar” – meaning east and “pa” – meaning people. They came to Nepal in the 16th century from Tibet. They specialise in professional carrying loads and as guides in alpine areas.]

Sherpas in the High Tatras, as well as in other Slovak, European and world mountains, make an extremely interesting profession that is not exactly widely known by either public or specialists. They are interesting in various aspects: history of the profession, environment in which they do this work (it is also a standard place to live for many of them), work organisation and finally - life philosophy.

A sherpa, almost always a man in Slovakia, is a person that carries heavy loads to mountain huts, using just his body strength. The load can be represented by food and other items needed in everyday life, fuel, construction materials and similar articles. This load is carried on his back using a special kind of framework made in various shapes and using various materials. This construction is equipped with harness to enable him carry it on his back. Being a sherpa means doing physically demanding work and contributing fully as a part of the team or society that one lives in as well, society that he meets every day and cooperates with. He must stick to rules to be able to work and exist in this environment.

In the environment that we study, the work of sherpas is irreplaceable. There are no roads that cars can use and helicopters are too expensive. Sherpas are a relatively cheap and efficient alternative for supplying. This profession would not be needed without having the mountain terrain open for tourists, without mountain huts and services that are offered for them.

Mountain porters come and leave. Some of them are able to do this job for one or two days, a month or a season or two. Thus they do something that is pleasant (staying in the mountains) and beneficial for them (money). Others stay in the mountains the whole life or come back year after year and become legends.

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Methodological assumptions

Assigning an individual person to a certain group influences his or her position in social structure of a given society. It differentiates this person in a large scale of social prestige, determines his or her status, value orientation and lifestyle. I see sherpas as a socio-occupational group that shares common characteristics such as interaction, cooperation, mutual team standards, values, approaches, goals, sense of fellowship, membership, identification, existence of positions, statuses and roles. Psychological connection and identification of us-the others is important. We are interested in the very social atmosphere inside the group, acceptance and demonstration of profession statuses. We are concerned in how the enculturalization, transmission and replacement of values and norms work the way in.

The research in this socio-occupational group was performed through studying a combination of documents found in archives, scientific literature, popular scientific literature, homeland-studies, memoirs, as well as terrain research. I tried to understand a group of sherpas in a broader context of life and work within society, region, cross-interactions between sherpas and the major group (tourists) in the aspects of history, society and culture.

Various approaches were used: historical approach – tracking the facts related to history and timeline. We also used a holistic approach, popular in social science as a method in which a cultural event is seen as a part of a broad system of symbols, values, attitudes and opinions that, as such, cannot be studied as an isolated matter, without relation to other socio-cultural, historical and economical aspect.

I did the terrain research using the method of direct and indirect observation, controlled interviews with sherpas, spoken history based on biographical conversations with respondents about their life in the mountains and their families. The choice of respondents was determined by these conditions: being active in the profession or having experience with this work, being a mountain hut-keeper or a rescue worker who cooperates/cooperated with sherpas and finally the third group - tourists who meet mountain porters. The research group consisted of 42 sherpas aged 19 to 86 and 10 tourists.

A birth of the profession as the result of development in tourism

To explain the birth of the profession of a sherpa, we need to look at the situation in the beginning of tourism and the need of this profession. The breaking point came roughly in the middle of 17th century, when a new profession started to be formed among people of the Tatras region – a porter and guide. It usually were the people of German Spiš intelligentsia who chose to be guides, whilst porters were usually common village people – herbalists, poachers, shepherds who knew the terrain well and were willing to carry heavy loads. Both the settlements that were started near the mountains and the railway made the High Tatras more interesting for the general public. Spa industry and tourism arose.

Along with expansion of tourism came a need to organise porters and guides in a union, this was managed by Uhorský Karpatský Spolok. Porters and guides had to pass tests, they had official porter's and guide's registration certificates and

licences. Further step in the development of the profession was in building mountain huts that started in the end of 19th century, when people from the surrounding villages worked as porters. They also helped with construction of a cable car to Lomnický štít in the 1930s. Many of them remained in the Tatras after the construction had been completed and started working as professional mountain porters who transported goods such as food, coal, furniture and petroleum. It was one of the few possibilities to earn some money in the region.

After the end of WWII, with a boom of mountaineering, also some Slovak and especially Czech mountain-climbers came to the Tatras, wanting to practice this sport and work and live here. Many of them were coming back regularly during the season, or they stayed and worked not only as hut-keepers, ski-lift operators and rescue workers, but mainly as mountain porters. There was a rapid rise in number of university students coming to Tatras after 1948 and during the Normalization period, as it offered a possibility to escape and find a neutral zone. Since the beginning of 1990s, when the linkage to the state was cut off, the mountain huts have been rented by people – mountain hut keepers, who consequently hire the service of sherpas during the tourist season. They usually have two or three full-time sherpas and hire six or seven, or even ten sherpas in summer season.

At the present time, there are sherpas in five of the mountain huts in the High Tatras: Zbojníčka chata - elevation 1960m, Téryho chata –2015 m, Chata pod Rysmi –2250 m, Zamkovského chata – 1475 m, and Rainerova chata –1300m. Why are the European's last sherpas found in Slovakia? The reason is simple – there are no lifts to carry goods to mountain huts here. There is no infrastructure and there are no drivable roads, just tourist paths for people to walk on. Transportation with the help of helicopters is hardly ever used, because it is very expensive. Every season there is a need to transport some fifteen to twenty tons of goods to each of the mountain huts. Some professional sherpas are able to carry the goods twice a day sometimes: they carry 50-90 kilograms of goods in one go and the price is about 50 cents per one kilogram. One climb – and one load carried – takes approximately 3.5-4 hours in good weather.

Until the beginning of 20th century, sherpas used to carry goods in canvas sheets, baskets and leather bags. With boom of tourism, they started to use a wooden frame called krosna, a traditional mountain gear used everywhere in the world (see more in for example.: Klodnicki 1976 [2], Baran 1954 [3], Fenton-Podolák-Rasmussen 1974)[4]. The krosna has surely been a subject of improvements, so today there are mountain gears of various kinds, shapes and sizes made of aluminium or other metals.

Motivation for the profession

Among the most important motivation aspects for birth and existence of the profession until the present day, there have been money, love for mountains, independence and freedom. Especially freedom, understood in the second half of the 20th century as freedom of speech, thoughts and ideas. Then there is also self-knowledge, self-realization, relax and last but not least – money. Work of a sherpa is interesting and attractive for its uniqueness. However, not everybody is able to work

like this for a longer time, work in an assortment of people in high altitude, in cramped space, specific conditions and regime. [5]

For ethnology, psychology and sociology, it may be most interesting to study relationship between the sherpas and tourists. It is an interesting phenomenon, since the birth of this profession was the result of development of tourism and yet tourists have always regarded porters as untrustworthy, while the same applies the other way round. There has always been a sign of reciprocal aversion, dominance or underestimation. The tourists see in sherpas some kind of lingering legend that belongs to the past, symbol of mountains, attraction to marvel at, be photographed with, or just job meant to mean punishment, job for the uneducated or people unable to adapt to a new situation.

At the present time, the High Tatras' sherpas are understood to be an attraction worth taking a picture and the porters have adapted themselves to the situation. They pose for the tourists, there are new films and documents, reportages about records and breaking old records, as well as souvenirs and books. Sherpas even have their own museum and they also organise a competition.

I. Sherpa's museum, a kind of exposition of the sherpa profession and an information centre, this all can be found in Rainerová chata (Rainer Hut), the oldest mountain hut in the Slovak part of the High Tatras build in 1863. The hut keeper and sherpa in one person shares information about this profession with those who are interested, there are a large number of photographs and interesting exhibits, such as mountain gear that was used when a record was broken or pictures of the best porters, summary of the winners of porter competitions, record achievements, snowshoes, skis and many other, equally interesting objects. About 20 thousand people visit this hut annually, including some influential people in politics and culture.

Sherpas have always been competitive. Mutual raillery, sense of competition and strive against each other have finally lead to an official contest – Sherpa rally. The first impulse for starting this competition was to give hut-keepers and porters an opportunity to meet at least once a year and see how strong they are, but also speak with each other and have some fun. Having a name of this event chosen, rules set, jury established and prizes collected, the year of 1985 saw the first year of this unusual competition. Next year this competition was organised again and thus a new tradition started. This year was the year number 30 in its history.

Let us mention some interesting data about records in carrying heavy loads by the sherpas:

Zbojnická chata (Zbojnická hut): 1970s, 138kg, this record still remains unbeaten, then there is a unique series of carrying a load of 100 kg three times in a row in 24 hours, woman record of 1950s, 60 kilograms.

Téryho chata (Téry hut): 1970s, 138 kilograms

Chata pod Rysmi (Rysy hut): 2004, 122 kilograms.

Zamkovského chata (Zamkovsky hut): 1950s, 140 kilograms, 1993, 207.5 kilograms.

Skalnatá chata (Rocky hut): 2000, 210 kilograms

Beside records in weight and duration, there is a number of interesting items that have been carried up to the huts, such as a bus stop, rocking chair, boiler, bathtub, barbell including its rack, turbine, water-treating device, ski-lift, furnace, sofa, metal cross, kayak, some acetylene and oxygen tanks, soil to be used as stove putty, tables, doors, windows, glass panels, telephone posts, cabinets, cases with musical instruments and baggage.

II. CONCLUSION

The profession of a sherpa has undergone many changes, from occasional season-based job through full-time job until it finally reached the status it has today. The reasons why people would chose this job in the 19th and early 20th century were very different from the reasons after the WWII and those of the present generation. These changes came due to the change in social and economic conditions, change in political situation, sherpas also changed their opinions and attitude to work and life in the mountains. Their motivation has always been subject to changes and dependent on many factors. Professional porters of the 19th and early 20th centuries, who did this job only for money, were, in the 1950s, replaced by a new generation that was trying to escape into a different and isolated environment and that found freedom and fulfilled their dreams and desires. The following generation not only did the same, they also spotted the possibility to combine pleasure with usefulness, chance for interesting work and financial gain as well as possibility for doing a sport. Presently, this is also accompanied with opportunity to self-improve, train mountain climbing, practice additional sports, or simply earn respect from the tourists.

There are various opinions regarding the future of this profession. Some see no perspective in the future and say carrying loads will only exist as some kind of attraction in the High Tatras as this necessity will be replaced by machines, some hope for a different fate. Others fear that carrying heavy loads will change in fight for breaking records and earning fame, or mere routine influenced by amount of money and the glamour of the profession will be lost.

This paper opens the topic of sherpas as a specific and largely heterogeneous socio-professional group. The research identifies a range of possible questions and issues to deal with in the future. In this contribution, we also tried to offer the most complex information and clear sherpas and their work of the “mythological” elements that have gradually emerged through misinformation given by tourists and media and that are so frequently present among people.

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