

Sustainability in Folk Culture: Transmission of a Traditional Blue Dyeing Technique in Győr

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Based on blue-dyer masters' experience, we can say that people are still interested in the technology of traditional blue dyeing. There are many people participating in trade shows. Moreover, people tend to buy and use the products produced this way. Based on the proposal of the Intellectual Cultural Heritage Professional Committee of the Hungarian National Committee of UNESCO, the tradition of blue dyeing became part of the National Register of Intellectual Cultural Heritage in 2015. Then, in 2018, to the proposal of five countries, including Hungary, the traditional trade of blue-dyeing was recognised, which thus became part of the list of intellectual cultural heritage of UNESCO. In the elaboration of the petition of nomination, a master of Győr, Ildikó Tóth and her family participated. In our study, we are giving an overview of the history of blue-dyeing, which can be dated from the end of the 17th century, of the spreading of the main techniques, and also of the state of the number of blue-dyers. Beyond the above-mentioned issues, we are dealing with the history of blue-dyeing in Győr, mentioning the more important masters, as well as the mark of the trade, which can be seen until now. In the main part of our study, we are introducing a blue-dyeing workshop in Győr, where they manufacture textiles using original devices and technology until the present day. Apart from this, we are pointing out the family story of the blue-dyer family Éhring, which embraces five generations. Moreover, we are presenting their work done in the survival of our cultural heritage, in popular education and community development, with the help of the interviews made with Ildikó Tóth and her family – who has recently received the title 'Master of Folk Culture'. In the study, we are also publishing true stories about blue-dyer masters, about the trade and the above-mentioned family.

1. Introduction

Our choice of topic was inspired by the fact that we have been instructing the subjects of Intellectual Cultural Heritage and Folk Small Trade at Széchenyi István University for several years. One of the authors of the study is an ethnographer whose field of research is – among others – the examination of folk trades and handicraft techniques (Lanczendorfer, 2020). With students of various majors (grade education, special education, cultural meditation), we often participate in handicraft presentations.

The other reason is that – based on the proposal of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Committee of the Hungarian National Committee of UNESCO – the tradition of blue dyeing in Hungary was adopted by the National Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2015.

The purpose of the study is to introduce blue dyeing as a sustainable value and trade, based on the example of a workshop in Győr. For this, beyond looking through specialist literature, we have done an interview with the members of a famous blue dyeing family, who are famous abroad as well and who are already dealing with this old technique alone in our region.

The study is of a niche nature since there has been no scientific research of any kind in connection with the above-mentioned blue-dyer families so far. In the future, we are planning to extend the research to the countries which nominate the trade to UNESCO's List of Intellectual Cultural Heritage.

2. Blue dyeing as a sustainable value

There are currently six blue dyeing workshops operating in Hungary: the workshops in Bácsalmás, Győr, Nagynyárad, Szombathely, Tiszakécske (Tajti, 2009) and Tolna. Out of these, we have visited two workshops and their masters personally. One of our interviewees was the leader of the workshop in Győr, Ildikó Tóth – who has also participated in the elaboration of the component “Tradition of Blue Dyeing” – defined the blue dyeing technique as follows: “Blue dyeing is a special textile dyeing procedure. To a higher degree, it spread in the 18th century. It has two main work phases: 1. Putting covering material onto the surface of the textile with the help of pressing forms. 2. Dyeing in indigo vat in a dyeing bath sunk into the ground (kippah) or in a tub, in an indatrene vat.” About the textile dyeing, the readers are referred to (Costa et al., 2021), the source of indigo blue, and the woad, see (Pinke, 2016)

In 2003, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) adopted the Convention on the Preservation of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Its objective is to preserve intellectual and cultural heritage, to respect the intellectual heritage of the concerned communities, and to raise awareness of the importance of heritage at the local, national and international levels (Csonka-Takács, 2013). Based on the recommendation of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Committee of the Hungarian National Committee of UNESCO, the tradition of blue dyeing in Hungary – thus also the activities of the blue dyers of Győr – was included in the National Register of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2015 (LXIV Law, 2001).

In 2018, this traditional craft was submitted for nomination at the proposal of five countries (Austria, The Czech Republic, Hungary, Germany, and Slovakia) collectively, which was recognised and added to the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO. We would like to note that there had already been a precedent of cooperation and common submission: Hungary had submitted falconry as a living human heritage together with 18 countries. The ceremonial announcement and handing over of the document certifying that the “Tradition of Blue Dyeing” has been added to the representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity took place on 12 February 2019 in the Blue Dyeing Museum of Count Károly Esterházy Museum of Pápa.

3. History of Blue Dyeing In Hungary

“The history of European textile printing – including blue dyeing – has a library of literature...” – writes Ottó Domonkos, an excellent researcher on the topic (Domonkos, 1981). In the 18th century, the so-called “Porzellan Druck”, the technical term, indicating the reserve pressure imitating the colour effect of the blue-white patterned oriental china, referred to as blue dyeing (Domonkos, 1991). “The first written Hungarian mentioning of the term “blue dyer” dates back to 1770” (Domonkos, 1981). Namely, we can read it in a letter of complaint from Pápa. In the middle of the 18th century, a new procedure of textile dyeing, reserve pressure blue dyeing, could be launched, at which the use of the traditional woad was switched by the more sunproof and more effective indigo and the cold indigo bate procedure. Every single workshop has its own well-trying recipe, which they do not willingly share. The journeys of master students also helped to get to know the new technique and the dyeing plant. From our county, we can find data about the new procedure in the family chronicle of Jakab Kistler from Sopron from the 1870s: “In the old days, when they did not dye with indigo, but with woad, they used human urine for this. However, only urine before reproductive age was good. This is how the colour was developed,” – says Ildikó Tóth. In the beginning, indigo was called “devil’s dye”, and “Teufelsauge”. The high number of fabric dyers was shown by the fact that they even had their own newspaper. In the case of the expert magazine, which appeared from 1934 again, however, the word ‘blue dyer’ no longer appeared in the title.

Throughout the times, the number of blue dyers decreased continuously: “Whereas, in 1890 there were 414 independent workshops working in Hungary, around 1940 there were already only 70 of them” (Domonkos, 1991). The Treaty of Trianon did not favour this craft, either. Several workshops lost their markets, their fair districts. “In the heyday of the craft – until the Second World War → dyers were holding their annual gatherings in Budapest every year. Our family preserves a photograph of this, of the year 1945,” – said Ildikó Tóth. From the second half of the 20th century, because of the accession of textile factories, few workshops could remain. In the 1970s, their number did not even reach thirty, and in the 1990s, only fifteen masters were working in this craft (Domonkos, 1991).

3.1 Blue dyeing in Győr

According to the words of Péter Éhling, master of Győr, this slogan could be read on the wall of each blue dyeing workshop: Blau ist die schönste Farbe, Blau liebt jeder Mann. Darum lieb’ ich alles was blau ist, Weil mein Schatz ein Farber ist.” (“Blue is the most beautiful colour, everybody loves blue. I love everything that is blue because my darling is a blue-dyer.”).

With one exception (Bakó, 1998), there were no writings about the blue dyeing families of Győr. It is only Ferenc Bakó, who published an interview from Péter Éhling, a master from Győr. “We have news about the authentic practice of textile printing from 1695” (Domonkos, 1981). In the council register of the city of Győr appear the

names of two dyers of Győr: “Balogh Györgi” and “Fabian Mihály.” We have data about the settling of dyers satisfying Győr’s needs from this time already. The presence of dyers in Győr is revealed by the fact that “in 1831, the city council named a street after the painters” (Domonkos, 1981). This custom was, however, present in other cities of Hungary as well (e.g. in Veszprém, Szeged, Kecskemét). “My great-grandfather worked at 12 Festő Street with a partner dyer named Mészáros. At the bottom of one of the dyeing baths, the date 1854 can be read, so dyeing was already present then” – mentions Ildikó. What is more, she has even shown the lion-shaped stone, which is visible at the beginning of the street. “When we enter Festő Street, we can still see one of the guard-post marble stones, which has the shape of a stone lion. The coat-of-arms animal of dyers is the lion. In the coat of arms of blue dyers, we can find a huge blue dyeing cauldron, the dyer’s stick and an indigo breaker, while there are two lions standing on both sides. The masters claimed that because their emblematic animal – so also the lion – defended them from all evil. The old masters said that there would be dyers and that craft would not die out as long as a lion was guarding Festő Street.” Several dyers were working in this street. In 1950, Ferenc Bakó mentioned the names of the masters: Péter Éhling, Aschendorfer, Sáfrány and Potfai. Ildikó’s great-grandfather, Péter Éhling, often kept saying: “A dyer can never be a poor man, but he also works a lot for it”, despite the fact that the German equivalent of dyeing blue (Blaumachen) means a do-nothing, told us Zsolt Gerencsér. “This originates from the fact that when we lower the textile into the dyeing well, we have to wait for at least 15 minutes for it to oxidise in the air. During this time, we practically cannot do anything. When the master stood out to the door and was asked what he was doing, he said: »Ich mache blau«, which means, I am making blue, and this means nothing now, I have time.”

In the collection of Ferenc Bakó – when mentioning the picture illustrating the process of blue dyeing – another master’s name appears as well, who also comes from Győr: “The pictures that were hanging on the wall of Schiffer, former blue dyer of Győr, dyed on a tin canvas. They are presenting the job of blue dyeing the way the master and his 28 assistants were doing these in Schiffer’s workshop formerly” (Bakó, 1998). From him, the already-mentioned Aschendorf took over the workshop at 1 Festő Street, whose grandson was the famous writer and aesthete, Béla Hamvas”.

Regarding the blue dyers of Győr, Ferenc Bakó writes that – according to the bulletin of 1946 – the blue dyers were left out of the register. He sees the reason for that in the fact that they were supposedly listed among dyers and dry cleaners, probably because the job was declining. “My great-grandfather donated a great part of his printing boards to the Xantus Museum of Győr, and the family changed principally to textile painting. The reason for this was that factory production had started, the women had stopped wearing national costumes, and the Swabians, who were wearing the blue dyeing clothes, had been deported.” In 1963 we already know of three blue dyers in Győr: „Péter Ehling, Péter Berecz, and a “fabric dyer” called Róka” (Bakó, 1998).

The workshops decreased in number, but still, blue dyeing has survived through centuries. In 1962, a Blue Dyeing Museum was established in Pápa, in the place of the workshop of the Kluge Company. The museum has had a great role in preserving and familiarising blue dyeing as a trade.

3.2 Blue dyeing workshop of Győr – Ildikó Tóth Ildikó blue-dyer master and her family

Ildikó Tóth summarised the history of their blue dyeing family and that of the workshop of Győr for the recommendation for the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO in the following way: “We can read about the first certified practice of textile printing in Győr in 1695, in the City Council Records. Because of the high water demand, he founded his manufacture in Győr, in Festő Street, next to the former River Rábca, in 1906. At that time, several dyeing families were working here. This is where the name of the street comes from. Our workshop, similarly to the other masters, fulfilled the local demands, but it went to the fairs in the surroundings, too, from Pápa to Csallóköz. They were typically dyeing cotton canvas, they were making gowns and tablecloths out of the rough home canvas, but they were also dyeing wool yarns. The women of Rábaköz liked clothes that had white patterns and were rosy, beany and striped on a middle-blue base. An indispensable fitting of their wear was the blue dyeing textile. The blue-dyeing families who are working until the present day are those who carry and keep alive this rare trade of Hungarian folk art, which is about to become extinct. Although the traditional work processes are identical, still, each family has a unique style and own recipe, which has formed and been handed down throughout the centuries.”

Ildikó Tóth reveals the family trade as follows: “Already the fifth generation is working in our workshop: from 1906 until 1954, my great-grandfather, Péter Éhling, from 1954 till 1961, my great-grandmother, Péterné Éhling (born Zsófia Nemes Nagy), from 1961 until 1983, my grandmother, Ilona Éhling, from 1983 till 1990, my father, József Tóth blue dyer master, and now already us.” Ildikó also helps with the work of the folk artists of the county as a secretary for the Association of Folk Artists of Kisalföld and as a president of the Traditional Handicraft Section of Győr-Moson-Sopron County Chamber of Trade and Industry. She is doing his work with a great deal of preciseness and a local-patriotic mind. It is not by chance that her works of art and her professional knowledge have been praised by several certificates and prizes: Folk Industry Artist: 2006; Silver Memory Medal Of The City Of Győr: 2007; Memory Medal For The Work In The Chamber: 2017; IPOSZ Golden Jubilee Memorial

Medal 2017; Győr-Moson-Sopron County Memorial Medal: 2007; Prize for Serving Győr City Centre: 2017; Master of Folk Art in 2019.

Ildikó Tóth's husband, Zsolt Gerencsér originally learned to be a machine tender, but he got to know and came to like textile dyeing. Józsefné Tóth, Ilike, Ildikó's mother – as well as having a degree as a pedagogue, took an exam in dyeing. "At us, in the family, everybody has, or had their master's certificate, a certificate of dyeing as a skilled labourer" – she says. Until the present day, she has helped in dyeing and selling in their shop in Győr. In this family, the parents are handing down their knowledge of trade further to their two daughters, Brigitta and Enikő, and they have taught them blue dyeing. "Every blue dyeing family are endeavouring to preserve the work tools of the trade, their workshop, its equipment, enabling the following generation to continue the trade" – claim the parents.

The youngest members of the blue-dyeing family were raised in this beautiful job. Their daughters, as they told me, "were born into a blue world." Their elder daughter, Brigitta – who has a degree in law – composes like this: „ I was born in Győr, in 1988, as the fifth generation of a family that deals with blue- and fabric dyeing. A determining experience of my childhood was the time spent in the dyeing workshop of my parents, I got to know the technique and tricks of blue dyeing, hands down. With my younger sister, we were there at each dyeing, we were shaping and dyeing cloths designed by ourselves. My parents used to regularly hold presentations of trade professional guiding, to which they were taking me with themselves since my childhood.“ Enikő mainly likes dealing with children, and despite her young age, she has already had exhibitions as well. The members of the family are not only excellent masters but also they are "folk educators", community builders, in the noblest sense of the word, thus they address wide layers of society with their presentations and works of art. They participate unselfishly in the further training of pedagogues in the teaching of folk art and handicraft. They were there at the fabric dyeing, at the presentations held in the workshop, and, of course, at the fairs as well. They regularly receive the pupils and adults of the region, where they not only make the trade known but also have it tried. "Last year only, 1,400 youngsters had the chance to get to know and try this trade" – says Zsolt. They have been helping with the handicraft training of our students for several years, too. We often go to their workshop in Festő Street for presentations. However, we did not only marvel during the birth of the blue miracles, but we also made a beautiful blue-dyeing tablecloth. We even organised an exhibition out of these at our university.

Győr Blue Dyeing Workshop undertakes an active role in making the trade known and handing it down. They are regular participants of the Festival of Crafts and Museum Picnic in May, held in Buda Castle. Since 1999, they have been holding the trade presentations of the Blue Dyeing Museum of Pápa. They take the science of blue dyeing not only to the Hungarian inquirers but also to those living out of the borders. For example, they are regularly present in the advent indoor play centre of Collegium Hungaricum as well. Their works have been shown in several countries in Europe (England, Austria, France, Poland, Germany, Italy, Romania). What is more, their works of art have also reached China and the USA. In 2013, they represented Hungary in Folklife Festival in Washington.

The blue dyeing family of Győr also keeps professional contact with the other blue dyeing workshops and their masters. They also help with the work of country houses. Within the frames of "Country House Cavalcade", they held a handicraft presentation in the country house of Felpéc once a month. Moreover, in Bányogyszovát, in the country house, with the participation of the younger and the older generation, they printed an environment-friendly textile bag with a positive print. With their works (cummer cloth, souvenirs) they took part in Cummer Plate Conference and Exhibition and in Lakitelek Folk College as well in 2019. We could see them in several films. Last time "in the video clip Trianon100" or in the films "You are at home!" and "Stay at home". In the German film titled "A seed trader woman" directed by Attila Árpá, Ildikó appeared as a contemporary blue-dyeing woman. We can see them several times in the programmes of Pápa Town Television and Győrplusz TV, as well as in different local and national media. They held presentations on the Kossuth Defence Association Tulip Garden Movement in the media and at Pensioners' University as well.

3.3 Interviewees

Dr. Brigitta Bajcsai, born.: Győr, 1988.

Enikő Gerencsér, born: Győr, 1999. ('Junior Prima' Prize Holder)

Zsolt Gerencsér, born: Győr, 1969. (Young Master Of Folk Art)

Ildikó Tóth, born: Győr, 1962. (Master of Folk Art, public body member of Hungarian Academy Of Arts)

Józsefné Tóth, born: Botos Ilona, Győr, 1937.

3.4 Their exhibitions

1999. Nagynyárád

2000. Győr, Bartók Béla MMK (independent)

Budapest, "Living Folk Art"; Budapest, ELTE World Reunion Of Chemistry

2001. Győr, Balázs Béla MMK (independent)

- Csorna, Museum Of Csorna (independent)
2003. Sopron, Lábasház „Blue Dyeing Masters”
2004. Schwetzingen (Németország)
2005. Győr, County Hall, Industry Body Of Győr
Pápa, Blue Dyeing Museum, Permanent Exhibition
Győr, Bartók Béla MMK “Living Folk Art”
2006. Essen (Germany)
2007. Ingolstadt (Germany) (independent)
2008. Sindelfingen (Germany)
Győr, Kálmán Öveges Primary School (independent)
2008. Brassó, Romania
2009. Erfurt, Germany (independent)
2010. Poznan, Poland (independent)
Pápa, “Historic Days”; Pápa, “Game Festival”
2011. London, England, Collegium Hungaricum (independent)
Győr- Ménfőcsanak, Bezerédj Castle (independent)
2012. Budapest, Hungarian Handicraft Superb,
Budapest, Festival Of Trades (independent)
2013. Washington DC, USA “Hungarian Heritage”
2014. Nyizsnyij Novgorod, (Russia)
2014. France Gannat: Les Cultures Du Monde
2015. Milan EXPO Hungarian Pavilion
2016. István Széchenyi University Győr, University Of The Retired, - presentation (titled: The Tradition Of Blue Dyeing In Hungary)
2017. Csunking, Spring Cultural Festival
2017. Nyizsnyij-Novgorod, (Russia) Secrets Of Trades
2017. New-York, Hungarian House, Exhibition and Introduction Of Trade
2018. Hand-Work-Superb, Hall Of Arts
2018. Sanghaj
2019. Párizs, UNESCO Centre, Walking the Indigo Walk
2020. Cegléd Galéria- exhibition
Film-making for the exhibition of Sopron Lenk Villa
- 2021: Festival Of Trades, Szentendre Outdoor Museum
NMI The Study Circle- film shooting (titled: Blue Dyeing, Textile Printing)
- 2022: Blue-Dyeing Reunion And Fair, Gutau (Austria)
Vigadó- exhibition
Cracow- handicraft workshop
Nádszeg (Slovakia) Hungaricum: Sun - presentation

4. Conclusions

The blue dyeing family of Győr gives a beautiful example of how an old craft can survive and how it can enrich our present world. As it turned out from the professional literature and the interviews, this textile dyeing procedure had been present already since the 17th century.

Several families (e.g.: Aschendorfer, Balogh, Berecz, Éhling, Fabian, Potfai) were doing this profession. The negative historical processes (wars, deportation), the development of the industry, the change of people’s taste also decreased the number of those who were doing the craft.

In our county, what is more, in our region, it is already only Ildikó Tóth and her family that deal with blue dyeing. The resourcefulness of the family also contributed to a high degree, so that blue dyeing was able to survive in Győr. The survival was also secured by the fact that Péter Éhling, then his great-granddaughter, Ildikó Tóth handed down the family trade to their children, and they presented the profession in national and international fields, too. During the research of the five-generation master family, the greatest change seems to be in the fact that they are already not only manufacturing their goods, like their predecessors, but they reveal the way of manufacturing as well. At their presentations, you can get to know the technology, the sample wood, the motive treasures, moreover, you can even try those. The other issue is that while in the old days, people were only making articles for use – according to demand -, today also the décor products and souvenirs appeared (e.g.: tablecloths, cushions, curtains, bags, wine cases, dolls in blue-dyeing clothes, Christmas-tree ornaments, home blessings). Their craft was enlarged by designing, sewing, and not least by educational tasks. We think that Ildikó Tóth’s and her family’s greatest merit is that they have explored the blue-dyeing tools of Győr, as well as

their patterns, that had sunk into oblivion, they have collected them in archives, museums, and this way they have revived the craft knowledge of the Éhling family. Apart from this, they have borrowed the grandfather's plates from the warehouses of museums, and they have started the revival of the trade with the help of those. What is more, today the husband is already manufacturing the sample wood himself, with which they are working. Ildikó Tóth and her family has always been looking for the opportunities of connecting teaching and tradition grooming. They have raised the handicraft profession up to the level of art education, continuously endeavouring to have the values of our folk art heritage discovered, as well as the opportunities of involving them into today's environment- and object culture. They had a share in the fact that, within the field of cultural heritage, the "Blue Dyers of Győr" got into the county collection of values (Megyerikum, 2023). Their works are today already enriching museums. Their works of art can be found in Óbuda Textile Museum, in the Blue Dyeing Museum of Pápa and in the Museum of Ethnography as well.

Based on the sources of technical literature, the interviews, and the documents owned by the family, we can conclude that this traditional trade remained all over Europe through centuries. Thanks to the high level of professional knowledge of those who apply the technology and thanks to the interest of the recipients, it is still alive further in the future. In the following, we would like to continue our research by getting to know the work of blue-dyer masters working in other regions of Hungary and in foreign countries, as well as by introducing unique painting techniques.

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