

Translation

## Folklore and superstition in traditional Slovak beekeeping

## Folklor i prázdnověrje v tradicijnom slovačskom pčelarstvě

Josef LEDINSKÝ

TRANSLATED AND ANNOTATED BY ERIK TIHELKA

### ABSTRACT

---

The following text was written by Josef Ledinský in 1762 and chronicles the Slovak apicultural folklore of the time. It is reproduced here in translated form and with comments on some of the traditional practices relating to 18<sup>th</sup> Century European beekeeping.

### ABSTRAKCIJNY

---

Toj tekst byl napisany Josefom Ledinskym v 1762 i govori ob slovačskom pčelarstvenym folklorě onoj doby. Tu on jest představjeny v přeloženoj formě i s komentarjami ob něktoryh tradicijnyh dějanjah svězanyh s evropejskym pčelarstvom 18-ogo stolětja.

**Keywords:** traditional ecological knowledge, *Apis mellifera*, apiculture, folklore, folk beliefs, swarming, cultural entomology, Slovakia

The manuscript was published in 1912 in the ethnographic journal *Český lid* under the name “Starodávne slovenské obyčaje a pověry včelařské” (vol. 21, no. 9-10, pp. 450–452). The original article is freely available from the [publisher's website](#).

---

## I.

Driving bees out into the fields in the spring. On the first day of spring when you want to let all your bees out into the fields, bring three hazel branches and beat each hive three times with them saying: “In the name of God, under God's mighty hand, shall you work faithfully, nourish yourselves and me, and never shall you do harm to anyone else.”

## II.

So that the bees are strong in the spring. Smoke your bees with wild marjoram<sup>1</sup> and give them maple and birch sap to drink into their feeder.

## III.

So that your bees prosper and swarm well<sup>2</sup>. On Christmas day, take an ant nest (ants together with soil) and dust it all atop your hive while saying the following: “Just like this rich and fertile soil may you, my bees, thrive equally, with the help of God”.

## IV.

When you catch a swarm, take some soil from underneath it and dust it atop the new hive and recite the following: “Just like this rich and fertile soil may you, my bees, thrive equally, with the help of God”.

## V.

So that you have many swarms. Take two or three seeds from rye that stands on your Christmas table and place them with the other grains reciting the following: “As I present this gift to you, may you gift me with abundant swarms.”

## VI.

After you catch a swarm, place a bowl of porridge on the board on which you intend to stand the hive.

## VII.

So that you do not miss swarms. When the first swarm leaves the hive, take the knife used for harvesting honey, make a circle in

<sup>1</sup> Traditional European beekeepers believed that the health of their colonies could be improved by feeding them with various extracts from aromatic herbs. Some would even move their colonies next to fields of aromatic plants, as this was believed to protect bees from disease (Tadman, 2014, *The Australasian Beekeeper*, 115:450–451). This belief does not appear to be far from reality, as the pollen of some medicinal plants has been shown to contain fatty acids and essential oils with antimicrobial activities against the causative agents of American and European foulbrood (reviewed in Tihelka, 2018, *Arthropod-Plant Interactions*, 12:57–64).

<sup>2</sup> While beekeepers today place enormous efforts into swarm control, traditional beekeeping prizes swarming bees. In the early days before queen breeding, the only way to multiply the bee stock was to let it swarm. Without a swarm, a beekeeper was unable to populate new hives and replace dying colonies. When a swarm escaped, the beekeeper lost a considerable portion of his harvest. Such was the importance of swarms that in Slovakia until the 1940s, some beekeepers took days off work to look out for swarms.

It is interesting to note that out of the 26 practices listed Ledinský, 12 relate either directly or indirectly to swarming. This can be explained by the fact that catching a swarm and hiving it is a laborious task that carries much uncertainty, swarming itself is difficult to predict and could be complicated by many circumstances outside of the beekeeper's control. By modern standards, the biological knowledge of traditional beekeepers was quite limited and so

hiving a swarm must have presented a remarkable challenge for a person, whose livelihood depended on beekeeping. For this reason, various agrarian cultures around the world have developed a number of complex and sometimes even bizarre customs relating to catching swarms (Crane, 1983, *The Archaeology of Beekeeping*, p. 224, 244). The situation is somewhat analogous to what the Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski observed in one of his classical studies of the Trobriand islanders in the Solomon Sea. He observed that while fishing in the inner lagoons, which typically yielded abundant fish with little danger, the islanders had little use for superstitions or magic. However, out at the open sea where fishing was dangerous and the results always highly unpredictable, the Trobrianders could not rely on their knowledge and skills but instead practiced countless magic rituals “to secure safety and good results”. When faced with uncertain situations, human communities will often develop a rich repertoire of superstitions and habits which may otherwise seem irrational to the outside observer (Poggie and Gersuny, 1972, *Journal of American Folklore*, 85:66–72).

Bee swarms also held an important role in other areas of traditional rural life. Seeing a bee swarm was widely regarded as a good omen. In Medieval Europe, it was believed that if a swarm settled above the head of a child, it was a sign of a lucky future. In Holland, young ladies would decorate a tree on which swarms were known to settle before going to a ball (Moreaux, 1968, *l'Apiculteur*, 1968:21,72,91).

the earth around the swarm, stick the knife into the centre and leave it there.

## VIII.

When they are swarming, catch a single bee from the cluster, make a circle with your finger in soil and a small dimple in the centre; bury the bee in there and recite the following words: “Just like this trapped bee cannot escape, may the rest of you not escape me, with the help of the almighty God.”

## IX.

So that the swarm does not settle too high on a branch. On the Christmas day inweave a needle below the hive entrance and the swarms will settle low. Or take red hot coal and dust it on the spot where you want to hive your swarm. If the ash turns white, luck will be on your side; if the ash turns black your chosen spot is unlucky.

## X.

So that each swarm settles on a single branch. Rub the branch with thyme and wild ginger and the swarm will cluster on it.

## XI.

So that bees do not sting during hiving. Rub your hands with rue and they will not sting you.<sup>3</sup>

## XII.

So that a swarm stays inside a hive. Sprinkle the inside of the hive with female milk on Saint Lucy's Day<sup>4</sup>; cut three blocks of any kind of wood and leave them in place

that seems good for a hive until the Resurrection Sunday. On that day have a close look and if you find a grub under one of the wooden blocks, stand your hive on this spot. Or carefully store lamb wool at three different places. Inspect the wool after several days and if it is damp, stand your hive here. Or sprinkle the hives with female milk and the bees will stay in the hive.<sup>5</sup>

## XIII.

So that your bees do not abscond. Take three scented wax candles (candles that are made of wax with various herbs and are sold by women to treat fever) and attach them firmly to the inside of the hive; once you hive the swarm, it will never leave.

## XIV.

So that your bees swarm well, remain strong and resist robbing from other colonies. In autumn, when you have wine grapes, press them and boil with thyme, rhododendron<sup>6</sup> and dittany – pour this mixture into a trough and offer it to the bees every day. This is a well-tried remedy; it will not harm them; the bees will gain in strength.

## XV.

So that other bees do not rob your hives. Make a curtain out of red cloth and hang it over the apiary; they will stop attacking.

## XVI.

When you are cutting out comb in the spring<sup>7</sup>, give the bees bark; they will be strong and rich.

<sup>3</sup> Beekeepers used various remedies to prevent bees from stinging them for centuries. In many cases, this meant preparing various extracts and creams from aromatic plants. From surviving records, it seems that it was quite usual for beekeepers to experiment with various formulations, resulting into a variety of recipes from different regions of the world. Interestingly, recent research confirmed that floral odours can significantly decrease aggression in bees (Nouvian et al., 2015, *Nature Communications*, 6:10247) and some plant-based barrier creams have been shown to have the same effect (Duke, 1990, *Bee Craft*, 72:23).

<sup>4</sup> Celebrated on 13th December.

<sup>5</sup> The use of human milk to hive a swarm is certainly very interesting. A similar custom was once practiced by Czech beekeepers. Goat milk was thoroughly

mixed with bile and balm leaves and the resulting liquid was smeared on the inside of the hive (Anonymous, 1968, *Včelařský magazín*, 2:142–143).

<sup>6</sup> A similar rhododendron-based extract was sometimes used by traditional Czech beekeepers to hive swarms (Lisertová, 1912, *Český lid*, 21:309–310).

<sup>7</sup> In log hive beekeeping, it was usual that each spring the beekeeper would use a knife to remove half of the combs from the hive. This measure provided space for the bees to develop, it enabled them to renew the combs and the beekeeper also obtained honey for extraction. The beekeeper had to remember whether he cut out the combs in the left or right of the log hive so that the following year he could remove the opposite side.

## XVII.

When the bees do not want to swarm, seal of the hive entrance with a cloth and strike the back of the hive; they will swarm now.

## XVIII.

So that other attacking bees don't harm your stock. Smear the hive entrance with bear's grease; if that does not work use need-fire, mix it with honey and smear around the hive entrance. Or in the morning when you return from orthros,<sup>8</sup> go right to the bees and tell them "Almighty God, bless our livestock, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit!".<sup>9</sup> Depending on how many swarms you want, point at each hive with your right hand and show the desired number of fingers, for example one, two or three.

## XIX.

On Christmas, when going to the orthros, sweep your doorsill three times and take the dirt with you. After the divine service, be the first one to exit the church and dust the dirt in front of your bees three times.

## XX.

So that no bees attack your own bee stock. Take garlic, bear's grease, pepper and a small

amount of honey; mix it together and then in the spring before letting the bees out, spread it around the hive entrance; no other bees will be able to overpower them.

## XXI.

When bees are not at peace with each other. When your bees are not at peace with each other, cut out a part of their wax comb and smoke them with it; they will be calm.<sup>10</sup>

## XXII.

When swallows catch your bees. Take a brand-new pot with a lid, then take a swallow and a woodpecker; lay them inside the pot; seal the pot well and hang it above the fireplace until the swallow and woodpecker burn to dust. You should then mix this dust with honey and bear's grease and smear it around the hive entrance; the bees will swarm well.<sup>11</sup>

## XXIII.

When you buy bees. Upturn the hive and collect the soil from beneath it; and then dust this soil inside the hive. On the next day,

<sup>8</sup> A Greek Catholic and Orthodox religious ceremony held in the early morning.

<sup>9</sup> The practice of talking to bees is another re-occurring theme in Ledinský's work. The beekeeper's prayers were spoken out loud by the hives, perhaps for the bees to hear them. Throughout Europe, it was usual for the bee master or his family to tell the bees about important matters in the family such as births and marriages. When the beekeeper died, the relatives were expected to bring the news to his bees. If they failed to do so, it was believed that the bees may die, abscond the hive or sting the mourners. This custom of „telling the bees“ was practiced throughout Europe and later spread to the New World and Africa with European migrants (Haarhoff, 1960, *Greece & Rome*, 7:155–170).

Several explanations exist as to why the beekeeper and his family communicated with the bees in this way. Some postulate that old beekeepers regarded their bees as "small spirits" and recognised human qualities in them (Ransome, 1937, *The Sacred Bee in Ancient Times and Folklore*).

<sup>10</sup> It is possible that this traditional beekeeping practice designed to stop robberies in the apiary is in fact more than a mere superstition. Modern apicultural research suggests that guards recognises robber

bees in part by their scent. Each colony has its own distinctive smell, which enables bees to discriminate between nestmates and non-nestmates. This unique olfactory "signature" of each colony depends mainly on the mixtures of fatty acids and alkenes from combs (Breed et al., 2004, *Annual Review of Entomology*, 49:271–298). J. R. Free experimentally demonstrated that if bumble bees were caged and hanged above the comb of a strange colony, they would "soak up the scent" and would not be aggressed by the guards (Free, 1958, *Behaviour*, 12:233–242). It is possible that what Ledinský suggests here functions on the same principle. If robber bees are smoked with a wax comb from the colony they are attacking, they would likely too "soak up the smell" of the colony and would not be attacked by the guards.

<sup>11</sup> This somewhat brutal practice again rests upon rational foundations. Many foraging animals, including birds, assess the risk of predation by paying close attention to cues such as noise or scent that may indicate danger (Stephens et al., 2007, *Foraging: Behaviour and Ecology*, p. 309). The beekeepers may have assumed that swallows would avoid the scent of other dead birds and would therefore keep distance from the treated hives.

collect this soil again and smoke the bees with it.<sup>12</sup>

XXIV.

It is good to stand a beehive under a pear tree and smoke them with the plum fungus; it is said that this will stop robbing.

XXV.

So that you sell your bees well. Sweep debris from under your hive and dust it inside the bee's nest; or chip off a small piece of wood and throw it into the hive.

XXVI.

So that your bees are never stolen. Ask a young girl to give you a ball of thread on Christmas Eve; then kill a blind cat and rip it into pieces; dip the tread in its blood and tie the hives together with the red thread: you will never lose a colony again. Then burn the cat to ash and dust it over the hives and the hives will never leave your apiary.<sup>13</sup>



---

<sup>12</sup> Traditional European beekeepers generally held negative attitudes towards buying bees. In England, it was believed that selling bees was unlucky unless they were sold for gold and some even felt that it was unlucky to begin beekeeping by purchasing a colony (Croft, 1989, *Curiosities of Beekeeping*, p. 40).

<sup>13</sup> European beekeeping tradition believed that rituals carried out on the Christmas Eve would assure that the beekeeper's hive would not be stolen. Traditional Czech beekeepers were advised to run around their apiary naked three times with a rope in their hand on Christmas Eve to protect their bees from theft (Anonymous, 1968, *Včelařský magazín*, 2:142–143).