

Letter from an Austrian Officer in Hungary, 1848-1849

From: W. Baron, "Letter II," in *Scenes of the Civil War in Hungary, In 1848 and 1849 with Personal Adventures of an Austrian Officer* (Philadelphia, E.H. Butler and Company, 1850), pp. 24-38.

Military Frontier of Hungary; its Extent and Situation—Frontier troops—The Seressans; their personal appearance, costume—Dress of the other Border Troops their character; military spirit of their Women; their personal beauty; their costume—Villages of the Borderers—Family houses—Patriarchal manners—Service required of the Border-Soldier—Guard-posts.

The military frontier, which, as you know, furnishes eighteen regiments of infantry, and one of hussars, the well-known Szekler regiment, is composed of men belonging to several tribes, differing considerably in language, manners, and bodily conformation. The three Szekler regiments in Transylvania are of Magyar origin, and are now for the most part ranged on the side of the Hungarians. Other regiments—the Wallacho-Illyrian, for instance—comprehend a great number of Wallachians. In the Banat regiments, the Slavonian and Croatian, the Slavonian tribe predominates; and about two-thirds of all the border-soldiers speak Slavonian, though, it is true, in widely differing dialects. But in this tract, upwards of 1000 (English) miles in length, from 20 to 60 broad, and extending from the Bocca di Cattaro to the Moldau, there are many more discrepancies.

In the East is situated the lofty mountain range of Transylvania, the abode of the Szeklers; then the low marshy grounds of the Danube and the Saave; and, lastly, to wards the West, the wild and lofty mountains of Ogulin stretch away to the Adriatic Sea. here dwell the most uncouth, but the bravest, the hardest, and at the same time well disciplined soldiers of the Licean, Ottochan, and Ogulin border-regiments, all of whom, or at least as many as could possibly be spared, are now in Italy—tall, bony figures, with meagre faces, sharp features, the upper lip covered with a long moustache, not closely twisted up to a point, like that of the Magyars, but hanging loosely down

The frame of such a borderer seems to be nothing but sinew and muscle; and with ease—nay, without appearing to be at all affected by them—he endures hardships and fatigue to which we, seasoned soldiers, are scarcely equal. A piece of oaten bread, a dram of *sklikowitz* (plum-brandy) suffice him, on an emergency, for a whole day; and the Ottochan, Ogulin, and Liccan soldier, as well as the men of the regiments of Kreutz and St. George, will march on untired alike in the most scorching heat and the most furious snow-storm, and desires no other couch than what the bare ground, no other roof than what the sky, afford him.

He possesses the shrewdness to avail himself of every petty advantage that offers, whether in reconnoitring an enemy's position, or in a hand to hand fight, and is a master in the use of arms. I have myself seen a Seressan, with his *stanitza*—(a long Turkish gun) for a wager, shoot the bowl off a short pipe, which a comrade, at the distance of eighty paces, had to hold up in one hand above his head. Any Seressan would wager ten to one that he hits a swallow as it flies, at thirty to forty paces; and, when one of them misses, he becomes a laughing-stock to his comrades.

These Seressans are wild fellows, of singular aspect, such as is not to be found elsewhere in Europe. A high cap, of brown or black felt or fur, covers their long shaggy hair. The bearded

face is lean, with sharp features, and darkly tanned. The spare, sinewy body is clad in a short brown jacket, with a half-standing collar, bordered with red braiding, and wide, dirty white linen trousers, tied at the ankle. • The foot-clothing consists in wide blue and white stockings, drawn up to the thigh, and sandal-shoes fastened with thongs. Round the waist they wear a wide red or yellow sash, in which are stuck the broad Turkish handjar, usually in a red, richly ornamented sheath, and a long pistol, the butt of which is often richly inlaid. A small cartouch-pouch hangs from a black bandelier, adorned with numerous yellow nail-heads, over the shoulder; on the other, the long Turkish gun, which has a very narrow barrel. These guns are frequently of very beautiful workmanship, enriched with ornaments of gold and silver, and often of considerable value. In general they are booty taken in some Turkish war or other, and transmitted, as dearly prized heir looms, from father to son, and hence almost all of them have very ancient locks.

In like manner as the hussar wears his pelisse, the Seressian has his long cloak, of a particular kind of thick woollen stuff, continually fastened about his neck, even in fine weather, by a double cord: it is lined and turned up with red, and provided behind with a large hood. From these cloaks they have obtained the name of lied-mantles; and under this designation, or that of Pandours, they acquired in the Seven Years' War, under Trenk's command, a somewhat equivocal reputation. In bad weather, the Seressian draws this cloak about him, throws the hood over his head and face, and thus defies the pelting of the most pitiless storm.

These people serve partly on foot, partly on small, mean-looking, but nimble and never-tiring horses, unequalled in particular for climbing the steepest hills. They constitute the frontier gendarmerie; live in constant hostility with the wild predatory bands, which, coming from Bosnia and Dalmatia, frequently take up their abode here; and this occupation is apt to communicate something savage to themselves. If the Seressian can take the robber by surprise; he shoots him dead upon the spot, with the same *sang-froid* as we should shoot a hare: likewise the robber murders the Seressian when he falls into his hands; and often, in the most cruel manner, cutting off; while alive, ears and nose, and then hanging him on a tree. Both parties, who bear the most implacable hatred to each other, never think of taking prisoners: with them taking and hanging are synonymous.

If the Seressans, as well as the Croatian frontier regiments dwelling here, have not clever officers, who know how to maintain strict discipline, which, with a little energy, is not difficult, licentiousness is apt to creep in among them; but under good leaders they make the best soldiers in the world, especially for advanced post service. Subsequently, in Hungary, I have been the only officer of thirty or more Seressans, and have never had reason to complain of want of obedience. Of course, the Ban, who is as much feared as beloved by them, understands how to keep up admirable discipline.

The clothing of the other frontier troops is precisely similar to that of the regular Hungarian regiments, except that, instead of white, they wear a brown uniform coat, with black leather accoutrements. The coats, in deed, now looked excessively shabby; and scarcely half the troops assembled by the Ban in Croatia and Slavonia against Hungary, were in proper uniform. The field-battalions of the regiments were almost all in Italy; it was therefore necessary to call out the re serves and the third battalion; and very many of these men, in general no longer in the service, were out of uniform, and wore their brown cloaks and linen *gatjes* [trousers] The officers and subalterns alone appeared in regular uniform. So torn and tattered were also the coats of some of the Ottochans who had come with me from Peschiera, that the men were obliged to fling them away, and to have recourse to their brown woollen cloaks and their

working jackets. These brave fellows had been but a few days at home, with their wives and children, before they were obliged to march off again; and they did so cheerfully and joyously, amidst hearty *Zivios!* for Jellachich.

What the military frontier, and particularly the Croatian and Slavonian part of it, has performed this year, is almost incredible. About 35,000 men were in Italy; 20,000 were required for the protection of the frontier itself; for the Bosnians, excited by agents of Kossuth's, taking advantage of the critical situation of affairs, attempted incursions; and yet the Ban, in not quite six weeks, brought together 36,000 men, who certainly were not so completely equipped as to be fit to appear at a review under the Linden (Limes) at Berlin, but, nevertheless, as fit for fighting, and animated by as good a spirit as could be wished.

What enthusiasm, what zeal for the Emperor and the independence of Croatia! I have myself seen, in districts of the Ottochan regiment, wives and maidens take up the musket, and repair to the chain of posts on the Turkish boundary, that all the men might be able to take the field: and such an eight days' duty at these frontier posts is no trifle, and requires not a little firmness. Old, half-invalided, frontier subalterns, incapacitated for taking the field, were the commandants; young, many of them handsome females composed their troops. By my faith, I should have had no objection to be the commander of such a corps of Ottochan females myself!

They are almost all pretty—nay, even handsome; tall, elegant figures, yet plump; small feet, oval faces, long dark hair, hanging, braided into two tresses, far down the back; rather dark complexion, it is true, but at the same time dark, animated eyes, red lips, exquisitely beautiful teeth; and brisk and lively withal in manner and gesture. This, you see, accounts for the wish to command such a corps of Amazons. At any rate, it does one good to behold again friendly female faces, instead of seeing, as of late in Italy, tongues almost always stretched out at us. This was really done, shortly before the outbreak of the revolution, by a lady of very high rank, who met me in her carriage, and whom I politely saluted, because I had been several times in companies with her. Besides, the costume of the female sex here is very handsome and ornamental. The sleeves of the chemise are neatly worked with a variety of arabesques, and every seam is braided with gay cording, and the stockings are generally coloured. A Croatian woman, in her Sunday dress, looks just like a female peasant on the stage.

And these women frequently astonish by their courage and fortitude. We had wives of frontier soldiers with us in Peschiera, and on the march through Hungary, who equalled the men in the endurance of fatigue, and displayed undaunted courage in battle. In Hungary, we had with us a young Croatian, the daughter of an old Seressan, who was as daring a rider as the best hussar, and more than once fearlessly joined the men in the charge. An Hungarian *jurat* gave her, in an action, a cut on the right cheek, which she returned with a severe blow on the arm, seized the bridle of his horse, and took him prisoner. This horse, a gray stallion, she ever afterwards rode, and refused to sell, though I offered her forty ducats for him.

The villages of the borderers in the mountains are mean and scattered, the houses almost all in the Swiss style. In the rich plain of Slavonia, on the other hand, where wine, maize, wheat, and capital vegetables of all sorts are grown in abundance, the villages are large and regular. Fine alleys, mostly of plum-trees, which are planted here in great numbers, border the wide village streets; the houses are spacious, neat, in good repair; no filth, no disorder, no decay—at the same time, no beggars, no poor, no rags; every where plenty, regularity, activity.

All this makes a most agreeable impression, especially on coming from Italy—the land of dirt, beggary, and every kind of disorder. The people here prate less than the Italians, but then they are more industrious; and as for courage, I would engage, with one company of borderers, to drive a thousand of those Roman or Neapolitan volunteers, who made believe that they would eat us up, hide, hair, and all, to the world's end.

Upon the whole, I have taken such a liking to the country and way of living here on the frontiers, that I have a great mind, when the war is over, if I am living, to get myself exchanged from my hussar regiment into a Slavonian frontier regiment.

What has particularly pleased me on the frontiers, is the peculiar custom of family habitations. There is something quite patriarchal in it. To every house on the frontier is attached a sufficient extent of land, which belongs in common to the whole family, but cannot be sold by it. In general, the eldest of the family, mostly a border soldier, whose term of service has expired, and who still belongs only to the reserve, is elected by the others to be house-father, and his wife is the house-mother. These are then invested with the superintendence over the whole family, which consists of children, grandchildren, sons of all degrees of relationship, to the number frequently of sixty or eighty individuals in a single house.

All take their part in agricultural labour, as well as in their meals, and also in any surplus money. The latter is divided by the house-father, who settles all petty disputes, and when his influence is insufficient, applies to the captain of the company. Every house must furnish the company to whose district it belongs with a certain number of soldiers, in proportion to its adult male inhabitants. The unmarried, and indeed all up to the age of thirty-five belong in general to the field-battalions, and the others to the reserve.

In time of peace, the field-battalions are assembled for a Week only in spring, in companies, and for a not much longer time in autumn, in regiments, or even larger divisions, for the purpose of exercising; and, further, only four days in each of the winter months are destined for manoeuvring in detail. It is only on these occasions that the soldier wears his complete uniform, which he keeps at home; at other times he goes in the ordinary dress of the country, and receives pay only for the period that he is called out, or on guard-duty.

The frontier soldier is supplied by the government with shoes, accoutrements, arms, and ammunition; the other parts of his uniform he must procure himself. With the exception of extraordinary cases, the soldier in the field-battalions must go upon guard-duty the whole of every fourth, or even third week. At his departure, the family to which he belongs supplies him with provisions, which he cooks himself at his post. He takes with him to the frontier, musket, sword, cartouch-box, and cloak; for the rest, he wears the ordinary dress of the country—the staff-guard, which is in complete uniform, alone excepted.

The guard-posts consist, in the dry, mountainous part of the frontier, in Transylvania, and again, from the Unna to the Bocca di Cattaro, of huts sunk in the ground. Each of these huts, which are at so short a distance apart, that the posts can see one another, contains six or eight men. At certain distances, there are larger posts of twelve or fourteen men, with a corporal, and at a still greater distance the officers' posts, from which the main patrols set out. At every officer's post is set up a signal pole, with a barrel, which is fired, in case of emergency, to alarm the district upon any serious incursion of the Bosnians.

In the marshes of the Danube, the Saave, and the Unna, the guard-posts are raised upon poles, and communicate with each other by means of causeways, or plank bridges. A wooden gallery runs round these guard-houses, and there the men on duty walk to and fro. This whole line of posts along the Turkish frontier has the two-fold object of preventing, by means of a strict cordon, the introduction of the plague, and of forming a defence against the predatory incursions of Bosnian hordes of banditti. There are generally about 8,000 men upon guard on the frontier line.

--Scanned by Matthew Davenport (mfd25@cornell.edu)