

FALCONRY IN SLOVAKIA

Falconry has been an integral part of the Slovak tradition since as long back as the ninth century. In this feature we have a series of fascinating articles which look both at the early history of falconry in Slovakia and falconry in the modern day.

SLOVAK HISTORY OF FALCONRY TRADITIONS

By Laco Molnar DVM ,PhD
IAF delegate, Slovak Falconers Club

Beside the traditions and habits left for a new generation by our ancestral falconers they also passed on a message:

*We do not hunt only for the prey...
but for that beauty during the hunt*

The present region of Slovakia ,was inhabited by the ancient Slavic nations. Between the 1-5 century the countryside went through a big change caused by deforestation and drying out the marshlands. This created large patches of steppe land suitable for migratory birds as a temporary stop on their migrations. The large amount of birds and demand for meat encouraged and introduced falconry as an effective hunting style. The cultural relation with eastern nations who entered Europe in the second century helped a lot with introduction of falconry into the Karpatian region.

During the era of Great Moravia (ninth century) - the first common state of the former Czechs and Slovaks - falconry was already accepted as a prestigious activity of royalty and contributed to its increased standard as very effective way to introduce game meat to daily cuisine.

The golden age of falconry during the period of the 11-15th century reworded Slovak falconry with great attention. The mountain region supplied falcons and falconers for other European castles and royal families. As mentioned in a written note from 1504 "The saker falcon from Nitra region is faster than a northern wind and claims higher rank than other falcons."

The introduction of firearms in the 18th century negatively affected falconry in Slovakia as well. Falconry was a sport and passion of the former royalty, and after the French revolution it was forbidden by law. There are only a few sporadic notes and

reports about falconers until the first World War.

Renaissance of Falconry in Slovakia.

The first enthusiasts got organized and held the first falconry meet in 1965. Falconers Marosi and Doubrava presented themselves with exceptional birds. On 19th January 1967 falconry was accepted as a recognized hunting method and falconers united themselves in the first common Czechoslovakian Falconers Club. 1971 was the year when the Federative Falconers Club got divided

into two national Organizations: The Slovak and Czech Falconers Clubs working under the larger umbrella of the National Hunting association. In 2007 we celebrated our 40th anniversary and together with the Czech Club presented our common history at Engelfield festival in the UK. At the moment the club is uniting over 250 active members and almost 50 candidates.

Among the greatest achievements of the Club we can count the continuity and sustainable work with the young generation , which is provided by two forestry high schools where falconry is a part of the curriculum

and is lectured as an accredited subject. The subject of falconry is incorporated also into the curriculum of university education in Faculty of Forestry in Zvolen. This is a public institution supported by government and all students will get familiar with knowledge about birds of prey, training ,hunting , legislation and history of falconry. Besides this the Club organizes training courses for new candidates willing to become a club members. They have to pass a one year training supervised by a senior master, and successfully pass the exam.



The annual series of fox and roe deer hunts is the most famous event in Slovakian falconry.

The Slovak Falconers Club also makes large efforts towards the national regulatory bodies (parliament and ministry) to reduce one sided pressure from the radical green movements .Thanks to our club president we were able to incorporate such a positive formulation into the valid legislation which made the falconry and hawk keeping easier and hunting with birds has become a recognized legal style - with an accepted exemption specially for falconers within the legislation regulating hunting. This is a huge relief after many years of suffering due to extremely strict regulation –much harder for falconers than anywhere else in Europe.

The main falconry events are usually the international falconry meets in Opočno –getting known during the time of former Czecho-Slovakia. Nowadays the Slovak Falconers Club organizes also its annual meet in DIAKOVCE. A fertile land close to Danube rivers, abundant in small game it gives a wonderful opportunity to present falconry in all its beauty. Regular visitors, politicians, government ministers and also public people sympathetic with falconry annually find a great joy .

The most famous event is the annual series of fox and roe deer hunts in the northern part of the country, the mountain scenery during a few days hunting event challenges the fitness of the hunting birds as well as the falconers.

The club members fought a long battle against discriminating legislation, many legal cases and disputes were on the daily agenda of the club meetings. Extremely strict procedures regulating captive birds of prey, their breeding and international traveling meant that it stayed a passion for only the most determined falconers. But our resistance proved our rights and in 2008 we started a first season with falconry-friendly regulations accepted by our parliament. We achieved the sustainability and reputation for the falconers and for their passion. After many years fighting for our constitutional rights ,we believe that acceptance by UNESCO gives legal guarantees and helps shield falconry from radical effects and negative influences if a change in political orientation occurs. We offer full support and our active contribution and cooperation with the international falconry community. 🦅

WITH EAGLES IN SLOVAKIA

By Gary Timbrell



Some of the 16 eagles lined up for the day's hunting.

Having been a part of IAF since my first term as delegate in 2000, I was delighted and honoured to represent IHC once again at an AGM. This, its 41st, was held in the Hunting Castle of Palarikovo in Slovakia on 21st and 22nd October, 2010. Advisory Committee Meetings were held at the Slovakian Falconers' Eagle Meet in Vrbod on the two days prior to the AGM. Since I take an active role as PRO for IAF I was obliged to attend the AC meetings as well as the AGM itself. Vrbod is a six hour drive from Vienna airport (five from Bratislava) and nestles under the High Tatras mountain range which continues unbroken into the Transylvanian Carpathians. This is the wildest country I have ever seen. It is completely different to the neat Czech countryside many IHC members know from international meets in Opočno. Small villages are scattered on the rolling country between the mountains. Each house has a vegetable plot and poultry yard and at the edge of each settlement there is a gypsy encampment, an unromantic one with a standpipe, no electricity, mud and barefoot children. It is not an affluent area. There are strings of garlic around all the doors and

windows. The weather is grey; the mountains attract drizzle and mists. There are ruined castles. It's like an old black and white Hollywood film set.

I only managed to see one day's hunting. At the meet there was the usual line up of the eagles (16) and formal speeches from the club chairman and one from the president of the local hunters association.

“The reason there are only eagles here is that there is no small game and the reason there is no small game is there are too many foxes and lynx. These have cleaned out the hares, the rabbits, the pheasants and the partridge. Oh, and don't go too far into the woods for a pee, there are wolves there and the bear population in this area is very high this year so we have fewer deer.”

I did not go into the woods.

Those of us lucky enough to have visited central Europe have seen the high calibre of the Czech and the Slovak eagle hunters and even the Czechs acknowledge the supremacy of the Slovaks in this. Their eagles are calm, show no aggression on the fist and even no aggression when accidentally slipped

THE EAGLE HUNTERS OF SLOVAKIA.

By Adrian Lombard



A successful day at the Slovakian Falconers Eagle Meet.

in an impromptu cast. In discussions with our main guide, Laslo, two reasons came out for this, constant attention to the extent of almost living with one's eagle and catching something almost every day, at least five days in the week. Note: remember when we did this with sparrowhawks? We used to be good, too. They carry their eagles mostly hooded, but remove the hoods from time to time, for example if you admire their bird. This seems to help keep them constantly manned and avoids lethargy. There was a professional team of beaters provided by the hunting association and paid for by the spectators in our fees. We were left fairly free to stand where we wanted during a beat so long as we stayed clear of the falconers who assessed the best slips and took up positions on the higher knolls. We stood in small groups – silent unless we wanted abuse in four languages – while the beat came towards us coming through rough patches in the open fields and sending foxes and roe-deer towards the waiting eagles.

Despite the large predators we saw many, many roe deer, often coming towards us in family groups of three, two parents with their calf of the year, now almost indistinguishable from

its mother. As a rule the eagles were slipped individually and they selected one of the deer, usually avoiding the large males with their antlers. There were as many foxes as roe deer and these provided more interesting slips. With the deer it was a straight speed chase with a final attempt for height, a strike and hold-on-tight while the falconer runs like the wind to assist. With the foxes it became more of a course with the fox jinking left and right and the eagle having to throw-up and wing-over. Neither quarry is a walkover. Many roe were refused at the last second and some escaped.

The most spectacular flight I saw was on a wily fox that turned his head and snarled every time the eagle came in for the strike. Three times the eagle threw up, but the third time put in a little jink herself causing the fox to turn his head and snap the wrong side. The eagle hit him hard, one foot across his head, the other across his back, pinning him to the ground. This won a justified round of applause from the field. Four deer and four foxes were taken on every day of the three day meet, an impressive total of 24 head of quarry. The deer were eaten at the banquet after the AGM, but not the foxes. 🦊

The 2010 IAF AGM was held in Slovakia. I attended this and had the pleasure of being hosted by the Slovak Falconry Club and meeting up with old friends – Laco Molnar and Lubomir Engler – who had attended the IAF Meeting hosted by SAFA in 2008. The initial part of the Meeting, involving the IAF Advisory Committee Meeting, was held in Kezmarok-Vrbov, in the foothills of the High Tetas Mountains. I must admit some trepidation in setting off, via Vienna, for a place whose name I still cannot pronounce or spell! Nevertheless, set off I did, accompanied by my long-suffering spouse – who had been conned into believing we were going to an Italian seaside resort (well Venice and Vienna do sound similar) and who remains under the impression that somewhere our trip went irrevocably and dreadfully wrong! I admit that I would not have made the Meeting if we had not been met in Bratislava by Laco who took us on an amazing drive across Slovakia past lakes and forests decked out in autumn colors. The trip was interspersed by Medieval Castles perched on the most improbable kopjes and rumored to have been occupied by the villainous Counts and Countesses who bathed in human blood before breakfast. We settled into the hot spring resort hotel on the outskirts of Vrbov. The company and camaraderie made

up for any short-comings as well as the fact that the hotel grounds were littered with an array of Eagles and fairly rugged looking falconers including some from as far afield as Holland and Germany. The Eagle hunting Meet in Slovakia is recognized as the World's finest and this was attested



Scenes from the Eagle hunt



to by Bakyt Karnakbayev of Kazakhstan who was truly impressed by the events of the next three days. The birds were all Golden Eagles; several were the large central Asiatic “Berkut” subspecies. These are spectacular birds, huge and dark chocolate brown with golden highlights. Several were imprints but there was no sign of aggression towards their handlers. One of the Falconers told me that it is important that the birds are hunted frequently and kill regularly to focus the aggression. They were all in outstanding condition.

We spent 3 days going out to hunt. Hunting grounds were organized with the local hunting clubs. The target quarry was Roe deer and Red Fox although young Boar could be flown if seen. The Falconers were welcome to take the Roe Deer, at €100 a head, as the Roe Deer numbers need to be controlled to increase the numbers of Red Deer. Red Fox were seen as vermin and could be hunted for free. Understandably, some of the falconers wanted to avoid too many roe deer and hoped for foxes. The method of hunting involved identifying a suitable valley with a river system containing reeds and bushes in its floor and surrounded by agricultural lands. The Eagle Falconers would position themselves, seated strategically on the slopes of the valley around the marsh. A very energetic and hard working group of beaters then made their way through the valley, singing and clapping their hands, intermittently a roe deer or fox would break cover and the eagle closest was allowed to fly it. The deer would run, twisting and jinking, while the eagle tried to get a foot to them. Ideally, a foot to the back and one to the head would bring the deer down, thrashing and kicking, and the falconer must run in subdue it. The fox would run and the eagle would throw up and try to stoop onto them. The fox may then stop and try to bite at the eagle as it came in. Once again the falconer needed

to get in quickly before injury was done.

All the action took place in beautiful surroundings. The rolling hillsides of the foothills of the High Tetras Mountains were covered with agricultural lands and patches of woodland in autumnal colors. Little villages were dotted around and were characterized by the wooden Churches with onion shaped steeples. The houses were painted in a variety of bright colors, pinks, yellows and greens. I was told that during the communist era, houses were not painted in different colors and tended to be drab and uniform. Certainly much is changing since the establishment of a democracy. Historic villages are being renovated, highways built and signs of development are everywhere.

On one of the days, we hunted the slopes of a large hill which was topped by the ruins of an enormous medieval castle. It was the most dramatic setting for a hunt but I could not help thinking how fortunate I am, never to have been asked to assault those stone walls, struggling up the steep hillside while the inmates poured stones, arrows and boiling oil at my head. It must have made a strange picture as I, a South African stood on a boulder beneath those walls with two Arabic falconers while the autumn wind tried to freeze our butts off.

This was a wonderful experience and I have been extremely fortunate to share the hawking with these skilled and talented Eagle hunters. They were wonderful hosts and we were welcomed into their culture and homeland. The Eagle hunting was unique and dramatic; these Central European hunters have proved themselves Masters of the Art.

Something was salvaged of my marriage on the way home with a stop-over in Istanbul and the purchase of a very expensive leather coat! 🦅