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Baron Franz Nopcsa and His Ambition for the Albanian Throne

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Baron Franz Nopcsa was born on 3rd May 1877 at the family estate in Szacsal near Hatzeg in Transylvania. His family were Hungarian aristocrats. He studied initially at the Maria-Theresianum in Vienna and then from 1897-1903, when he obtained his Doctorate, at the University of Vienna. He is now considered as one of the founders of palaeophysiology and is known mainly for his studies on reptile fossils, a subject on which he lectured. Nopcsa also became known for his research into the tectonic structures of the western Balkan mountain ranges and became fascinated by Albania. As a leading Albanologist of his day, fifty-four of his one hundred and eighty-six publications (1907-1932) relate to Albania. Nopcsa committed suicide on 25th April 1933, after having shot

his long time Albanian secretary Bayazid Elmas Doda. He is now as well known to German Albanologists as Edith Durham is in the UK.

Baron Franz Nopcsa of Felsöszilvás (1877-1933) is a typical example of the early twentieth century Western scholar whose interest in Albania was ignited not simply out of curiosity for this *exotic* spot that was gradually emerging from the five-century long Turkish eclipse, but primarily by the interests of his own country. Nopcsa was not the independent tourist-traveller-turned-Balkan-scholar of the Edith Durham type. Nor was he a Byronic hero who sided with the Albanians from 1908 to 1916 solely because he wanted to help them to win their independence and establish an Albanian state. In spite of his disagreements with the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nopcsa was throughout his involvement in Albania more of a 'volunteer' on behalf of Austria-Hungary than of the Albanians.

Nopcsa's publications indicate that he was 'a most careful observer' of the terrible consequences of the blood feuds in Albania (Durham 1985, 125). He also made some interesting comments on early and modern Balkan and Albanian history. In spite of his vast work on the Balkans and Albania, Nopcsa's claim to fame lies primarily with his contribution to palaeontology.

For a student of dinosaurs, Nopcsa's initial visits to the Balkans and particularly to Albania were inspirational and enlightening mainly because Albania, especially its Northern regions, seemed to have frozen in time, hibernating for centuries. With its 'wild', 'uncivilised' landscape, laws and customs, Albania and the Albanians must have been in Nopcsa's eyes something of a sleeping dinosaur.

But if Nopcsa was rightly impressed by the living past he encountered in Northern Albanian mountains, he was out of touch with that part of Albania and Albanians that was changing rapidly. Nopcsa, the successful palaeontologist, was not always the objective social observer of the Albania that was struggling to understand, come to terms with, and respond to the challenges of the twentieth century. To Nopcsa, as well as to other Western writers and travellers of his time, this new, emerging, challenging Albania was of no particular interest. Nopcsa apparently visited and departed from Albania with some preconceived notions, which he maintained to the end of his life.

Nopcsa's memoirs abound in conceited and often arrogant remarks about contemporary Albanians who were trying hard to save their country as the terminally-ill Ottoman Empire was finally dying. Nopcsa's notes on the Albanian Congress held in Trieste from 26 February to 6 March 1913 verify this. His observations are of particular interest because of the insight he offers into the apparent intrigues and backlashes in the selection of a European noble to become the King of the newly independent Albania. Nopcsa's memoirs about this particular event also reveal that his conclusions on some of the Albanian historical figures of the day were superficial and often erroneous. He takes it for granted that most of the Albanian patriots were simpletons and traitors to Albania. In his eyes, they all had a gargantuan greed for privileges and could be easily bribed. This is what Nopcsa writes on Ismail Qemali, then head of the provisional government of the newly founded Albanian state:

As a long-term friend of the Greeks and as their paid agent, he [Ismail Qemali]...promised to facilitate their occupation of Janina if he remained head of Albania. It is obvious that Ismail Qemali wished to remain at the head of the provisional government because such positions usually bring in a lot of money.... I was easily able to foresee that Ismail Qemali would betray Albania to Greece because Stead had told me much about Qemali's relations with Greece in 1911 and

because the writer Alexander Ular...had revealed to me a number of details about Ismail's conduct as Governor of Tripoli. When Berchtold asked me what I thought of Ismail Qemali two weeks after he had founded the provisional government, I said to him quite literally, 'Ismail Qemali is an ass'. Ismail Qemali's betrayal of Albania was confirmed to me completely by Eqerem Bey Vlora, who was himself the son of the Albanian ambassador in Vienna, Sureja Bey, and the nephew of Ismail Qemali. I do not know what the Greeks intended to do with Ismail Qemali once they had occupied Janina. Perhaps they wished to proceed according to the old saying, 'The moor has done his duty, the moor may now depart'. At any rate, intensive propaganda campaigns were being waged in Europe on behalf of the various pretenders to the Albanian throne while provisional government was being headed by Ismail Qemali, who was open to bribery, though only with large sums of money.

(Elsie 1999, 332-3)

It is not for me to defend the figure of Ismail Qemali or of any other Albanian politician, past and present. Politics and corruption continually go hand in hand everywhere. I simply intend to highlight a few flaws in the way Nopcsa draws some of his conclusions. Ismail Qemali may have been an 'ass', in Nopcsa's eyes, but few can deny that he was not an extraordinary 'ass'. A few days after the declaration of the independence of Albania at Vlorë on 28 November 1912, the Italian Consul reported to Rome:

At the sudden apparition of new, unexpected enemies that could have condemned for ever the existence of the Albanian nation, they [the Albanians] got rid of all antagonism and gathered around a man quite superior for intelligence, experience and cleverness, and struggled to save themselves declaring their independence and applying to Italy and

to Austria, both willing to sponsor their cause thanks to a harmonious contrast.

(Falaschi 1992, 106)

The ‘quite superior’ man chosen by all Albanians was the ‘ass’ Ismail Qemali. Ismail Qemali, notes Renzo Falaschi, was ‘a man who had renounced wealth and glory for the sake of democracy and progress and love of his country’ (Ibid.). His father was a patriot deported by the Sublime Porte in Asia Minor for quite a long time, while the rest of the family were exiled in Salonica. After completing his secondary studies at the renowned Zosimea Gymnasium of Ioannina, he went to the Law School of Istanbul where he started work at the same time as an interpreter at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Ismail Qemali the ‘ass’ at that time was fluent in Albanian, Italian, French, Greek and Turkish. In Istanbul he was soon noticed for his ‘eclectic culture’, ‘ready wit’, and ‘enterprising spirit’. At the age of twenty-five, Ismail the ‘ass’ became Governor of Varna, welcoming Emperor Francis Joseph on his way to the opening of the Suez Canal. Ismail Qemali the ‘ass’ was also a very successful Governor of Constanza. As a governor he was instrumental in establishing agricultural banks for the welfare of Varna and restored an old Roman aqueduct to supply water to Constanza that needed it badly. This ‘ass’ of a governor was a committed humanist and scholar of the classical Balkan culture. It was mainly thanks to him that the site of the famous Pelasgic sanctuary of Dodona was found in Epirus. Ismail the ‘ass’ was the President of the Danube Commission. General Gordon himself must have been quite an ‘ass’ to have tried to have Ismail Qemali at his side at Khartoum, and to have had predicted that Ismail the ‘ass’ ‘will be a great man’ (Falaschi 1985, 352-3). Likewise, the famous liberal statesman Midhat Pasha must have been a real ‘ass’ to have considered Ismail Qemali as an asset to put into practice his progressive programmes. Like several other distinguished high-ranking Albanian politicians in the service of the Porte, Ismail Qemali strove hard, and of course failed, in his attempts to reform the Ottoman Empire. In 1892 Ismail Qemali

the 'ass' wrote to the Sultan: 'The Ottoman Empire is of all nations that one that has most need of reform and reformers' (Falaschi 1975, 229-40). Renzo Falaschi states that Ismail Qemali's reports about the rights of the Armenians, the questions of Egypt and Crete and the Russian expansion into the Mediterranean were 'masterpieces of realism and political clairvoyance' (1992, 107).

Having exiled him for seven years in Asia Minor in 1877, the Sultan planned to intern Ismail Qemali again directly after appointing him Governor General of Tripolitania in 1900, something which he avoided at once. From then onwards, he devoted his life to the independence of Albania. The decision cost him dearly: the Sultan tried to murder him, sentenced him to death by default and finally confiscated his properties.

From 1900 to 1912 Ismail Qemali was constantly on the move. He travelled to Brussels, Rome, Paris, London, Budapest, Bucharest and Vienna meeting senior diplomats and political figures, working hard to pave the way for the Great Powers to accept initially the idea of an autonomous then an independent Albania. By the time Ismail Qemali the 'ass' proclaimed the independence of Albania, he was a politician and diplomat of international standards. Had Ismail Qemali been a Greek agent and 'open to bribery...with large sums of money' (Elsie 1999, 333), he would not have left his family in Nice, in the words of Nopcsa, 'in virtual poverty' (Ibid. 334).

Nopcsa offers no evidence whatsoever to substantiate his claim of Ismail Qemali's betrayal of Albania. It is regrettable that a palaeontologist of Nopcsa's international standing draws hasty and incorrect conclusions about one of Albania's most prominent figures of the first half of twentieth century based on gossip coming from an obscure nephew. Would any one in their right mind depend on HRH Prince Edward's television programmes to draw conclusions about his Great-Uncle, Edward VIII, the Duke of Windsor?

Nopcsa's conclusion that some Albanian politicians are open to bribery perhaps rings true now more than in the teens and the twenties of the twentieth century. What sets Ismail Qemali the 'ass' apart from some Albanian politicians today is that while he was willing to spend his own money to travel around the world for the sake of Albania, they are now wasting the money of the Albanian taxpayers and of foreign donors to travel lavishly around the globe for pleasure.

Nopcsa's intense dislike for Ismail Qemali was apparently calculated. Ismail Qemali was unique among Albanian political figures of his time for his knowledge, experience and expertise in politics, economics, culture and diplomacy. If Nopcsa could discredit Ismail Qemali, he would not find it very difficult to 'rubbish' less well-known Albanian leaders.

Reading Nopcsa's notes on the Albanian Congress of Trieste, one could easily conclude that he alone was its life and soul, that without him there could have been no such event, that he dictated and conducted everything there, and that each and everyone at that gathering was eager to listen only to what he had to say about everything all the time. This is how Nopcsa sums up the Congress:

All in all, there was nothing but hot air at the congress.... The day before the congress was to end, I therefore felt compelled to call Faik Bey Konitza aside and inform him that the congress had as yet done no work at all and that the least one could expect from a political congress was a resolution. Faik agreed and I dictated to him a resolution which the congress was to telegraph to all the Great Powers the next day. The matter was attended to within half an hour, and the next day, Faik presented the document to the congress as a resolution.

(Elsie 1999, 335)

Nopcsa admits himself, although not in these words, that he was the best schemer attending the Congress. He used Ismail Qemali's 'penniless' and 'retarded' son Tahir (Ibid., 334) to thwart Albert Ghika's attempts to become King of Albania. Nopcsa has at hand a label for everyone – Albanian or otherwise – at the Congress in Trieste: Fazil Pasha Toptani was a miser (Ibid. 333), Stefan Zurani was vain and naïve, Albert Ghika, 'like many a Romanian had a long career as an impostor behind him' (Ibid. 334), and Nikolla Ivanaj was 'crooked' (Ibid. 335).

Some Albanians occasionally tend to boast and often in vain, but Nopcsa too does not seem to have been very modest:

Since the many Italo-Albanians attending the congress were becoming over-bearing with their Italian-language speeches, I had myself introduced at the opening by Faik [Konica] as an old friend of the Albanians. I had but a few minutes to think of my reply, mounted the podium and held a spontaneous speech in Albanian. With the exception of Kral and a few other Austro-Hungarian and Italian consuls, I don't think many a central European would be in a position to repeat that feat.

(Elsie 1999, 334-5)

Nopcsa appears to be at odds with himself at the Trieste Congress. On one hand, he wants to appear as if he is there simply as a friend of the Albanians, thus representing no one. On the other hand, he cannot help confessing that he fully agrees with the decision of Vienna not to accept the candidacy of the Duke of Montpensier for the Albanian throne. If one is to believe Nopcsa, he was instrumental in putting an end to the Duke's ambition. Nopcsa certainly believed that it was he who gave the final blow to the Duke's secret plan during the banquet held by the Viennese Members of the Parliament for the Albanian Congress at the Palace Hotel:

I interrupted a pause in the conversation by saying in an audible voice, 'I hear that Montpensier wants to become King of Albania and that proclamations have already been printed! Does anyone of the gentlemen here happen to have one in his pocket? You know, gentlemen, I am a great collector of printed material on Albania.' Tremendous surprise and a stunned silence. Fan Noli forgot himself, drew a proclamation out of his pocket and gave it to me. Montpensier's secret was divulged. That evening the proclamation was in the mail on its way to Berchtold. Our worries were less now, but not done away with entirely.

(Elsie 1999, 335-6)

Iago, eat your heart out!

While Nopcsa is apparently very active in dashing the hopes of many would-be kings of Albania, he fails to explain why he went to so much trouble. He had carried out the mammoth task of discrediting one by one so many royal wannabes apparently for no obvious motive. That is not entirely true. The reason why no candidate was deemed suitable by Nopcsa, and there were many – Albert Ghika, the Duke of Montpensier, Fazil Pasha Toptani, Count Urach of Württemberg, the Egyptian prince Ahmed Fuad, the son of the Marchese Castriota of Naples and several other Albanian and non-Albanian hopefuls – is perhaps because he wanted the throne for himself from the beginning.

Nopcsa must have been aware that his ambition was ludicrous, which explains why even in his intimate memoirs he is reluctant to confess it openly. When he eventually does, he writes rather casually:

At this moment I resolved to take a step which could easily have made me a laughing stock and have put all my activities on behalf of Albania in a bad light. Nonetheless, I decided to go through with it. I

informed Excellency Conrad verbally that I would be willing to join the list of candidates for the throne if the Foreign Ministry would support me and told him that, to have myself proclaimed King of Albania, I would simply need the one-time payment of a larger sum of money in order to buy the support of the so-called Albanian patriots which, as I learned from the Montpensier putsch, was no problem at all. Once a reigning European monarch, I would have no difficulty coming up with the further funds needed by marrying a wealthy American heiress aspiring to royalty, a step which under other circumstances I would have been loath to take.

(Elsie 1999, 337-8)

His ambition for the Albanian throne, as well as his line of argument, prove, to quote Robert Elsie (Ibid., 339), that Nopcsa was a keen, ‘though not always objective observer and commentator of events in the Balkan Peninsula in the early twentieth century’. Like many other Western scholars, diplomats and politicians of his time, Nopcsa took it for granted the ‘inability’ of Ismail Qemali, Fan Noli and young aspiring political figures like Ahmet Zogolli (King Zog I) to establish the Albanian nation and govern it against all odds.

Nopcsa’s ambition for the throne of Albania is a telling indicator of his character. In his 1966 monograph *Franz Nopcsa and Albania. A Contribution to Nopcsa’s Biography*, Gert Robel draws attention to what he calls Nopcsa’s:

many and extremely diverse aspects in his being, including many a contradiction. His ingenious intuition was in stark contrast to his inability to understand and appreciate the motives of others; his insensitivity and egoism were in contrast to his devotion to the Albanians, his critical intelligence to his emotional bias.

(Robel 1966, 161)

Nopcsa, argues Robert Elsie:

was constantly driven by a craving for recognition and prestige, was often irritable and arrogant and on occasion openly anti-Semitic. Some of these traits may be understandable in view of his background and milieu, but many of his motives and reactions remains [sic] difficult to fathom.

(Elsie 1999, 340)

That Nopcsa was ‘driven by a craving for recognition and prestige’ is clearly seen in his ambition for the Albanian throne. He may have come to Albania with this craving, but it is also possible that it became worse when he met with the Albanians especially those living in the North. In his memoirs on the Albanian Congress in Trieste, Nopcsa remarks: ‘I was sure of the support of the inhabitants of the northern part of the country in view of the stance I had taken in the years 1910 and 1911’ (Ibid., 338).

Nopcsa was not the only Westerner to enjoy the support of the inhabitants of the northern part of Albania at the beginning of the twentieth century. Like him, Edith Durham had won the hearts of the Northern Albanians. Durham was probably one of the first modern Westerners the highlanders had seen for a long time, and they were marvelled by her friendliness. Isolated in the mountains for almost two thousand years due to constant occupations, they took it for granted that Durham was not just a woman acting on her own, but also a ‘messenger’ sent to them by the Western Powers to help them. The Albanians offered Durham their proverbial hospitality, which impressed her throughout her long stay.

A noble virtue, as undoubtedly the Albanian hospitality is, it is also an indication of the Albanians’ naivety. Their hospitality is often excessive; this was certainly the case when Durham and Nopcsa lived and worked in Albania.

It seems the situation in Albania has hardly changed much even today; guests are still treated like deities there.

It is a sad fact that the Albanians' hospitality has often been misunderstood, misinterpreted, misused and in some cases even abused by foreign guests, especially their neighbouring peoples to justify their claims over Albanian territories. At times, the generosity of the Albanians has created the conditions for the guests to believe that since they are so venerated they could just as well take over and become masters of the hospitable Albanian hosts.

But not all the guests have abused the hospitality of the Albanians; Edith Durham did not. Durham knew the Albanians treated her like a leader because she had been through thick and thin with them for many years. Nevertheless, she never thought of herself as, nor did she claim to be their leader. Fed up with five hundred years of corrupt Turkish administrations, the Albanians saw in Edith Durham not only a friend who was *there* for them but also the kind of 'leader' they had wished for for so long. This explains, perhaps, why they always addressed her as 'Kralitse' (Queen) (Durham 1985, 131). They would often tell her that they would follow her and obey her King (Ibid. 228)!

But the Northern Albanians were mistaken. Edith Durham had not joined them to be their queen. She had initially gone to Albania 'for a change'; she was there to forget her domestic tensions. Durham had no idea what to expect in the Balkans. She certainly did not know how much attached she would grow to Albania and the Albanians. Durham would gradually realise that she was a queen in the hearts of many Albanians. Being their 'official' Queen, however, never entered her mind.

Different from Durham, Nopcsa genuinely believed that he could be the King of the emerging Albanian State. His suggestion to join the list of candidates for the Albanian throne, apparently, did not come out of the blue. His aspiration for

royalty was not just a whim. He seems to have cherished the royal dream for years. It was not an accident, perhaps, why he was so scathing about Ismail Qemali when Berchtold asked his opinion about this leading Albanian political figure. Nopcsa appears to have seen Qemali as one of the royal contenders, which probably explains why he was eager to present him in such a bad light. Nopcsa's venomous remarks about Qemali suggest that he had started eliminating some of the royal candidates well before the Congress of Trieste. Considering that, by his own confession, Nopcsa was aware that Qemali 'was being supported by Berchtold' (Elsie 1999, 338), one could only speculate if his smearing campaign was an indication of his eagerness and desperation to get hold of the Albanian throne or yet another proof of his political immaturity. Nopcsa seems to have shot himself in the foot by caricaturing the Albanian politician who apparently had the backing of his country's foreign policy-makers.

It would be, perhaps, unfair to Nopcsa and his praiseworthy contribution to Albania and Albanian studies to say that his long stay in the country was motivated primarily by the desire to secure the Albanian crown. On the other hand, it would be naïve to think that Nopcsa wanted to become the King of Albania simply because he liked or wanted to help the Albanians. It stands to reason that someone with his educational background, scientific and research interests, and political affiliations must have been fully aware of the benefits of securing the Albanian throne. Nopcsa surely must have seen Albania as a small yet potentially good catch not only for himself but more importantly for those he represented, albeit not officially or openly. In becoming the King of Albania, Nopcsa would have been securing quite a strategic and affluent colony for his own country.

Nopcsa does not tell us what exactly Berchtold and Conrad made of his proposal to join the long list of the contenders for the Albanian 'kingship'.

What is known, however, is that he apparently failed to secure the support of the Foreign Ministry (Elsie 1999, 338).

One can only speculate how Nopcsa felt when he realised he would not secure for himself the much-coveted Albanian throne. What is known, however, is that soon after the Albanian Congress in Trieste, in his own words, ‘I resigned from the Albanian committee...and withdrew from all further political activity’ (Ibid.).

Nopcsa may have pined for the Albanian throne in the years that followed or thanked his lucky star he did not after all become King of Albania, a country, which he undoubtedly loved. Considering the political naivety and bad judgment of characters that he blatantly reveals in his notes on the Albanian Congress of Trieste, I would say the Albanians were better off without Baron Franz Nopcsa as their King.

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