Legend Has It

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Do historical legends have still something to tell us, citizens of nations which cannot stop getting globalised and looking forward only? Do the values they cherish – the bravery and self-sacrifice of our ancestors shown in so many battles fought in order to defend the homeland's sacred borders, the righteousness of the rulers who placed the interest of their people above anything else, or the sense of justice as perceived by the ordinary man-turned outlaw – still appeal to us? How much truth can we find in historical legends? Can we still learn something from them or should we just consider them naïve old-fashionable samples of sentimental nationalism and irrevocably turn to the ever more numerous universal urban legends which keep waving to us?

If we had at least one romantic drop left in our blood we would patriotically state that historical legends are indisputable documents about our past, faithfully mirroring the exceptional qualities of the nations we belong to. But we haven't it and they aren't that. The best they can do, as the nineteenth century Romanian historian Nicolae Balcescu said, is to reveal the "feelings" of past epochs and not the details that even contemporary historians cannot provide in their proper forms.[1] People's memory can keep whatever it finds worth keeping; likewise, it can forget whatever it finds insignificant. A nation's memory does not keep figures, it keeps lasting feelings which sometimes transgress the ages. It chooses deeds and heroes according to its own logic which sometimes differs from that of the researcher. It flirts with the fantastic, exaggerating the deeds and heroes' dimensions, but it never goes too far from the real.

In fact, with historical legends the fantastic seems to be an artistic convention which fulfils both an aesthetic and an ethical function. On one hand, it turns the deeds and heroes into metaphors - "huge shadows of facts that really happened and people that really existed"[2]; on the other hand, it gives them a symbolic connotation: "they represent possibilities destined to be reactualised"[3]. It is these two functions that make historical legends more attractive than the history books dealing with the same people and events but doing it with a clinical eye. History told by the nation itself has the flavour and warmth of the immediate experience which nothing can beat. The following Romanian legend (in my translation) about a battle between King Jan Sobiesky's army and the defenders of a Romanian fortress could be a case in point.

[1] Quoted by V. Adascalitei in the Preface to V. Adascalitei (ed.). *De la Dragos la Cuza Voda. Legende populare romanesti*, Bucuresti, Editura pentru Literatura, 1966, p. IX.

[2] V. Adascalitei, op. cit., p. XV.

[3] www.olavodecarvahlo.org/traducoes/the%20metaphysical.htm, p. 14.

„Philologica Jassyensia", An III, Nr. 1, 2007, p. 201-204

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Sobiesky and the border guards[4]

A long time ago a Polish King by the name of Sobiesky was returning to his country through Moldavia[5] *at the head of his army. Sobiesky was sad as he had been beaten by the Turks. While approaching Cetatea Neamtului6 he said: "That must be some nest of the Moldavians, damned brigands! Let's go and take it, otherwise we'll get home without any feat to talk about!" But one of his officers replied: "Your Majesty, I think we should leave the fortress alone and keep going. You know we don't have the right cannon for it." "Don't worry about the right cannon," Sobiesky said, "we'll take it barehanded." And he ordered the army to head for the fortress. There were only eighteen guards in the fortress, but they were the best of the best, all stout mountaineers – in one word, trueborn border guards. When they saw the army coming to the fortress, they locked the gates and got ready to defend it. Presently the battle started. The Polish light cannon kept bombing the fortress while the border guards were giving the Poles a hard time too, answering back with long salvoes of bullets. Each bullet felled a Pole, officers in particular, for the guards aimed at them more often than not. The battle lasted for five days. Lots of Poles were killed, which made Sobiesky think he was fighting a large garrison. Of the guards, there were only ten that got killed. At last, they finished their victuals and bullets and, poor them, had to surrender the fortress, but not before negotiating with Sobiesky to let them go wherever they wanted. When the gates of the fortress were opened, Sobiesky drew nearer to see the large garrison he had been fighting for so many days. Instead, he only saw eight guards – four of them were carrying the other four on their shoulders.*

"Where are the others?" Sobiesky asked in amazement.

"There were only eighteen of us, Your Majesty," one of the guards answered. "Ten of us died fighting, the other eight you can see for yourself."

"What? How dared you oppose me and kill so many of my brave soldiers?" Sobiesky shouted in a rage. "The sword is too much for you to perish by! It is the rope you all deserve! Hang them!"

Immediately the Poles surrounded the Moldavian guards who, laying down their wounded, made the sign of cross and carelessly looked at the preparations that were being made for their execution. Then a Polish officer approached Sobiesky who was still full of anger and told him the guards had only done their duty – they had defended their land bravely after all, so, instead of the rope, they were worthy of all praise. The King gave it some thought and finally took pity on the Moldavian guards. He forgave them and said: "Brave men, you are free to go! Go and tell your children and fellow countrymen that you had the honour to oppose the King of Poland for five days!"

When did that happen and how long did it really last? According to a present – day Romanian historian, the Polish army went on annual military expeditions through Moldavia to reach the Danube and fight the Turks between 1685 and 1691, the ones that

[4] V. Adascalitei (ed.), op. cit., pp. 227-229.
[5] Moldavia was one of the three countries that later united and formed Romania (Author's note).
[6] The German's Fortress (Author's note).

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were organised in 1686 and 1691 being led by King Sobiesky himself. During the last expedition, on October 4/14, he besieged and occupied Cetatea Neamtului, an event which was described by Cazimir Sarnecki in his journal, as well as by Dimitrie Cantemir (the son of Moldavia's ruler at the time), the latter's three versions being different from that of the Polish chronicler.[7] So the siege probably lasted only one day! In order to show how skilful and heroic the defenders were, the writer felt it was not enough to say that there were only eighteen guards; he dilated the time of their resistance, adding four days to it.

Despite the anonymous author's various ways of pointing out the Romanian guards' cold-blooded courage (they knew that, by taking the officers out of the action, the Polish soldiers would panic; they negotiated their freedom before the King found out how few they were; they preserved their dignity up to the end, even if the King had ordered their execution), a careful reader would not say the legend is biased. First of all, the King's officers are shown as both knowing their trade well and obeying the unwritten code of chivalry. They anticipate the fact that, not having the right kind of cannon, conquering the fortress will take more time and casualties. And they do not hesitate to draw the King's attention to the heroism of the handful of people that had defended a part of their land.

King Sobiesky himself, who first seems to contradict the image that he had imposed on the whole of Europe - an enlightened monarch, an accomplished intellectual, and a master in battle who miraculously broke the siege of Vienna in 1686 defeating the Ottoman Turks, therefore a hero to all of Christian Europe[8] - is finally rendered the things that are his. He starts by being arrogant and rash, thinking the fortress will be an easy prey for his army, but the author readily finds an excuse for that: the sun is going down on the King's reign, he is returning home under the heavy burden of defeat and a victory, no matter how small, would help save his face. But when his officers insist that he should treat the prisoners according to the nobleness of their deed, the King immediately realises he was about to make a fatal mistake. He forgets the damage done by the Moldavian guards to his army and lets the heroes go, but not before reminding them, as the ultimate form of praise, that they have opposed no other king but that of Poland. The author's deferential attitude towards the King makes the reader think that Jan Sobiesky's extraordinary exploits were common knowledge in Moldavia.

Since they put it on paper, this legend has become one of the classics of Romanian folklore. Several authors have developed it into stories or plays. To show how impressed Jan Sobiesky was, a nineteenth century author wrote at the end of his story that the Polish King even gave the Moldavian guards fifty zloties each.[9] This story has been present in the middle school textbooks for more than half a century as an example of not only patriotism but of how human beings should preserve their humaneness even in times of war.

[7] Virgil Candea (ed.), *Istoria românilor*, vol. V, Bucureşti, Editura Enciclopedică, 2003, pp. 297-298.

[8] *Polish Manuscripts, or The Secret History of the Reign of John Sobieski, The III of that Name, King of Poland*, *containing a particular account of the siege of Vienna*, trans. François-Paulin Dalairac, Rhodes, Bennet, Bell, Leigh & Midwinter, London, 1700, pp. 355-364.

[9] C. Negruzzi, *Povestind copiilor*, Bucureşti, Editura Tineretului, 1960, p. 142.

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If, as they say, legends "establish a bridge between temporality and perenniality"[10], then this historical legend, like all the good old historical legends, does build a bridge between a singular past event – one of those rare astral moments that illuminate history – which spiritually brought temporary enemies together, and the present and the future, as a charming lesson to be learned and taught on and on, about Man.

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www.olavodecarvahlo.org/traducoes/the%20metaphysical.htm

La légende dit que...

Quelle vérité y-a-t-il dans les légendes historiques? Peut-on en apprendre quelque chose ou doit-on les considérer comme des exemples naïfs de nationalisme sentimental et doit-on être attentifs aux numéraux légendes urbaines universales qui nous temptent toujours? Cet article essaie de répondre à ces questions à partir d'une ancienne légende historique et en la confrontant à la «vérité» enscrite dans les livres d'histoire.

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[10] www.olavodecarvahlo.org/traducoes/the%20metaphysical.htm, p. 16.

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