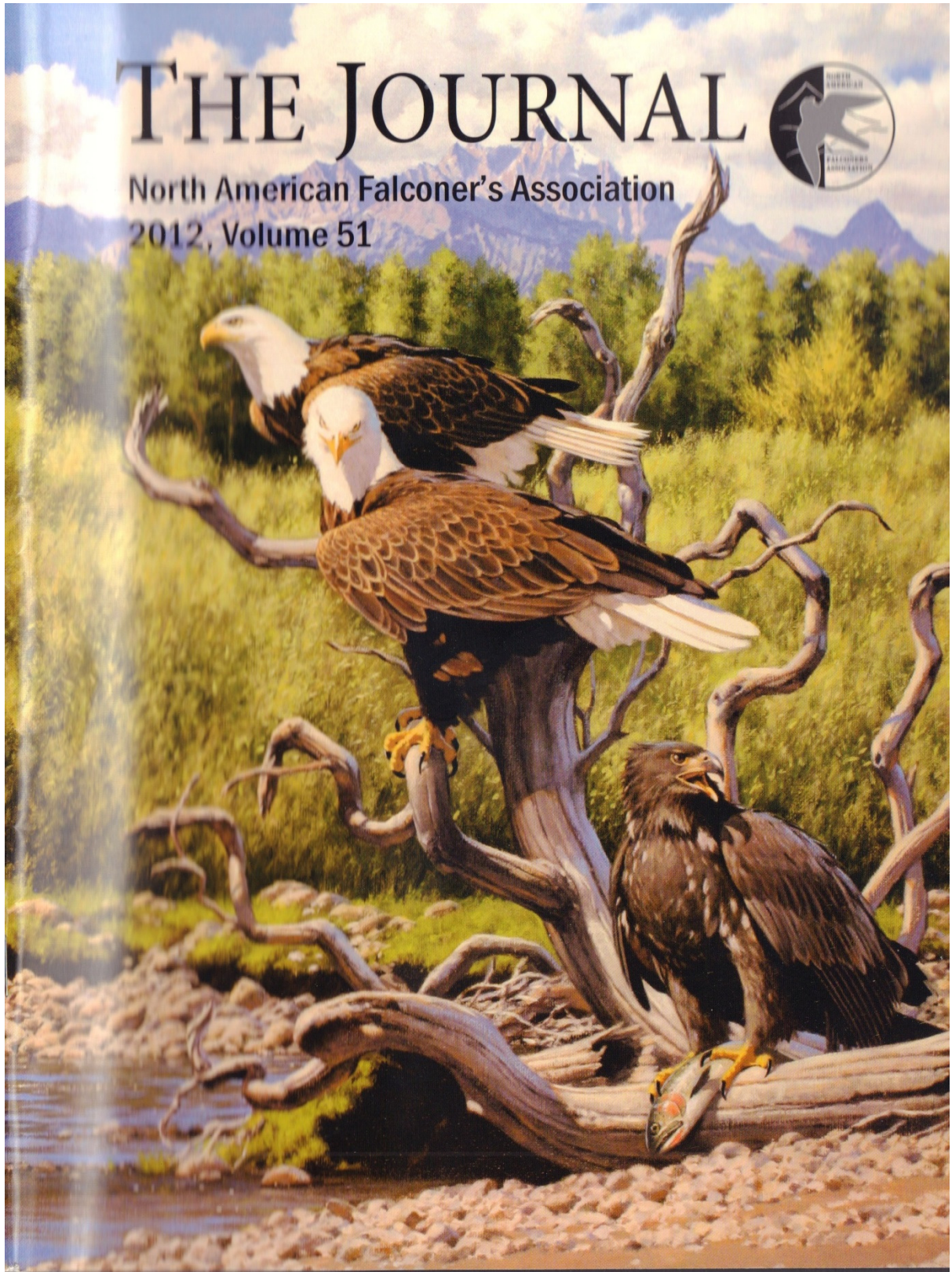


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The First International Czechoslovakia Falconry Meet of 1969 Held Under The Russian Soviet Regime

by Photos and Article by Rich Howard

My friend, Rudi Schmidt from Vienna, Austria, and I were invited to the first international Czechoslovakian Falconry Meet in October of 1969. By extraordinary effort, the Czech Falconry Club had successfully petitioned the Russian Soviet Government to hold this international meet. It was their first since before World War I. The country needed some relief after being suppressed by the Russian Soviets when Alexander Dubcek led the Czechs in bid for more freedoms in 1968. A revival of Russian falconry had recently begun and this was an opportunity for each country to mend some of their political scores.

I was living in Germany in 1969 and had been invited by Claus Fentzloff, a German falconer to attend the Austrian Falconry meet about 70 kilometers outside of Vienna, Austria at a castle/village called Stockerau. The September meet was a great success and featured hunting traditions and dress codes that had been in place for over two centuries. At that meet, I met Rudi Schmidt, an Austrian engineer who at the time worked for the International Atomic Energy Commission whose offices were located in Vienna. Only three German's were allowed by the Russian Soviets to attend the Czech meet but there was no limit to the number of French, Belgian, Dutch, English and Spanish citizen/falconers from western Europe who could attend. I was the only American to attend this meet and "unofficially" represented the North American Falconry Association. It was a historic moment for the Czech Falconry Club.

After a routine check by the Austrian and then the Czech border guards, we began a four hour journey by car to Opochno, Czechoslovakia through country rich in forest, fields, and game. Upon arriving at Opochno, we checked in with the local falconers, met the President of the Czech Falconry Club, Dr. Sloboda, and walked to the mews. "Mews" is an old French word meaning to change or molt feathers, but in English it means a stall where hawks are kept. This mews was not exactly a stall but rather the Zameck castle; built in the 16th Century by the Hohenzollern family, one of the ruling elite families of Europe. Its courtyard served as the place to keep the birds.

Eagles, falcons, and hawks greeted our eyes. About, 60 birds were tied to their perches. Oxblood-colored bathing tubs about the size of a kitchen sink had been set beside each perch.



It was late in the afternoon when we arrived, so there would be no possibility to hunt. However, a formal ceremony soon began in the courtyard with a falconer's greeting from Dr. Sloboda. Then, four men standing on a balcony above the courtyard blew hunting signals on horns that looked and sounded like French horns only smaller and without valves. An announcement was made about how the hunts were to be organized during the next three days. Twelve groups would be made; each having a particular species of birds, and those not having birds would be assigned at random to a group. After a final bugle signal from the four buglers, about 40 of us from Western Europe climbed into our cars and in convoy style drove to a hotel-Inn.

A hunters' feast had been prepared at Serinsky Inn where we were to stay, about 15 kilometers from Opochno in the Adler Mountains. Forests of spruce, fir, and maple surrounded the lodge. The bright reds and yellows of the fall colors gave the country a lusty vitality which is reflected in the people who live here. A fine dinner of roast beef, potatoes, and Czech Pilsner beer was served. The Czech Pilsner is a strong, dark yellow beer reputed to be the best in the world. I, for one, believe it. After dinner and a few more rounds of Pilsner, the conversation turned to falcons, hawks, dogs, and equipment. One could hear falconry being discussed in five languages, as there were falconers from all over Europe and one from the United States. About 1:30 a.m., the party broke up and we went to bed.

At sunrise the next morning, we got up, had breakfast, and drove to Opochno. On the way, I passed out aspirin for those who were feeling it from the night before. I was given the title "medicine man" by my comrades. After a brief meeting at the Zameck castle, we were assigned to a group who had eagles. We drove to a nearby farm and walked to the field. Here the jagtmeister (hunting guide) met us and directed us to where the target quarry could be found. The eagles used for falconry are very similar to our golden eagle. A flushing-line was formed with falconers carrying eagles on the end and several in the middle. An eagle can be quite efficient when one is hunting the European hare. It takes a skilled person to know how to train and hunt with an eagle. Much time must be spent in caring and manning the bird. Some falconers train the eagle and a flushing dog as a team.

The European hares weigh about 8-10 pounds on the average and are about the same size as our North American whitetail jackrabbits. They have several unusual escape patterns when an eagle is hunting them, and an eagle is not always successful in taking them. One escape pattern is for the hare to rear-up and run on its hind legs. It looks like a horse trot and allows the rabbit to propel itself much faster for short distances. It also serves to change its profile and can confuse a fast approaching raptor such as a golden eagle or Finnish goshawk.



Perhaps the most noticeable thing about hunting in Czechoslovakia is the quantity of game one sees. While walking in the field, we put up pheasant, partridge, and hares in numbers one rarely sees in the U. S. A big hare bounded away 30 yards in front of us. Immediately, an eagle was cast off. With several strong wing beats, he gained speed and rapidly closed the distance between himself and the hare. The hare began to dodge and turn with the eagle just above and behind him. Suddenly, the hare hesitated ready to dodge again, and that was his mistake. The eagle took the advantage, dove down, grasped the hare by the head, and killed him. The falconer walked to the

eagle, retrieved the hare, and took up the eagle on his glove. We walked the rest of the field and several other eagles took hares in much the same style.

We returned to the Zameck castle and the courtyard mews that evening. The day's game taken by our group and the others included 20 hares, 3 foxes, 12 pheasants, and 6

Hungarian partridges. An evening ceremony during a falconry meet is typical of European falconers who have perhaps observed hunting ceremonies for more than 7 centuries. It serves as a great bond between them and the quarry they have hunted. In Czechoslovakia, the quarry that was taken during the day is laid in rows within a large square made from pine boughs. Torches three feet long were lit, bugle calls were blown, one for each type of quarry taken, and a short speech was given by the President about sportsmanship. At the end of the speech everyone said, "Falkenersheil." We got to bed early.

The next morning, we were invited to go with a group who had Goshawks. This is the bird most commonly used by eastern European falconers. A wily hunter and quick with his feet, he is excellent for hunting pheasants, partridge or hares. We went out to the field with four of these birds, who looked like lethal weapons just standing on the fist. Just as we walked away from the farm house a cock pheasant flew up from a ditch. A Czech struck the hood and cast his hawk off the fist. Within 20 yards and five micro-seconds, the Gos was right behind the pheasant. The bird flew for cover in a heavy thicket. Quickly, the hawk followed the bird into the brush, and a few moments later we heard a dying squawk

from the pheasant. Several more flights at pheasants served only to frustrate the other Goshawks who had not hunted. A hare got up 10 feet in front of me and I yelled, "Hase," pointing as it bounded away. Two falconers cast their birds off at the same time. The chase lasted for nearly 100 yards with both birds leapfrogging each other trying to grab the hare.



Finally, the bigger bird bound to the hare's behind and was dragged for several yards before getting a killing hold on the head. The other bird banked off and bound to the hare's hind quarters. The falconers took up their birds and secured the hare.

We returned to Opochno for another falconry hunt ceremony, and some more Pilsner beer. I introduced the Czechs to the "boilermaker." Taking a jigger of vodka, I dropped it casually into my beer glass. It foamed over and someone yelled to me in German, "You can water the flowers but do not waste the Pilsner!" Soon everyone was drinking "boilermakers" and growing flowers.

The last morning of the meet we went with Dr. Saar and his wife, the only two Germans allowed to attend the meet. He had a Shaheen falcon and a German short-haired pointer. Shortly after moving into the field, the dog threw a point. The falcon's hood was struck and the falcon flew from the fist and mounted up. When she was almost directly over the dog and 100 meters high, the falconer gave the dog a whistle command and the dog flushed a covey of partridges. Immediately, the falcon turned his tail skyward and stooped at the birds. Flying low and looking for cover, the partridges became desperate as the falcon flattened out close to the ground.

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She quickly chose one and we heard a “whack” as she knocked a partridge out of the air. She threw up and then landed on the dead bird. Dr. Saar hurried over to the birds, covered the partridge with a canvas towel, and coaxed the falcon to his fist.

On the third day, a field trial was held similar to ones held by NAFA during the 1960’s era. Goshawks, falcons, sparrow hawks, and eagles were flown at bagged quarry. Perhaps the most impressive flight of the day was seeing a sparrow hawk flown at a lark and a golden eagle taking a fox.

Akstein Oldrich, a Czech, who trains casts of sparrow hawks, prefers a tiercel and hen for larks and only hens for Hungarian partridge. He picked up his cast of hawks from the perch, adjusted them on his gloved fist and signaled for the flush of the lark. The three birds went berserk. In 30 yards it was all over. The tiercel had bound to the lark just above the ground and then the hen bound to the lark and this took all of them to the ground.

In another spectacular flight witnessed that day, Steindl Siegfried, an Austrian who had trained a huge female golden eagle stepped into the field. Steindl used a “T” perch most of the time when hunting fox, but prefers to hunt her off the fist when hawking for hare. The fox darted out from hide and started loping across the open field then seeing people, dogs and eagles started to run like the wind. Steindl’s eagle was not going to wait and was immediately launched from the T perch. She stroked into the air, headed toward the fox, and when she was about 40 meters high, went into a killing dive. The eagle, now coursing behind the fox, bound to him and was dragged for several meters. It was a good kill, or was it? Moments later the fox loped off again across the field. Apparently, in a snappy move, she had bitten the eagle’s tarsus and was released by the eagle.

In the afternoon after the field trials, Rudi and I said goodbye to our new friends. It was a fine meet. We rode back to Vienna, Austria with Karl and Ingrid Pachberger and their eagle in a Fiat. It was a crowded affair but somehow we avoided the slice and splash from the eagle.

We wondered, as we crossed the Czech border into Austria, about our new Czech friends and what their future would be after the Russian government reasserted its domination over the country. Czechoslovakia freedom fighters had revolted just 18 months earlier in a bid for a better government under Alex Dubcek. We were hopeful that our lawyer/falconer friend, who had been a supporter of the new freedom government, would successfully escape to Berlin, Germany with his family. Some of the falconers, including myself had heard about his plight and provided American dollars and other kinds of aid to him for his flight to freedom. He had been severely punished when caught by the Soviets and was made a street sweeper at the Prague train station. Several years later, the author received a post card from this Czech freedom fighter/falconer that he and his family had fled to West Germany. In 1991, the old Soviet form of government was dissolved under the theme of “glasnost” and “perestroika” in Russia and throughout its satellite countries, including what is now called the Czech Republic.

Note: The 61 pictures included in the companion disc with this story are from both the 1969 Austrian and Czech Falconry Club meets. The dress code of hunter brown and green with Tyrolean hats has not changed for European falconers in over two hundred years. Tradition and ceremony play a strong role in European Falconry Clubs. The Czech Republic club is now active member of the International Association for Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey.

Editor’s Note

The author, Rich Howard, is a member of the Idaho Falconers Association and has been a NAFA member since 1965. He resides in Boise, Idaho and has remained an active supporter of falconry for both the Idaho Falconers Association and the Archives of Falconry located at The World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho.

This piece was first published in the April, 1971 edition of Hawk Chalk, Vol. X No. 1 and has been revised and expanded by the author for better context. For additional copies of this article, and the slide program, e-mail: atlatl_1@yahoo.com.