

Falconry nobles, noble falconers

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The 19th century is the most resource-deprived period in the history of Hungarian falconry. With Joseph II's decree, which abolished court falconry, the decline of falconry began, further exacerbated by the development of firearms. Newspaper articles from the second half of the century already reported on the revival of English, French, and Dutch falconry culture, but in Hungary's dualist-era, specialized journals – Hunting and Horse Racing Journal and Hungarian Hunting Journal – merely mentioned the foreign attempts, the emerging club life in falconry, and the increasingly growing results as curiosities. In England, the Old Hawking Club had already been operating since 1863, and in the Netherlands, the Mollen family, specialized in falcon trapping, was still practicing their craft. In historical Hungary, the centuries-long silence in falconry was broken by a young nobleman, Prince Jenő Zoárd Odescalchi, who, using his personal friendship with an English major, Eustace Radclyffe, hired two English falconers for his estate in Tuzsér. Major Radclyffe had been engaged in falconry for a long time; he employed several falconers on his estate in Dorset County, England. At the request of Prince Jenő Zoárd Odescalchi, the major sent two of his men to Hungary, who arrived to the estate on Tuzsér on November 6, 1901, accompanied by seven peregrine falcons and a goshawk. These falconers – Richard Best and Fred Lightfoot – were the first professional falconers in Hungary in a long time. The day after their arrival the prince already went hunting with the two English falconers, mainly for magpies and partridges in the first season. By the fall of 1902, they had caught 80 partridges. For Richard Best, this was a huge opportunity. The young, 27-year-old English falconer never dreamed that he would work in another country, on a prince's estate.

For the prince, good horseback riding opportunities were also important in falconry, similar to pack hunting, so they hunted corvids on horseback, releasing the falcon from under the hood. In one of his writings, Odescalchi notes that on one occasion, releasing the falcon named Ready on a magpie, and repeatedly driving the magpie under the falcon, he experienced a thrilling 37-minute chase, which ultimately ended unsuccessfully, nevertheless he still considered this chase a more beautiful experience than those that ended with a catch.

The prince also viewed falconry as a representative event—during these occasions, a significant portion of aristocracy attended. In 1903, the game harvest already included 330 partridges, which was considered a significant achievement. The falconry events held at the Tuzsér estate were reported by Hungarian and English press. Several nobles trained their future falconers here, so the estate also functioned as a kind of training center.

Richard Best agreed to train a local man in falconry, and under his guidance, they collected falcon chicks from the mountains around Ung and Mukachevo, so the prince's falconry soon consisted of 14 birds, including a peregrine-, a saker-, and two hobby falcons. The young falcons were raised using the hack method. The chicks were placed in a box resembling a larger nest box on a high stand, the so-called *hackhouse*, in the hunting area. The falconer fed the chicks every day, morning and evening. The young falcons began flying around the hackhouse at six weeks old, their upbringing thus taking place in natural conditions, while they mastered excellent flying skills. At the end of the few-week "hacking period," the falcons were caught back, and their training for hunting began.

Despite the social differences, a good relationship developed between the prince and Best; the English falconer was allowed to hunt with a rifle on the prince's estate, and he successfully hunted for roebuck and wild boar during his stay in Hungary. In 1902, he returned to England, while the other English falconer, Fred Lightfoot, stayed in Hungary in the service of Prince Odescalchi. In 1904, Best returned to Hungary to assist Lightfoot, and then in January 1905, he returned home once again. As gifts from the prince, he brought two female and two male peregrine falcons. He spent the 1906 season in Hungary at the Tuzsér estate again, then after a long break, he returned in 1910. At that time, Zoárd Odescalchi entrusted him with an unusual task. Richard Best had to train peregrine falcons to attack military balloons and zeppelins. The work of the peregrine falcons trained for this purpose was also observed by the military technical committee during an inspection at the Tuzsér estate. The experiment was successful, but the actual military deployment of the peregrine falcons ultimately did not take place. In August 1914, a state of war has been declared between Austria-Hungary and Great Britain, thus severing their relationship. After the war, in 1921, Richard Best became the president of the legendary Old Hawking Club, and with the exception of a short period, he worked as a professional falconer until his death in 1929. The significance of his years spent in Hungary and his relationship with Prince Odescalchi is highlighted by the fact that this period of his life was mentioned in the obituary published in *Field* magazine. He is revered as a significant figure in British falconry, and his memory is still cherished today.

Due to the influence of Odescalchi Zoárd, several nobles started showing interest in falconry during this period. Until now, it has not been published that Count Ferenc Esterházy also hired an English falconer to his estate in Tata in 1902. This falconer was Jack Frost. The 24-year-old man had already been working as a professional falconer in England since 1897. His father, John Frost, was also a falconer of the Old Hawking Club. It is not exactly clear how he came to work in Hungary, but since Major Radclyffe knew Jack Frost, it can almost certainly be stated that his employment at the Tata estate was due to the connections between Zoárd Odescalchi and Radclyffe. He trained six falcons, with which they hunted partridges and several wild ducks in the estate of Count Ferenc Esterházy. Count Ferenc Esterházy passed away in 1907, so it is likely that falconry in Tata also ceased from that period onwards. Frost was presumably still at the Esterházy estate in 1903, but by 1904, he was already appearing at falconry shows in Germany. He lived in England for years after, and then became the falconer of Prince Sturdza of Romania. Later, he worked as a falconer and hunting dog trainer in Italy. In 1935 he returned to England, where he also worked as a hunting dog trainer and won several awards in Field Trial competitions. He passed in 1952.

The lord of Iszkaszentgyörgy, Count Szigfrid Pappenheim, sent his young servant, Mihály Gullrich, to Tuzsér in the spring of 1904 to learn the art of falconry alongside English falconers under the supervision of Prince Odescalchi. Mihály Gullrich worked under the supervision of Richard Best. In the spring of 1904, peregrine falcon chicks were collected from nests near the villages Ókemence and Perecseny, north of Uzhhorod, and then raised using the same hacking method on the estate in Tuzsér. Three months later, after completing the basic training of the falcons, Mihály Gullrich returned to Count Sigfrid Pappenheim with six peregrine falcons. They hunted with falcons on the count's estate for two years, mainly targeting partridge and pheasant, often capturing 5-6 of them per hunt. For Mihály Gullrich, these few years were determining. In the 1930s, he frequently spoke to the press about this period of his life, his years as a falconer at the Pappenheim estate. In 1929, he helped ornithologist Dezső Radetzky train a young saker falcon, but from then on he presumably no longer practiced falconry. He died in 1948, and his obituary referred to him as the "last trained

falconer," which was, of course, an exaggeration, but it well illustrated the significant role falconry played in his life.

We have significantly less information about Count Pál Szapáry's falconry than about the previous ones. The hunting press regularly mentions that significant falconry activities took place on Szapáry's estate. In 1913, the count sold his castle in Sorokpolány to Gyula Gött, a resident of Győr. According to rumors, the new owner offered him anything he needed from the castle, but Szapáry only picked a rose from the garden and left. Therefore, the family archive was unfortunately lost, and there is no information about its fate. However, it is certain that in September 1903, the Sorokpolány estate held a two-day hunt, and on the first day they hunted with falcons, accompanied by László Széchényi, Dénes and Pál Draskovich, Antal Sigray, and other esteemed guests. The name of the falconer working for Pál Szapáry is not yet known, so it is also unclear whether a Hungarian or an English falconer was employed at the Sorokpolány estate.

At the beginning of the 20th century, among the noblemen engaged in falconry, the figure of Prince Jenő Zoárd Odescalchi stands out as particularly significant. He was the first to attempt the re-establishment of falconry in Hungary, hoping that his example would inspire followers. From his writings, a picture emerges of a nobleman sincerely committed to falconry, and his words are worth heeding for today's falconers as well:

"However, after long observation I can say that as a profession it is so difficult, so complicated, the character and temperament of the birds is so different and they must be treated with love (this is the main message). I too agree with the old Socrates: the more I know, the more I see that I know nothing."

The tragic death of the prince in 1917 definitively closed the first chapter of falconry in 20th-century Hungary. The dropped thread was picked up by Géza Nemeskéri Kiss in 1930, and his activities led to the establishment of organized falconry.

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