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Dragutin Lerman in Herzegovina

Summary

The life of Dragutin Lerman can be divided into two parts. The first is when, despite being a minor, he was selected for an expedition led by Henry Morton Stanley on behalf of the Belgian king Leopold II. As one of the expedition's few survivors, he advanced significantly in the hierarchy of the newly established government of Western Congo, which resulted in his audience with the King and the King bestowing high honors on him. The first part includes his return to his homeland and his successful business in Požega. In this period, fortune complete abandoned him, and because of his frequent and naïve trust in people (the flight of the teller with the bank's capital) and some serious accidents (factory fire, mine flooding, fire in apartment), his enterprises failed completely, which led to his final separation from his wife Hedviga.

His departure from Požega, in which he never set foot again, and his attempts over several years to find work in France (some claim in Belgium and Austria, too) and money, with which he would restore his reputation in his homeland and live with Hedviga again were unsuccessful, and after a short stint with his sister Marija and niece Milica in Nova Kapela, where he eagerly awaited correspondence from France, in 1911 he arrived, obviously with the assistance of a French bank, in Bosnia, in Kreševo, where he settled in Široka ulica, in the house of the Ban family, and soon started his all-encompassing work on researching mineral deposits. This was the second part of his life, in which, excepting the reasons for his arrival and unsuccessful attempts to, at least through rare communications, connect the threads of what once was until his arrival in Kreševo, he had no more connections to his past, and which contributed to a different working environment and then the onset of the Great War and everything that the war brought with it.

Very little is known about the first few years Lerman spent in Kreševo other than his plans were interrupted by the Great War: as Austro-Hungary and France (like Belgium) were on opposite sides, he was left without the financial support of the French bank and without the pension granted to him by Leopold II. This, however, was not all because the war also brought general conscription, leaving him without miners who were sent to the frontlines, and it was becoming more difficult to obtain financial and technical supplies (explosives and the like) necessary to continue working. Because of the sea blockade against Austro-Hungary, there was a complete lack of foodstuffs, clothing, footwear and everything else, which completely destabilized the market, so prices changed on a daily basis which led to famine and people rebelling from time to time. Seeking mineral deposits and giving priority to potential deposits necessary for the military industry (copper and manganese), Lerman was constantly looking for means with which he could finance his work, but which he achieved only partially.

Despite exceptionally difficult working conditions, he decided to expand his research to Herzegovina, first in the Konjic region, and then in other regions from Široki Brijeg, Čitluk

and Ljubuški, via Čapljina, to Stolac and Ljubinje. He had at his side, by virtue of the Viennese-Zagreb entrepreneur Sigmund Rosenberger, who had partially financed his activities in Kresevo, expert geologists like dr. Ivo Turina, dr. Frano Tućan and dr. Niko Andrijašević. They managed to locate several of the richest mineral deposits and Lerman, alone or together with Rosenberger, was granted many concessions from the Miners Captaincy for Bosnia and Herzegovina. He never got to the exploitation stage, as the war lasted longer than expected and Lerman died several months before the war ended.

Research to date on Lerman's activities have focused exclusively on his activities in Bosnia, concretely in Kreševo, where he lived, whilst his activities in Herzegovina were not mentioned at all, let alone the focus of particular attention (obvious from the above), which is necessary to gain a complete, rounded impression of the aims and methods of his whole enterprise.

Some of the mentioned mineral deposits were exploited in the following decades (bauxite in Dabrica and Poplat near Stolac, and in Domanovići near Čapljina, bitumen in Mišljen near Ljubinje), and some are still being exploited today (bauxite in the regions of Široki Brijeg and Čitluk).

Keywords: Dragutin Lerman; Požega; Belgian King Leopold II; Henry Morton Stanley; Africa; Kreševo; Herzegovina; mines; Great War.