



The Keeper of the Slavonian Secret



One Man's Renaissance is Another Man's War

Let the time-machine take us some five centuries into the past. Columbus has just returned from the voyage that will change the world. DaVinci is on the brink of his most prolific years. Printing presses are spreading throughout Europe. At the same time, the southern border of the Hungarian Empire, which Slavonia is a part of, is dangerously unsteady. The Ottoman Empire (popularly known as Turkey) is getting closer by the day. When, in 1512, defences fall on the southern bank of the Sava, the land around Babina Greda is counted among the most outlying territories. Still, let's not panic more than the people who lived in such times. It was a period with neither strictly defined state borders, nor battles fought from one house

to the other. The locals lived in some dozen hamlets surrounded by marshes. Most of them probably never crossed paths with invaders, or showed much interest in the grand political schemes, like people nowadays do.

The mysterious Kostroman

From what we know, the medieval estate of Babina Greda (or, in earlier rendering, *Babagerenda*) had two bases. Babina Greda, the first of the two, is hale and hearty to the present day. The other one, however, is veiled in mystery. The Kostroman Fort (from the Latin *Castrum Romanum*) lay 3.5 kilometres south of *Babagerenda*. During the Roman times, it served as a control point for the traffic routes along the plains of the Sava and Bosna Rivers. It was renewed in the Middle Ages, but historical sources mention it only once – as *Kosztormánszentdienes*. (Ah, the lovely Hungarian language!) There was a Saint Dionysus Church close to the fort, and the entire complex might have served as a stronghold from which the official Church curbed the influence of heretics from the neighbouring Bosnia. No heroic feats were undertaken here either during the Ottoman war, or later, when its significance began to fade. In the 18th century, Austrian government used it as a frontier quarantine.

Kostroman spent the last 150 years of its existence pursuing a career in construction business. In the 1830s, people began making houses out of brick and stone, and ruins became an accessible source of building material. The final blow was dealt by an excavator with a local hotshot (*baja*) behind the steering wheel, levelling what still remained of Kostroman.

Hey, Mr. Sultan!

When compared to the Middle Ages, the life of a peasant from Babina Greda changed little during the Ottoman rule (1536/7 to 1691). The taxes which he had used to pay to the landowner were now redirected to the sipahi and the Sultan. He remained Catholic, though several Muslim families probably moved into the neighbourhood, and some of the locals might have converted to Islam, deciding to advance their career. The Eastern influence was mostly felt in the dialect, which adopted words like *sokak* (street), *divan* (sofa), *avlija* (yard), *mala* (from *mahala*, neighbourhood), etc. As in the late medieval period, the Sava River was still not considered a border. Babina Greda was a part of the Slavonian Posavina which formed a cultural and economic unit with the lands on the opposite, Bosnian bank. Prominence of this unity would rise in the most turbulent period of Slavonian history, between the 17th and 18th centuries.

The Birth of Slavonia

When you stand under Grandma Keda's Lime Tree, you are in the presence of the only living being in Babina Greda which was there in the early autumn of 1683, when the Christian army defeated the Ottomans in the Battle of Vienna. The victory started an avalanche which, through a series of battles known as the Great Turkish War,

expanded the Habsburg Empire (Austria). The newly won area was equal in size to the modern-day Hungary and Croatia. The war tide also fashioned Slavonia with its current borders. More difficult than drawing borders, however, was carving out the modern Slavonian. The ravaged lands had to be re-settled first. Most immigrants arrived from Bosnia. These people were called Šokci, which is a contemporary word for "ancient" (*vikovični*) Slavonians – those who had moved to Slavonia prior to the late 19th and 20th century. In early 18th century, Babina Greda was already a populous village, and mostly native, "where several old clans had branched out into families". (S. Pavičić) Moreover, when Austria temporarily seized the Bosnian Posavina in 1718, many people from Babina Greda and its vicinity emigrated to Bosnia. This was how villages of Tolisa, Domaljevac, Donja Mahala and others were repopulated.

"Schengen" before "Schengen"

The 18th century marked the beginning of an era which would leave a deep mark on Babina Greda. In the liberated area along the Sava River, the Habsburgs established *Teutsche Militär-Staat*, or *Gräntze* – the Military Border or the Frontier. Its original function was to guard the unstable border with the Ottoman Empire. From Jasenovac in the west to Srijemska Rača in the east, a string of guard stations (*čardaci*) were set up, along with garrisoned forts of varying sizes. (The largest of these was the [Brod Fort](#)) Some 140 years before the telegraph and 180 years before the telephone, the Slavonian (or, Habsburg) border upheld a functional system which could alarm garrisons along 200 kilometres in 20 minutes by a single shot fired. After a while, the Military Frontier became a militarized belt which controlled the flow of people and goods. (Remember the role of Kostroman

in the 18th century?) At one time, its overall length, from the Adriatic to the Carpathians, spanned nearly 1,800 kilometres! Today the only remaining guard station (*čardak*) in Croatia is located near Babina Greda, in [Županja](#).

The Viennese Style

In exchange for not belonging to the class of serfs (*paori*), the frontiersmen were obliged to serve in the military. Since mid-18th century, they both guarded the Posavina border and took part in Austrian wars throughout Europe. As professional soldiers, each part of their lives was controlled by the military government. Everyday life on the frontier was organized in regiments or companies (Ger. *Compagnie*). Babina Greda was the headquarters of the Sixth Company in the Brod Regiment. The silver lining of living on command (*po zapovidi*) was that the military government tried to enhance the lives of frontiersmen by encouraging the development of education, health care and church organization. They also built dams and roads, and implemented planned organization of villages along the thoroughfares (the so-called *ušoravanje*). On the other hand, most novelties were introduced using force, under threats of punishment, and only to the extent to which they did not interfere with the peasant-military lifestyle. The military government also kept trying to uproot the customs which are at the heart of modern-day Slavonia. Many a frontiersman was imprisoned or flogged because he participated in a large wedding, a circle dance (*kolo*), a gathering (*sijelo*), or was lounging around (*divan*).

The Slavonian Dream

The force of change, just like the spirit of Slavonia, is difficult to rein in. When the

Military Frontier was abolished in 1881, the village welcomed modernization and capitalism. Since Babina Greda was among the largest villages, it used its abundant forests and pastures to mass produce pigs and cattle. Herding and grazing were run from *stanovi* or *salaši*, idyllic seasonal estates outside villages proper. The cattle were sold in herds to merchants, who then took them to large cities of Austria-Hungary (Budapest, Vienna, Sopron and others). The money earned in this way was invested in the modernization of agriculture, and the construction of houses and estates, but also in culture and social life. It was in the late 19th and early 20th century that Slavonia first gained the image which has remained popular to the present day: opulent folk costumes with gold embroidery and ducats, large gatherings (*sijela*), and tamburitza ensembles. It comes as no surprise that inhabitants of other, poorer parts of Croatia considered Slavonia the land in which “fences are held together with sausages, and strengthened by bread”. In short, it was a local version of the American dream.

To read, sing, or to paint?

If you dislike books and school desks, just visit Babina Greda and be on your way to an A grade! For 250 years, this place has inspired enlightened individuals. This is where Matija Antun Relković, the most famous proponent of the Enlightenment in 18th-century Slavonia, earned his retirement. In 1818, Mijat Stojanović, an educational pioneer in Croatia, was also born in Babina Greda. Our village is probably the only one in Croatia with less pubs than reading-rooms. Four were established over just 18 years, between 1907 and 1935, and two afterwards, bringing the total number to six, which are still in function.

The secret to straight-A students of Babina Greda might lie in the combination of the written and the sung word. In 1909, a law student by the name of Matija Bačić established the Zvonimir Music Society. Two years later, a medical student, Šima Stojanović, established the Stojanović Society. In late 1950s, the two ensembles joined together to form a Society for Arts and Culture, KUD Mijat Stojanović. They reached their nationally recognized artistic peak in the 1960s. Nowadays, we heartily recommend the vocal groups of the Mijat Stojanović Society, and the Šokadija Association. If you want to hear what Slavonian songs sounded like before the tamburitza ensembles, these girls and lads will be a music to your ears. If you are more of a visual type, go and visit ethno-collection and a gallery of Ana Verić (1928-2017), nationally acknowledged Naïve artist from Babina Greda.

The White Horses

While Mick Jagger could not be dragged away by wild horses, we would give everything for our white horses! Since the very beginning, horses were indispensable in controlling the vast areas along the Imperial border. Stronger incentives for horse breeding in military Slavonia began in the

late 18th century. About 1780, Babina Greda was among the few villages along the frontier with a stud farm. However, in this period, as well as in the 19th century, horses were primarily used for transport, while breeding purity was not as important. More professional horse breeding in Babina Greda began in 1936, when the first purebred Lipizzaner stud was brought from a horse farm in Kutjevo. In 1942, the Horse Breeding Association was established, and has been in operation ever since. The horses of Babina Greda are no longer labour animals, but dapper thoroughbreds that symbolize the wealth and tradition which people have created by enriching the fertile plain for centuries. The splendour of these noble inhabitants of Babina Greda is best enjoyed during events such as *Konji bijelci* (The White Horses) or *Pokladni jahači* (The Carnival Riders).

