

# The SZENT ISTVÁN wreck

Wreckdivers experiences

by Erwin F. Sieche

In Warship International No. 2/1991, page 112 ff. I published my article 'SZENT ISTVÁN, Hungaria's one and only and ill-fated dreadnought'. Which, according to the admission of the WI readership, got the top ranking of the respective year. The final chapter was entitled 'wreckdivers are preparing' and indeed they did. The following is a report of the happening of the last five years since this article has been published.

## Psychology

Like all kind of buffs wreckdivers are a breed of their own. First of all they want to be 'the first ones on the spot' like mountain climbers. Second most of them want to bring 'some kind of trophy' up. Third, they lack historic knowledge, this is why the Austrian War Archive and all of the A-H naval buffs including myself were peppered during the last years by diver's inquiries for informations and ship's plans.

Especially the Hungarian divers found themselves quickly beeing in love with the idea of a Hungarian dreadnought belonging to their proud nation. Gone were the decades of Communist indoctrination when the old Habsburg empire had been dubbed as 'the multinational prison', the respective history to be eradicated to create a new race of mankind, the 'Socialist Man'. Old roots have to be rediscovered. Much the same can be said for the Croatians with their radical way of hammering religious nationalism into the heads of their subjects in order to replace the old Yugoslav partisan ideology of understanding factual history.

The Italians have a different approach. Being victors they consider the *Szent István* wreck as a promising looting object of their naval history. Why not displaying some more objects demonstrating their daring naval spirit? And why not selling them for good money? In this complex orchestra of national interests the Austrians represent much the attitude of a little child knowing nothing about the outside world and it's roots.

## Rivalry

As said before each scuba diver is eager to be the first one on this particular wreck. Of course he wants to publish his findings. So it takes no wonder that we find a series of articles in different recent diver magazines, each claiming that the writer was the first one to 'solve the mystery' of the wreck. From the historian's point of view, however, all these stories do not bring too much new knowledge.

## The expeditions

The boom started with the announcement of the Italian diver Enrico Scandurra. When he had raised funds of the Italian Broadcast System RAI he managed to detect the wreck in May 1990, RAI announced future findings in a short notice in the evening news of 24 May 1990. Because of bad weather it was first impossible to dive during the second expedition in June 1990. Some

days later the weather calmed and the team brought back the wanted video footage from the stern part of the wreck. The respective report was on air at RAI's evening news the 17 September 1990. But Scandurra did not reach one of the goals of his expedition to break loose the brass letters *Szent István* from the stern. Apparently he lost further interest in the wreck and turned his focus to more promising and lesser dangerous wrecks.

In July 1994 the 1st Austrian expedition appeared on the scene. For them it was a primary investigation and they were also hampered by bad weather and bad underwater sight due to particles.

In September 1994 the Austrians were on the spot for the second time. This time the underwater conditions were excellent and they were able to investigate the whole length of the wreck and bring up excellent underwater video footage.

Short time later, in October 1994, the 1st Hungarian expedition appeared on the boat *Sveti Nikola*<sup>1</sup>. They posed a memorial plaque into the admirals cabin.

In May 1995 the 3rd Austrian expedition was on the scene. This was the one the author and Mr. Friedrich Prasky participated as historic advisers. Our base ship was the local boat *Vranjak* and we started from the Istrian town of Medveja. The diving was hampered by poor underwater sight and ended with two medium casualties which had to be treated later in the pressure chamber. The diving crew was composed of Engelbert Apfelthaler, Franz Mittermayer, Robert Bauer, Wolfgang Assl, Paul Oberwalder, Franz Witthalm Reinhard Boehm and the Slovakian Ladislaus Csúkas. The diving supervision came from Jani Kovacic, owner of a scuba diving centre at Medveja/Istria.

In September 1995 the 2nd Hungarian-Croatian expedition took place, sponsored by the watch manufacturer Breitling and the Hungarian correspondent of the Austrian Broadcast System, ORF. They used the local boat *Otac Duje* and started from Ilovik Island. Earlier attempts of the Austrian Broadcast System to produce a genuine wreckdiving report had been turned down for various reasons. Ironically this report came on air via the 'back door' of the Hungarian correspondent presenting the video tapes of a Hungarian expedition exploring 'their unlucky national pride ship.' This 15 minute report was on air at the Austrian TV the 23 October of 1995.

In the mean time the general interest of the breed of divers was regarded by Croatian officials as so dangerous for 'the nation's heritage' that the Croatian archaeologist Prof. Mario Juriši\_ had the command of the party to ensure that no valuable material was destroyed or taken abroad. This expedition was the best equipped of all using tri-mix scubas and being composed of renowned Hungarian professional divers and underwater photographers like László Czakó and Tibor Dombóvári. The others were Janós Túri, Endre Mácsai, Attila Kóllar, Dr. Zóltan Pálfi, György Kovács and Sándor Viski all members of the diving club of Debrecen. It was told that they also had one casualty that had to be treated in the new pressure chamber at Split.

No question that there have been more diver groups at the wreck in recent times, but we do not have informations about this. Even when we were on the spot in May 1995 a tiny 12 m sailing yought with 5 Hungarian divers appeared on the scene. But we never found out what they

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. Santa Claus

actually were here for and 'did they really dive?'. What is sure is that future expeditions without official license and official supervision will not be possible any more.

## **The dangers**

The *Szent István* wreck lies bottom side up flat on the seabed which is at a depth of 65 m. This means that the wreck's bottom is approximately at 50 m. Using pressurized air, as scuba divers do, the danger zone for the feared 'rupture of the deep' (neutrogen narcosis) begins at 55 m. The content of Nitrogen dissolved in the blood is so high that intelligent actions become more and more impossible. One feels like heavily drunken and in fact the first and only goal of a scuba diver acting in this depth is simply to survive because the smallest lack of concentration would be absolutely deadly. Regarding the average air supply of a scuba diver this means that he needs about 4 minutes to reach the ground, has about 12 to 15 minutes to operate under conditions of reduced intelligence and needs a scaled return of 4 stops totalling 50 to 70 minutes<sup>2</sup> to decomprimize properly.

Keeping this in mind we understand that it is not easy to explore a wreck of 152 m length. One can only examine particular spots and has to return soon. Some expeditions used an underwater scooter to see the whole length of the wreck in the 12 minutes allowed, but of course this did not allow an exact examination.

The simplest way to fix the divers boat is to moor it at the screws of the *Szent István*. This is why all expeditions came down at the stern. The divers were not unlucky about that because their only interest is to intrude into the admirals cabin and find and recover the memorial tablet (see W I # 2/1991, page 121) or other memorabilia. Although from the historian's point of view the forecastle is much more interesting as will be described later.

## **A foolharded risk**

Knowing all this the reader can judge himself Mr. Czakó's daring action during the Hungarian-Croatian expedition of September 1995. Outside the stern windows he took off his scuba - according to oral reports he used trimix: Helium<sup>3</sup>, Oxygen and Nitrogen, this saved him from neutrogen narcosis - squeezed himself through the small opening, an aiding comrade reached the apparatus inside, Mr. Czakó took the scuba in his left hand the video camera in his right and passed from the tiny admiral's veranda through the collapsed wall into the admiral's salon and started to explore the interior in search of the memorial tablet. He managed to reach the back wall of the cabin. Here were the rotten remnants of the admiral's preparing sideboard containing a good number of pieces of chinaware. He took off two nice plates which were finally brought up. Regarding the fact that the wall is a mess of massive girders and rotten wood panels, he could not intrude further into the admiral's day cabin and returned by undergoing the same procedure.

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<sup>2</sup> the total decompression time depends on the number of deep diving sorties per day. E.g. for a second sortie in the afternoon the decompression time increases to give the body for the second time within a short period the chance to purify the blood from dissolved gas.

<sup>3</sup> the only natural source of Helium is in the USA. This is why it is so expensive in all other countries. We have to admit the Hungarian's determination to visit the wreck in the hindsight of what it means to them in terms of money regarding their weak currency!

The two chinaware plates brought up were typical examples of A-H official stoneware. White overall with a thin blue line around and the crown and anchor insignia. On the backside was the seal of the manufacturer and the sign "AK", probably meaning "admiral's kitchen". The report at the Austrian Television showed all this in great detail because it were the thrilling aspects tv people need.

## **The wreck**

The following is a compilation of oral informations from the divers of our and other groups, from their video tapes and photographs.

The seabed is about in 65 m, consists of sand and is slightly sloped in direction of Premuda island. The wreck lies in direction 50° pointing to the island. It is capsized, bottom up and presents itself to the visitor as a huge metal dome, all superstructure being smashed under the hull. The very great surprise is that all three triple turrets are still in place, trained to port as we know it from the well known sinking film. Mr. Prasky pointed out that the turrets could be locked by clamps onto the roller path to fix them against unwanted revolving. This might be one of the reasons why they are still in place. The other reason might be that there has not been enough time for them to fall out due to the narrow distance the sinking dreadnought had to go down before he impacted on the seabed. The wreck lies on the roofs of the two superimposed turrets and has a 12° list to port. This angle results from my own drawing as a hypothesis, the actual situation might differ. The superimposed turrets are buried in the sand as 20.000 tons of steel are lying on them. This means that the whole line of the - former - port deck edge is free while the - former - starboard deckline is partially buried and partially free. Both triple turrets are free, the 12" barrels point out in the water. The forward and aft triple turrets are buried deep in the sand, only the tips of the 12" barrels peer out from the sea bed at their slight 12° angle.

As said before, all superstructure and the funnels were knocked flat and form a deadly labyrinth of smashed steel girders and plates. On tapes showing this area nothing is recognizable even to the trained eye with the exception of a boat crane with the searchlight sponson and some 7 cm QF guns now hanging from the ceiling.

The second very big surprise is that the whole forecastle has broken off during the impact on the seabed. At the moment there is no exact determination of the exact position of this break but we can guess that this happened exactly in front of the forward bulkhead of the most forward triple tower. This might be a logical point for structural weakness. Also it is not clear if the bow has completely broken off, if it is still connected to the hull in some way or if it has turned away. One oral report states that the the parts are some 8 metres away from eachother. The ammo chambers are at the bottom of the ship which is now ontop, we should find 12" shells there. A photograph gives the proof. Both masts are broken off and lie on the seabed nearby, the distinctive spotting tops clearly visible. Surprisingly they are 'befreed' of the mast and might be an easy object to be recovered by lifting bags.

On one video tape of a scooter equipped diver we find a distinctive hole in the ship's starboard side wall, the undamaged, meaning unrupted, longitudinal torpedo bulkhead just behind is fully intact.

During the last seven decades the hull has been covered by some 30 cm of marine growth. The Teakwood deck is still intact. The Czako expedition of September 1995 managed to clean the stern letters and unscrew the letters Z and E and recover them. Unfortunatley for the Hungarians

this valuable relic will go to the Rijeka Naval Museum (together with the two plates mentioned earlier). Regarding the few time to be spent on the ground there has been no wider search for other debris lying around the wreck. 89 men have drowned with the dreadnought, most of them inside, locked in the machinery space, so there has been not proof of human bones. Both screws and the rudders are entangled with broken fishernets indicating that cursing local fishermen knew very well that this was a dangerous spot for fishing.

### **The veil of secrecy**

All diver groups pointed out that they were the only ones to know the factual position of the wreck and argue how the others might have found it. This is of course nonsense, anybody equipped with a cheap side scan sonar can find the wreck if he knows the approximate location. But even I myself was deliberately closed out of the steering cabin of our boat *Vranjak*, when the skipper reached the final position by using his GPS system. When we were finally moored on the screw I entered the cabin to find out that the device had been switched off. Local people are anxious to give the exact position to have the first hand on future diver groups. Nevertheless I could get a fix reading 14°25'E/43°15'N. The reader may put this into my map published in WI # 2/1991, page 125 and will find that must be an easy task to detect the wreck.

### **Questions**

In the past years dozens of divers have risked their health and their life to visit the *Szent István* wreck. Despite all this examinations there is no full description of the wreck, some of them have peered under the port deck edge, a few ones have visited a small section of the starboard wall and seen the torpedo hole. And we have no exact reports about the broken off forecandle: does it still stand upright or has it overturned to the side? We have no mapping of the surroundings, so we do not know about maybe debris lying around. We dont know if the two funnels have been buried under the ship or are lying in the vicinity.

Many questions are left open and there is probably no chance that a professional expedition may do this survey. Although the wreck is of great interest for the naval historians and enthusiasts nobody will be able to raise the necessary funds. Three nations may be involved, Croatia, Austria and Hungaria, but governmental money for such expeditions is rare in these times of stressed budgets everywere. There is no question that the usage of a mini submarine and/or a RPV would give us lots of detailed informations. But these are only of value for a small community of naval enthusiasts. Even the recovery of some parts of the wreck, e.g. the screws, is not technical problem today, only a question of money. Probably we will have to wait for a long time to receive more news about the *Szent István* wreck ...

All drawings were by the author.

### **Articles**

The recent boom in diving to the *Szent István* wreck has generated a remarkable number of articles. With regard to the historical events they cannot bring anything new. Each reader of the article in WI # 2/1991 knows the same and even more. The informations given about the wreck are compiled in the above paragraph.

9 June 1990 "Slobodna Dalmacija", Split/Croatia:

'*Szent Istvan*': Ne dirajte u plavu grobnicu (*Szent István*: Leave them unhampered in their blue grave); by Marijan Zuvi\_

March 1991 "Mondo Sommerso", Milano/Italy:  
Affondate la *Szent István!* (Report on the sinking and the diving expedition); by Enrico Scandurra

10 July 1994 "Vjesnik", Nr. 17/1994:  
Mornarica koje vi\_e nema - Pogodak ronilaca iz Medveje (A vanished fleet - Meeting of the divers at Medveja; meaning report of the diving expedition to the wreck of the *Szent István*); by Damir Herceg

January 1995 "Megadive", Vienna/Austria, Nr. 5:  
*Szent István*; Report on the diving expedition; by Engelbert Apfelthaler  
Ibid: *Szent István* - Budapest diving club Amphora applies memorial tablet to the wreck

27 January 1995 "Képes európa (Colourful Europe)", Budapest/Hungary:  
Egy Csatahajó pusztulása és feltámadása (Sinking and reappearance of a warship); by László Csukás

May 1995 "Der Kamerad" ("The Comrade" newsletter of the Austrian police association), Nr. 5/1995:  
Betauchung des öst.-ung. Schlachtschiffs *Szent István* durch ein Mitglied des OEKB (Diving to the A-H battleship *Szent István* by a member of the Austrian police corps); by Franz Mittermayer

July 1995 "Nauta", Zagreb/Croatia:  
Razokribena misterija potonulog Szent Istvana (Mystery of the sunken *Szent István* revealed); by Danijel Frka und Mario Juriši\_

July 1995 "Haditechnika (War Technics)", Budapest/Hungary, Nr. 3/1995:  
A *Szent István* csatahajó elsüllyedése (Sinking of the battleship *Szent István*); by Dr. Károly Csonkaréti

Ibid: Magyar búvarók megtalálták a *Szent István* csatahajót (Hungarian divers have discovered the battleship *Szent István*); by Dr. Károly Csonkaréti

More reports are to come in the German naval magazine "Schiff und Zeit", the Polish naval magazine "OKRETY WOJENNE" and the Austrian monthly "Yacht Revue".