

Vesna Dimitrijević

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Belgrade

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Serbian Landowners in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia The Case of Bogdan Dundjerski

Abstract: Originally from Herzegovina, the Dundjerski family moved to south Hungary, present-day Serbia's province of Vojvodina, in the seventeenth century. From the 1820s the family's progress was marked by the enlargement of their landed property. In the early twentieth century the family owned or rented about 26,473 ha of land in Vojvodina. Bogdan Dundjerski (1860–1943), the third generation landowner, was brought up in a mixture of different traditions including the ethic of Serb highlanders of Herzegovina, central-European middle classes and Hungarian nobility. A wealthy landowner, Serb patriot and benefactor, whose political role in the Second World War remains controversial, described himself as: Serb, Christian Orthodox, landowner.

Keywords: Dundjerski family, landowners, Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Serbia, Vojvodina, Bačka, social transition, world wars

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, besides a strong sense of belonging to a nation, a significant role in the life of the Serbs in Vojvodina, a former duchy within the Habsburg realm, was played by a sense of belonging to a particular social group, where national affiliations were not necessarily prominent. From the 1820s, in the process of gradual modernization, Serb craftsmen, merchants, priests, civil servants, persons of various professions and wealthy farmers began to invest in the education of their children, thereby creating opportunities for their social advancement. Village schools, where Serb children acquired basic literacy and knowledge, were of particular importance. The Gymnasium in Sremski Karlovci (the seat of the Serbian Metropolitan) and the Gymnasium in Novi Sad, the largest Serbian city and cultural centre in the 1860s (known as the “Serbian Athens”), as well as the secondary schools in Vrbas and Pozsony (Bratislava), were the usual destinations of Serbian students. They commonly continued their education in Budapest, Vienna or Munich. By the 1850s and 1860s there had emerged in Vojvodina a distinct social group of Serbs possessing all characteristics of a prosperous central-European upper bourgeois class.¹

¹ See Traian Stoianovich, *A Study in Balkan Civilization* (Knopf, 1967), Serb. ed. *Balkanska civilizacija* (Belgrade 1995); Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford University Press, 1997), Serb. ed. *Imaginarni Balkan* (Belgrade 2006); Michael Mit-

In the early stages of the modernization process, their basic values were not much different from the moral norms of patriarchal rural communities guiding their attitude towards family, religion and work. Frugality, modesty and dedication to work were the most valued qualities. An important feature of members of this class was their openness to new knowledge and readiness to take risks and to learn more. From the 1850s the motto of the Dundjerski family was: "Where you have lost, there you will most easily find!" Great landowners were among the first to adjust to the new political and social landscape. They embraced the values of the growing middle class, they purchased houses in towns and embarked upon industrial enterprise, but they did not give up their land — they kept and further expanded their possessions.² The social model the Serb landowners in Vojvodina strived for was the lifestyle of the Hungarian nobility, still mostly beyond their reach in the early twentieth century.³ This was visible from their approach to leisure: apart from their houses in the countryside and in towns, they tended to purchase lavish mansions where they spent most of their free time with their family and friends. Leisure was reserved for women and children, while men often invited potential business partners and their families to their houses.⁴ They also owned horse farms, fishponds, hunting grounds.

After Vojvodina became part of Serbia and the newly created Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in late 1918 (renamed Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929), the great landowners in Vojvodina largely kept their old

teraureur, *Historisch-antropologisch Familienforschung*, Serb. ed. *Kad je Adam kopao a Eva prela. Istorijsko-antropološki ogledi iz prošlosti evropske porodice* (Belgrade 2001); Mari-Žanin Čalić, *Socijalna istorija Srbije 1815–1941* (Belgrade: Clio, 2004); Stevan K. Pawlovich, *A History of the Balkans 1804–1945* (Addison Wesley Longman, 1999), Serb. ed. Belgrade 2004.

² The Dundjerski family also owned a savings bank, and in the interwar period they were founders or majority owners of: *Ikarus*, aircraft factory, Zemun; Engines factory, Rakovica; *Orient*, printing house, Novi Sad; *Grafika*, art printing house; *Kulpin*, canned food factory; *Kamendin*, serum factory; two breweries and ice plants; three hemp processing factories; carpets factory; denatured alcohol factory; several flour mills; textile factories. They gave founders and presidents of Novi Sad Stock Exchange and Novi Sad Fair; owners of several horse farms and fishponds, breeders of thoroughbred cattle etc.

³ Petar Rokai, Zoltan Djere and Aleksandar Kasaš, *Istorija Madjara [A History of Hungarians]* (Belgrade: Clio, 2002).

⁴ They had servants in their town houses (usually in Novi Sad), and in country and summer houses. Those wealthier among them also had houses in Budapest. Housekeepers oversaw the functioning of the household and supervised subordinate servants. There were also gardeners, coachmen and various other servants who were hired as needed. Domestic servants were paid in cash and food, while factory workers, beside their wages, received some of the manufactured goods.



Mansion (Castle) of Bogdan Dundjerski
near Bečej (photo Vesna Dimitrijević)



Chapel of Bogdan Dundjerski
(photo Vesna Dimitrijević)



Bogdan Dundjerski (1860–1943)
as a young man (ROMS)



Icon by Uroš Predić
Chapel of Bogdan Dundjerski
(photo Vesna Dimitrijević)

lifestyle. The Vovodina citizens-landowners (they cannot be considered as being either gentry or nobility) could not find a matching social class in the rest of Serbia, whose pre-1918 rural structure was predominantly marked by small landholdings. The most similar social group were wealthy Belgrade industrialists, including several foreigners, who had to adjust their position to the new situation. In the interwar period, this was the social basis for frequent marriages between girls from Vojvodina's wealthy landowning families and Belgrade industrialists or Hungarian nobles.

The citizens-landowners, whose landed property was diminished by the agrarian reform of 1921, gradually transformed into landowners-merchants-industrialists. In the absence of a stable and unified market in the interwar Kingdom of Yugoslavia, more successful members of this class managed to maintain their position by creating small economic areas which functioned through rolling capital and raw materials from one area of economic activity into another. The surplus for sale came either from agricultural production, or from industrial production, depending on the market price and demand. All this required an enormous amount of work and dedication; otherwise, the family would have lost its position.

The government policy was aimed at protecting small landholdings and securing an existential minimum for the poorest population.⁵ The peasant-warrior tradition had secured the Kingdom of Yugoslavia's dominant position in the Balkans, the position it made official by participating in the creation of the Little Entente (1920/1) and the Balkan Pact (1934). Although the member countries of the two alliances never achieved an adequate level of economic and military cooperation, which was the only way in which they could strengthen their position in international relations, the alliances provided a sense of balance and strength, perhaps greater than it was in reality.

Great landowners and industrialists, who were few in the country, could not kick off production and pull the country out of the economic crisis and general poverty. Even the most successful had trouble keeping their heads above water. The survival of banks depended on the success of industrial companies, and the companies depended on favourable bank loans. Economic interests of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia were in contradiction to its political orientation. Huge pressure on landowners and industrialists threatened to ruin the most productive social class and leave the country without its economic elite.

⁵ Branko Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije* [History of Yugoslavia 1918–1978] (Belgrade: Nolit, 1980); Ljubodrag Dimić, *Kulturna politika Kraljevine Jugoslavije 1918–1941* [Cultural Policy of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia 1918–1941] (Belgrade: Stubovi kulture, 1996).

The economic elite of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was not ruined by bad laws, underdevelopment, economic crisis or international relations, even though all of that had its negative effects. The biggest seism experienced by Vojvodina's landowners-merchants-industrialists was being separated from their land. Landed property was the most stable point of the economy: the industrialists and merchants who did not rely on their own landed property were facing great risks in the conditions they could neither predict nor control. By being separated from their land, they lost not only their economic security, but also the mainstay of the family and the patriarchal moral which was the basis of civil ethic among the Serbs in Vojvodina. All this led to decadency and a feeling that an individual, in the given circumstances, was unable to achieve the desired results with his own work, which was visible for the generation which grew up in the interwar period. An industrial upsurge could be felt in the late 1930s, but the entry of Yugoslavia into the Second World War marked the end of an era and, with it, its economic elite.

Bogdan Dundjerski as a politician

On St George's Day 1921 a huge popular assembly was held in the centre of Stari Bečej in Bačka, where the citizens voted for the name "Great Serbia" and against the name "Yugoslavia".⁶ Various associations, especially the Sokol,⁷ advocated the name Yugoslavia, which was utterly alien to people like Bogdan Dundjerski, his friend Uroš Predić, a distinguished Realist painter, and other friends of the Dundjerski family. In 1904 Predić writes to Ilarion Ruvarac about what the word "Yugoslav" means to him, and says that it is just a concept which originated in the mind of Ljudevit Gaj, once much used and now exhumed.⁸

It is hard to find a man who was as apolitical as Bogdan Dundjerski and yet so politically active. He twice represented the Serbs from the "southern parts", i.e. the Bačka area of Vojvodina, in the Hungarian Diet,

⁶ Istorijski arhiv Senta [Historical Archives of Senta], Odeljenje za arhivistiku grada Bečeja [Bečej Town Archival Department], Zbirka rukopisa [Manuscript Collection], Nedeljko Stojković, "Saznanja o društveno-političkom životu u Bečeju između dva rata dobijena kroz izučavanje arhivske gradje" [Insights into social-political life in Bečej between two world wars gained by archival research], 5.

⁷ The Sokol organization was a manifestation of the Slavic idea which, through sports associations, recruited members regardless of religion, social status and nationality guided by the liberal slogan of the French Revolution: liberty, equality and fraternity.

⁸ Arhiv Srpske akademije i nauka i umetnosti (ASANU) Belgrade [Archives of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts], no. 5304, Uroš Predić to Ilarion Ruvarac, 5 August 1904.

first within Austria-Hungary, from 1910 to 1918, and then under Hungarian occupation, from February 1942 until his death in 1943. Bogdan Dundjerski did not take part in parliamentary debates, nor did he write or make statements for the press, but the press wrote about him. Dundjerski's political activity stemmed from his traditional understanding of patriotism and national duties. As an enlightened patriot, he continuously supported Serbian schools and the Serbian Orthodox Church, as key institution of the Serbs in southern Hungary. Dundjerski sought to ensure that as many landholdings as possible in Serb-inhabited areas were in the "Serbian hands". During the Great War, he relied on his reputation and, in his capacity as member of parliament, visited the imprisoned Serbs, took care that they have food, that their rights be protected and their families informed of where they were. It was his patriotic duty in both world wars, and he did not thought it humiliating to plead with Hungarian authorities for passes and permits to enter a jail where he had heard a Serb was imprisoned.

What he did not understand and thought was completely opposite to his actions, was the activity of the Partisan communist forces during the Second World War. Dundjerski was apprehensive about Tito's Partisans and the ideology of communism. Being conservative and traditional in his thinking, Dundjerski regarded these ideas as being deeply wrong and dangerous, and as coming from idlers, bums and spoiled intellectuals from wealthy families. Their actions simply meant more work for him, more killings and arrests of Serbs that he was unable to prevent. He did not perceive himself as being an exploiter of the poor; after all, he decided to bequeath his property to the poor Serbian children. Dundjerski believed that an educated and cultured person should have a strong sense of responsibility towards his own society and nation. From that perspective, he understood Soviet-led communism as an aggressive ideology, robbery, and inevitably leading to the loss of national identity.

In spite of his heart-felt patriotic attitude and important humanitarian initiatives, after the First World War Dundjerski came to be perceived as a *madjaron* (pro-Hungarian), and after the communist takeover at the end of the Second World War was condemned as "enemy of the people and traitor". In his first will (1918) Bogdan Dundjerski explained his decision to bequeath his estate to the Serbian children: "I was raised and educated in the Christian Orthodox tradition of my people, and besides, I am loyal to my beloved homeland, and thus I believe that I shall best repay my debt to the grace of God, and the love of my parents, by the loyalty to my homeland, and the devotion to my Holy Orthodox Church, and my beloved Serbian Orthodox people..."⁹

⁹ Aleksandar Kasaš, "Testament Bogdana Dundjerskog iz 1918", *Krovovi* 39/40 (Sremski Karlovci 1997), 81.

In his second will (1940), Dundjerski dared to state that there had been something more than the expropriation of his land that hurt and embittered him: “especially because people of dubious character besmirched me before our authorities as a *madjaron* and anti-government element, and as such, I was placed and for months kept under police surveillance by the strict order of higher political authorities, probably because, as a member of the Hungarian Diet, I had with much success protected our element that the enemy force came down on with the intention of destroying our nation [...] I mention all this simply in order to leave a trace of how they treated me and what attitude the factors in charge took towards me.”¹⁰ However, we have found no evidence to confirm or deny Dundjerski’s claim that he had been placed under police surveillance in the interwar period. Whatever the case was, this statement reveals how he perceived his own position in the social and political system of interwar Yugoslavia.

In April 1941, Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and their allies dismembered the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. In a coordinated onslaught against Serbia, joined by Fascist Hungary and Bulgaria, Hungary annexed the Bačka region of Serbian Vojvodina, including Novi Sad, Srbobran, Bečej and other places where Bogdan Dundjerski had considerable landholdings. At the session of the Hungarian Diet of 5 February 1942, Prime Minister Bárdossy proposed that deputies from the annexed “Southern Part” i.e. parts of Serbian Vojvodina annexed to Fascist Hungary, also be summoned to parliament.¹¹ Milan L. Popović, a publicist, and Bogdan Dundjerski, a distinguished landowner, were put on a special train to Budapest to attend the ceremony of their inauguration as deputies of the Hungarian Diet held on 9 February.¹² Some members of the Dundjerski family had been killed without trial upon the entry of Hungarian troops in the town of Srbobran, and he probably felt ill at ease at the ceremony.

In Milan L. Popović’s letter to Dundjerski of 27 March the same year, Popović, addressing Dundjerski as “highly esteemed and dear Uncle Bogdan”, informs him that he managed to obtain information about Szeged prison from the state prosecutor, Dr. Vladimir Ekert.¹³ Popović tried to obtain permission for Dundjerski and himself to visit imprisoned Serbs, if there were any. Permission was not granted, since the prison was under military control, but Dr. Ekert informed him that there were arrested per-

¹⁰ Bečej, Gradski muzej [Town Museum], The will of Bogdan Dundjerski of 1940, 2.

¹¹ *Nova pošta* II/25, 7 February 1942, 3.

¹² *Nova pošta* II/26, 8 February 1942, 3.

¹³ Rukopisno odeljenje Matice srpske (ROMS) Novi Sad [Manuscript Department of Matica srpska], inv. no. 13841.

sons “from this territory”.¹⁴ The prosecutor was convinced that Dundjerski and Popović should have no trouble visiting the prisoners in Szeged and informed them that there were Serbs in the camps in Vac and Budapest as well. The same day Popović sent a cable asking permission from military authorities to visit Szeged prison, and asked Dundjerski to set the date for the two of them to leave for Szeged together. That same day Popović visited the villages of Žabalj and Čurug and obtained the Hungarian district governor’s written permission for relatives to visit the property of their parents. “You can imagine how much joy there is among the people. I promised them I would come again on the first day of Easter”.¹⁵

Dundjerski was already in his eighties, and his actions were certainly not motivated by the prospect of political gain or personal promotion. Despite the danger to his own reputation under harsh Hungarian occupation, he acted in consistence with his beliefs. In late February, Dundjerski and Popović asked permission from the minister of internal affairs to visit Titel, Žabalj and Čurug, explaining that they, as members of parliament, wanted to be in direct contact with citizens. They were also granted permission by the Bačka county governor, Dr. Deak, and the dates set for their visit were: 3, 4 and 5 March.¹⁶ On 3 March 1942, Popović gave a speech to the villagers gathered in the hall of the Serbian Orthodox church in Titel, reminding them of the ordeal their ancestors had gone through to defend from the Ottomans the land they now worked and to turn it into fertile fields. He advised them to stay calm and not to let themselves be deceived by provocations from either Moscow or London, and to show to the relevant state authorities that they belonged to a hard-working, conscientious and constructive peasant class whose first concern was their home, wellbeing, country and Christian faith.¹⁷ The gist of Popović’s conciliatory philosophy is condensed in the following words: “The more people and male heads survive the world war, the more our [Serbian] people can expect from the ongoing world conflict.”¹⁸ After the service, the first to be held in a long time in the previously shut down local Serbian church, Dundjerski and Popović talked with the farmers about their daily problems. *Nova Pošta* gave no details of these talks, but this was one part of the visit which was extremely important for the members of parliament. On 4 and 5 March they visited Žabalj and Čurug. Dundjerski himself did not give a speech at any of these

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Nova pošta*, II/44, 1 March 1942, 2.

¹⁷ *Nova pošta*, II/46, 4 March 1942, 3.

¹⁸ Ibid.

meetings. A day after his return to Bečej, Dundjerski set off for Budapest to attend the parliament session. What the press did not write about and the two members of parliament did not forget was: the search for arrested Serbs in prisons and camps, the reopening of Serbian Orthodox churches, the restoration of property to the families of the killed Serbs. Dundjerski was always restrained, in contrast to Popović, a fiery speaker. Many Serbs were executed without trial in Hungarian army and police raids. Some believed that one should not remain silent over it and that any cooperation with the Hungarians, who had committed such crimes, was unpardonable. *Slobodna Vojvodina* (Free Vojvodina), the organ of the communist-led People's Liberation Committee for Vojvodina, branded Milan L. Popović as the most shameful traitor of the Serbian people: "The London government [in exile] condemned him to death. The people had condemned him much earlier. It is certain that the biggest traitor of the Serbs of Bačka, Milan Laži¹⁹ Popović, will not live to see the end of this war."²⁰ The same article claimed that Popović had visited the prison at Srbobran where locals and the imprisoned from other places were being executed in the most brutal manner. The victims were mainly of Serbian nationality. Although Popović did not speak of this prison in public, *Slobodna Vojvodina* accused him of spreading rumours "through his agents" that there was no torture in Srbobran prison".²¹ Irinej Ćirić, Aleksandar Moč and Bogdan Dundjerski did not fare much better, on account of their collaboration with the Hungarian occupying authorities.

A history of conflict between Serbs and Hungarians had left a strong imprint on the mentality of the Serbs in these areas. The proclamation of Serbian Vojvodina (Serbian Duchy) in southern Hungary, within the Habsburg realm, in 1848, came as a response to Hungarian nationalism which deprived Serbs of their rights. The conflict between Hungarians and Serbs, in particular the epic battle of Szenttamás (Srbobran) in 1848, had left a deep mark in the history of the Serbs of Bačka.²² The Serbian losses had been enormous, but they gradually resumed their lives after the revolutionary revolts were crushed. The Serbian troops that entered Srbobran

¹⁹ The initial L., standing for his father's name, was used to make an abusive play on words and call Popović a liar (Laži).

²⁰ *Slobodna Vojvodina* (organ of the Provincial People's Liberation Committee for Vojvodina), no. 1 (November 1942), 12–13.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² The town was originally called Szenttamás or Sentomaš. It was renamed Srbobran (1919), in honour of the Serbian soldiers who had come from Serbia to help the population's defence against the Hungarian military in 1848/9, who, upon seizing the town, killed the majority of the Serbian civilian population.

at the end of the First World War were joyfully welcomed by the Serbian population, the Hungarian provoked no conflicts, and they both became citizens of another state. When Hungarian troops occupied the town at the beginning of the Second World War, there was no resistance; the population surrendered their town peacefully. However, there ensued a Hungarian disproportionate, large-scale retribution. Most Serb civilians were killed in April 1941. In May the same year, "reactionary circles in Bačka" sent an epistle to Admiral Horthy in which they expressed their loyalty to the Hungarian state, and their readiness to serve it loyally.²³ *Slobodna Vojvodina* commented: "This epistle is signed by the very people who had bossed around in Yugoslavia for twenty years and were a mainstay of various regimes responsible for the collapse of our country."²⁴ According to *Slobodna Vojvodina*, some of the villagers who had fled during the massacre of Serbs in Šajkaška, "came across Horthy's gendarmes and, to save their lives, opened fire and killed two or three of their tormentors".²⁵ *Nova Pošta* condemned the killing, but that did not mean anything to the Hungarian authorities. Large-scale massacres against Serbs continued in January 1942.

Dundjerski was certainly aware of how dangerous it was at that point to accept a seat in the Hungarian Diet, but he obviously believed that it was the only way for him to be able to do something for his persecuted compatriots. In 1943, a second list of "enemies of the people and traitors" made public by communist *Slobodna Vojvodina* contained his name.²⁶ Uroš Predić, a famous Serbian painter and Dundjerski's closest friend, in a letter he wrote in 1948 commented that it would have fared badly with Dundjerski had he survived the war.²⁷ Dundjerski's young friend, Milan L. Popović, gave a speech at his funeral: "With no particular political line, no acting on impulse, no oratorical eloquence, Bogdan Dundjerski was a political man who despised quick success and cheap popularity".²⁸ Dundjerski strove to be a worthy successor of the great Serb benefactors such as Count Sava Tekelija (1761–1842) and Marija Trandafil (1816–1883), to be remembered by his people as a good Serb and patriot. Instead, he was proclaimed enemy of the people and traitor. Dundjerski was not a talented politician, or orator, he did not represent or defend any particular political agenda; rather, he was

²³ *Slobodna Vojvodina* 2–3 (Vrbas, March–April 1943), 1–4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Slobodna Vojvodina* 4 (Parage in Bačka, 1943), 15–16.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 16.

²⁷ Vesna Dimitrijević, "Uroš Predić i Bogdan Dundjerski: Priča o prijateljstvu", *Godišnjak za društvenu istoriju* 12/1–3 (2005), 185–193.

²⁸ *Nova pošta* III/246 (Ujvidek), 4 November 1943, 4–5.

a great patriot and proud to be Serb. He respected the law and tried to live and work within the given institutional framework.

Estates of Bogdan Dundjerski

Bogdan Dundjerski was attached to the land more than any of Gedeon Dundjerski's grandchildren. He managed his estate in an exemplary way and worked hard until the end of his life. Travelling around the world, he learnt and gained new knowledge. He turned his farm (*salaš*) with some forty buildings, a big and a small mansion, and a chapel, into his private kingdom.²⁹ The terrace of the big mansion (popularly known as castle) still offers a view of the endless plains of Bačka. Bogdan Dundjerski planned to leave everything he had created as an undivided estate after his death, but he did not succeed. From a redistribution document it cannot be seen how big his estate was in 1906, but in his first will of 1918 he states that he owns a total of 733.187 ha.³⁰ According to the data supplied by Toša Iskruljev in 1931,³¹ Bogdan Dundjerski owned 748.15 ha of prime farmland in the Stari Bečej area, but about half was taken away for agrarian reform purposes. In his second will (1940), Bogdan Dundjerski states that 207.756ha of his land was seized in the Srbobran area, which tallies with the data from the Archives of Yugoslavia.³² The same archival fund contains a document according to which 175.527 ha of Dundjerski's land were seized in the Stari Bečej district.³³ From a letter Dundjerski wrote in 1922, one can see that, to him, the ownership of land was a matter of patriotism, national identity, even of the survival of the Serbian people and the Serbian Orthodox Church.³⁴ Dundjerski was a law-abiding man and wanted to ensure that his business was safe and legal. His estate was a mirror of him as a person. He believed that the Serbs would lose their identity should their landholdings

²⁹ Gradski muzej Bečej [Bečej Town Museum], The will of Bogdan Dundjerski of 1940; A. Kasaš, "Kome je Bogdan Dundjerski, veleposednik starobečejski i srbobranski ostavio svoje imanje?" [To whom did Bogdan Dundjerski, a landowner of Stari Bečej and Srbobran leave his estate?], *Zbornik Matice srpske za istoriju* 55 (1997), 169–182.

³⁰ Kasaš, "Testament", 81.

³¹ Toša Iskruljev, "Kroz naš južni Banat" [Through our South Banat], *Jugoslavenski dnevnik*, 19 March 1931, 1.

³² Arhiv Jugoslavije (AJ) [Archives of Yugoslavia], Belgrade, Ministarstvo agrarne reforme Kraljevine Jugoslavije (MARKJ) [Ministry for Agrarian Reform of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia], Fund 96, Folder 35/92.

³³ AJ, MARKJ, Fund 96, Folder 35/93.

³⁴ ROMS, Pisma [Letters], no. 13844, Bogdan Dundjerski to Irinej Ćirić, Bečej, 29 August 1922.

pass into the hands of “people of different faiths”, first of all Hungarians. By purchasing land from poor Serbs or rich Hungarians he tried to secure the survival of Serbs in Bačka. On the face of it, such attitude may be interpreted as nationalistic, but in the political context of the age, it was a politically defensive and socially acceptable form of patriotism. On Dundjerski’s estate worked many poor Serbs, Hungarians and Jews, and they were all treated fairly. Dundjerski was held in esteem by respectable citizens, both Hungarians and Serbs, and it remained so until his death.

Describing the estate on which he began to build a chapel, Bogdan Dundjerski said: “This land, now the most fertile crop fields, once all was in the Serbian hands, but over time Serbs sold their land and farms (e.g. 30 years ago there were twelve Stakić farmsteads in my neighbourhood, and now there is not a single one) and people of different faiths settled, mostly Hungarians. With much effort and labour I managed to buy a large complex from the people of different faith and to fulfil my one-time dreams: what used to be ours must be ours again!”³⁵ Until the Unification of 1918 Bogdan Dundjerski did not have to modify his views. With the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, however, new rules were established and he could not understand their logic. His problems began with the agrarian reform of 1919 and stayed on until the end of his life. Even so, Dundjerski managed to leave a magnificent legacy to posterity.

Bogdan Dundjerski’s will dated 23rd November 1918, drawn up after the Serbian army entered Bečej and a day before the unconditional unification of Vojvodina with Serbia was solemnly proclaimed, shows not only how much land he owned, but also how emotional he was about it.³⁶ The will opens with the usual phrase: “I am the exclusive owner of my [landed] estate, which I am entitled to dispose of freely...”³⁷ The following year the big estate became subject to agrarian reform. Dundjerski tried to prevent its parcellation. When he exhausted all possibilities, he turned to the Serbian bishop of Bačka, Irinej Ćirić, whom he addressed as his spiritual father.³⁸ He made a copy of the letter for himself. The copy is unsigned, but Dundjerski later added a double-underlined comment: “there was *no reply whatsoever* to this letter!”

Bogdan Dundjerski bequeathed his entire estate with buildings for the education of poor Christian Orthodox Serbs. He named Metropolitan of Sremski Karlovci the president of the board of trustees and the Bishop of

³⁵ ROMS, Pisma, inv. no. 13842, Bogdan Dundjerski to Irinej Ćirić, Bečej, undated.

³⁶ Kasaš, “Testament”, 81–84.

³⁷ Ibid. 81.

³⁸ ROMS, Pisma, inv. no. 13844, Bogdan Dundjerski to Irinej Ćirić, Bečej, 29 August 1922.

Bačka its vice-president. Dundjerski believed that the metropolitan was his natural ally in his struggle to preserve the estate. He claimed that the new authorities were more considerate towards the Catholic than the Orthodox landholdings, but that both the Orthodox and Catholic Churches failed to protect their interests in the face of the agrarian reform. Bishop Irinej Ćirić was unable to help, and probably did not know what to reply to this desperate letter. Bogdan Dundjerski perceived this as betrayal, and distrust crept into his life and he completely withdrew from public life. He became preoccupied with his unusual ideas: after he had a chapel built, he began building a mansion; he wanted to leave something to the future generations of “patriotic Serbs”. According to Dundjerski,³⁹ the land which had been seized from him was distributed to the poor, and out of 404 families to whom the land was allotted only 121 were Serbian, as opposed to 283 Hungarian. Some families immediately leased out the land to rich farmers, and to “Hungarian”, those from whom he had purchased that land legally and with the money he had earned himself. He kept repeating in despair: “My land, which I kept as the apple of my eye, which I worked with the most modern tools and techniques and in the most rational manner, and which I so perfected that I can freely say it was one of the best in the whole district, that land of mine, which I loved and looked after like the mother looks after her child, is being leased out at so low rates to Hungarian farmers, and now they slouch over my labour and my sweat...”⁴⁰ Dundjerski claimed that “Jews and others”⁴¹ came to him and offered to return his former property, without asking any money in advance, but only after the transfer was officially carried through. Such arrangements would have been a semi-official opportunity for him to regain possession of his land, but to Bogdan Dundjerski they looked like a fraud in which he did not want to take part. He was too conservative and too proud for that. This might have been a challenge that suited the temperament of his uncle, Lazar Dundjerski, but not his own. In 1920, the seized land was put under prohibition of transfer and encumbrance. Dundjerski understood it as an act that “literally threw him out into the street”.⁴² No one in the Dundjerski family had ever experienced anything like that: to pay taxes and all imaginable dues regularly, to pay workers’ wages regularly, and still remain without land, and all that in times of peace. During the hardships of 1848 and the First World War, people had been killed, their homes and crops destroyed, but once the ordeal

³⁹ ROMS, Pisma, inv. no. 13842, Bogdan Dundjerski to Irinej Ćirić, Bečej, undated.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ ROMS, Pisma, inv. no. 13844, Bogdan Dundjerski to Irinej Ćirić, Bečej, 29 August 1922.

⁴² ROMS, Pisma, inv. no. 13842, Bogdan Dundjerski to Irinej Ćirić, undated.

ended, they returned to their devastated homes and fields and were able to start a new life on their property.

Although Dundjerski had thoroughbred horses and livestock on the estate, a seed nursery, a fishpond and other required elements, he did not succeed in retaining the land maximum. Neither the church Dundjerski was building, nor the foundation he wanted to establish, seemed of any interest to anyone in the local and central government. Although injured and shaken, Dundjerski was not a bitter opponent of the agrarian reform. At first he accepted that the needs of the Yugoslav state were above the needs of an individual. But, the more he struggled to preserve his estate, the more his position became insecure. Dundjerski experienced all the negative effects of bad legislations at first hand. A portion of his estate was even returned to him, although he did not ask for it.⁴³ When he had the land ploughed and sown, it was re-seized before he could reap the harvest. Compensation for expropriated land was generally paid irregularly or not at all, while the people who depended on land, as he did, were facing great economic uncertainty. Bogdan Dundjerski ends both wills (of 1918 and 1940) with the following words: "I commend my soul to the mercy of God, and my mortal body, may it be committed to that piece of land on which I lived honestly and worked hard". The issue of the minorities in the context of agrarian reform, until the peace treaties were signed, was used as an excuse for excluding the poor peasants from minority groups from land redistribution.⁴⁴ The explanation was that only the citizens of the Kingdom of SCS could be beneficiaries of the land reform. After 1920, "it was openly admitted that members of the national minorities, such as the interested Hungarians in St. Bečej, cannot be included as agrarian beneficiaries because of the national objectives of the agrarian reform."⁴⁵ The above-quoted statements of Bogdan Dundjerski are in stark contradiction to these claims. Dundjerski, overwhelmed by suspicion, tended to exaggerate and sometimes his statements sounded paranoid, but in his lists of the parcels of his estate, he was meticulous, he paid attention to every detail. His claims about the new Yugoslav authorities "loving" Hungarians or Catholics "more" were inaccurate, but it would have been unusual for him to make a mistake about the number of parcels and their users. He listed very precisely how his estate was parcelled and redistributed — mostly to poor peasants of Hungarian origin. According to the census of 1928, there were no Hungarian leaseholders of

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Nikola L. Gaćeša, "Agrarna reforma u Starom Bečeju 1918–1941" [Agrarian Reform in Stari Bečej], *Istraživanja* 19 (Novi Sad 2008), 46.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

the parcels.⁴⁶ The possibility that all Hungarian peasants had sold the parcels does not seem likely. The land was mainly allotted to local volunteers veterans. Unlike Dundjerski, other landowners did not care who worked their expropriated land.

Bogdan Dundjerski seems to have forgotten that his uncle Lazar Dundjerski, as a boy, had “ploughed the corn field, a shoe on one foot and an *opanak*⁴⁷ on the other”.⁴⁸ Bogdan Dundjerski’s father, Aleksandar Dundjerski, spent most of his time in the heath of Sirig, breeding sheep and oxen, and owing to that he had purchased the properties in the vicinity of Bečej which Bogdan inherited.⁴⁹ Bogdan Dundjerski respected his parents, but could not hide contempt for “ignorant newcomers”. Landowners were going through their drama, and poor peasants through theirs. The former warriors, liberators, torn between feelings of self-importance and misery, rambled from one farmstead to another, from barns to stables, to return to their shabby cottages, waiting for the definitive solution of their status in the parcels they held by lease. The drama continued and did not end before the outbreak of the Second World War.

His estate and his castle, Bogdan Dundjerski left by his will for the free education of the poor talented students in agronomic sciences. Everything was included: accommodation, food, school fees, teachers’ salaries, the maintenance of the estate, and students’ allowances. Wealthy students were supposed to pay school fees. The school should have borne the inscription: “Bogdan Dundjerski Foundation”. After the Second World War and the communist takeover, the castle was converted into a hotel, named “Fantast” after one of the horses from Bogdan Dundjerski’s stables, and the estate was nationalized.

*UDC 316.343-058.32:929]Dundjerski, Bogdan
94:341.3](497.11:439) 1941/1944”*

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⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Serbian peasant footwear.

⁴⁸ “Autobiography of Lazar Dundjerski”, manuscript, private collection; Aleksandar Kasaš, “Zapisi Lazara Dundjerskog o svom životu i sticanju porodičnog imetka” [Lazar Dundjerski’s notes on his life and the acquisition of family fortune], *Zbornik Matice srpske za istoriju* 51 (1995), 213–223.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

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