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Elisabeth Báthory – a true story

Summary. Almost everyone has heard the legend of cruel Elisabeth Báthory who bathed in the blood of young virgins to preserve eternal youth. The countess is also known as one of the bloodiest women in Europe. She is registered on the world list of Guinness records as the biggest serial killer of all time. However, there is a doubt whether she committed all crimes attributed to her. Thus, the article presents two alternative biographies of the Hungarian aristocrat: one that derives from legends, and the other that is based on historical facts recently determined by contemporary researchers of the topic.

Keywords: Elisabeth Báthory, legend of the 'Blood Countess', palatine Thurzó.

Elisabeth Báthory in popular culture

Elisabeth Báthory (1560–1614) is nowadays one of the most widely known heroines of popular culture. There are numerous references to her life in books, films, music or even computer games. The countess is most often portrayed as the 'Blood Princess', murdering young women and bathing in a tub full of fresh blood. She is depicted as a cruel aristocrat in both foreign and native popular science literature. The most famous examples include such sensational historical novels as *The Báthory Legend: Čachtická Pani* by Jožo Nižnánski¹, *Krwawa hrabina. Tajemnice Elżbiety Batory* by Stanisław Antoni Wotowski², series of books

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¹ J. Nižnánsky, *Pani na Czachticach*, Katowice 1974.

² S.A. Wotowski, *Krwawa hrabina. Tajemnice Elżbiety Batory*, Warszawa 2017.

by Andrej Štiavnický³ or a romantic novel by Rebecca Johns titled *The Countess. A novel of Elisabeth Báthory*⁴. Moreover, the 'Blood Countess' is one of the heroines of books devoted to the greatest criminals in history (Leslie Carroll⁵, Jan Stradling⁶), the cruellest tyrants (Helmut Werner⁷) or the most famous vampires⁸ (Manuela Dunn-Mascetti⁹). Most films devoted to Elisabeth Báthory, in turn, are either a niche cinema (*Immoral Tales* by Walerian Borowczyk) or B class productions (*Necropolis* by Franco Brocani, *Countess Dracula* by Peter Sasdy, *Children of the Night* by Harry Kümel, *El Retorno de Walpurgis* by Carlos Aured, *Thirst* by Rod Hardy or more recent productions like *Stay Alive* by William Bell and *Dracula's Curse* by Leigh Scott). Unfortunately, the number of biographical films that present the true image of that Hungarian aristocrat is still small. A few exceptions are *Bathory* by Juraj Jakubisko or *The Countess* directed by Julie Delpy. Finally, the theme of *The Lady of Čachtice* is also used by metal bands, such as the *Bathory* group from Sweden, the Czech *XIII Století* or the British band *Cradle of Filth*. The legend of the vampire from Transylvania appears even in the *Diablo II* computer game where there is a figure of Countess locked in the tower and bathing in the blood.

³ The most important titles of the series include: A. Štiavnický, *V podzemí Čachtického hradu*, Praha 2001; idem, *Alžběta Bátoriová vo väzení a na slobode*, Praha 2002; idem, *Čachtická pani pred Najvyšším súdom*, Praha 2003.

⁴ R. Johns, *Hrabina. Tragická historia Elžbiety Batory*, Bielsko-Biala 2013.

⁵ L. Carroll, *Zbrodnie i skandale na królewskich dworach*, Warszawa 2018, pp. 178–199.

⁶ J. Stradling, *Złe kobiety. Kleopatra... Mata Hari... pani Mao... a może Ty kochanie?*, Warszawa 2010.

⁷ H. Werner, *Tyranki. Najokrutniejsze kobiety w historii*, Warszawa 2005, pp. 139–150.

⁸ According to Slavic folk beliefs, a vampire is the ghost of a deceased or a living corpse, preying on living ones by drinking their blood, eating their meat, strangling them etc. See B. Baranowski, *W kręgu upiórów i wilkołaków*, Łódź 1981, pp. 51–52; C. Robotycki, *Wampiry. Od wierzeń ludowych do filmowych fantomów*, 'Konteksty' 1992, No. 3–4, p. 145; J. Strzelczyk, *Mity, podania i wierzenia dawnych Słowian*, Poznań 1998, p. 219.

⁹ M. Dunn-Mascetti, *Świat wampirów. Od Draculi do Edwarda*, Warszawa 2010, pp. 15–35.

The legend of the ‘Blood Countess’

Elisabeth Báthory was born on August 7, 1560, as a daughter of György and Anna Báthory. Because the Báthorys often married within their own family, many of them suffered from mental illness or other genetic disorders. For example, King Stephen Báthory (1533–1586) had attacks of epilepsy, his two brothers were well-known tyrants and criminals and his father used to take a sleigh in the middle of summer¹⁰.

Elisabeth had a slender body, gorgeous cream complexion and beautiful raven-black hair. From an early age she distinguished herself by not only her extraordinary beauty but also enormous intelligence. She spoke Hungarian, Slovak, Greek, Latin and German¹¹. Already at the age of four or five, she suffered from epileptic seizures, violent mood swings as well as painful migraines¹².

At a time when the beating of servants was obvious – according to Hungarian law, peasants were the property of the nobility¹³ – the young countess saw a lot of violence. In 1566, while in Escsed, she was allowed to observe a public execution of a local Gypsy, accused of kidnapping and selling a few children in slavery, who was sewn in a horse’s stomach¹⁴. When she was 15 years old, in turn, her cousin, the above-mentioned Stephen Báthory, in a fit of anger ordered to cut ears and noses of local peasants that fuelled the rebellion against him¹⁵.

In 1570, the ten-year-old girl’s hand was promised to a five years older Ferenc Nádasdy (1555–1604). The official engagement took place three years later. According to the custom, the young fiancée was sent to the court of her future mother-in-law to learn how to

¹⁰ C. Santos, *Unbecoming Female Monsters: Witches, Vampires, and Virgins*, London 2017, p. 136.

¹¹ T. Thorne, *Countess Dracula: The Life and Times of the Blood Countess, Elisabeth Báthory*, London 1997, p. 84; V. Penrose, *The Bloody Countess*, London 1970, p. 15.

¹² B.G. Sala, *W górach przeklętych. Wampiry Alp, Rudaw, Sudetów, Karpat i Bałkanów*, Olszanica 2016, p. 37.

¹³ A manual of Hungarian customary law completed in 1514, the so-called *Tripartitum*, practically abolished all rights of serfs and at the same time protected the nobility that exploited them. See T. Telfer, *Seryjne zabójczynie. Najślawniejsze morderczynie w dziejach*, Warszawa 2017, pp. 33–34.

¹⁴ R.T. McNally, *Dracula Was a Woman: In Search of the Blood Countess of Transylvania*, New York 1983, p. 21.

¹⁵ A. Szabelski, *Postać Elżbiety Batory w historiografii*, ‘Studia Europea Gnesnensia’ 2014, No. 9, p. 97.

manage the house. Rumour had it that in 1574 she gave birth to an illegitimate daughter whose father was local peasant, László Bende. He was allegedly charged with rape and it was said that Ferenc ordered to castrate him. A child was born secretly and handed over to a trusted woman who for a huge fee was sent to Wallachia and told not to return to Transylvania during Elisabeth's life¹⁶.

On May 8, 1575, a glamorous wedding ceremony took place at Vranov nad Topľou castle (hung. Varannó). Wedding celebrations lasted three days. As a wedding present, Nádasdy gave his young spouse the Gothic castle of Čachtice (hung. Csejte) located in the rocky backwoods of Upper Hungary. Thanks to the marriage, two most powerful Hungarian families were joint. The Nádasdys, however, contrarily to the Báthorys (known of mental illnesses), were considered a respectable, conservative and pious family. After the wedding, the newlyweds lived in Hungary in the castle of Sárvár, the family estate of the Nádasdys¹⁷.

Ferenc spent most of his time at war. Three years after the wedding he set out to fight the Turks. At that time Elisabeth was travelling between numerous castles to oversee her estates and servants. When in 1591 the so-called long war began, Nádasdy was labelled the Black Bay or the Black Knight. In his free time he used to throw up a pair of Turkish prisoners and catch them on the tips of his swords. He was cruel when he returned home, too. Once he ordered to smear a young girl with honey so that she was constantly bitten by insects. Apparently, it was Ferenc to taught his wife a trick called 'kicking the stars' which consisted of putting a piece of oil-soaked paper between the fingers of a disobedient servant and setting it on fire. He also presented Elisabeth with a pair of gloves ended in claws which she used to punish her servants¹⁸.

When Ferenc was on his military expeditions, Báthory had numerous romances. She was travelling and visiting relatives, including aunt Clara who lived in Vienna and was said to introduce the nice to the world of licentiousness and lesbian orgies. Aunt Clara's loyal servant, Thorko, introduced the countess into the world of dark powers. In the absence of her husband, she invited

¹⁶ T. Telfer, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁷ K.L. Craft, *Infamous Lady: The True Story of Countess Erzsébet Báthory*, Lexington 2009, p. 193; T. Thorne, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

¹⁸ R.T. McNally, *op. cit.*, p. 127; B.G. Sala, *op. cit.*, p. 37; T. Telfer, *op. cit.*, pp. 21, 29–30.

self-proclaimed sorcerers, seers, witches and alchemists. When she began to show up with a man of a pale complexion and unnaturally sharp teeth who dressed in black, local villagers, who believed in vampires, began to call her the Beast of Csejte. Over time, Elisabeth became a mistress in preparing medicines, stocks and potions. In one of her letters to the husband, she described an extremely effective way of casting spells: 'Catch a black hen and beat it to death with a white cane. Keep the blood and smear a little of it on your enemy. If you get no chance to smear it on his body, obtain one of his garments and smear it'¹⁹.

The countess began to torture her victims already at Sárvár castle, around 1585. Screams of the tortured were supposed to relieve her nagging migraines. She quickly understood that peasant maids working at the castle were an easy target. The smallest mistake of the servant was an excuse for the punishment. She liked to torment people by stabbing them under nails or cutting their fingers off. Naked girls were also poured with water and left in the cold. Sometimes 'natural' methods were used: the servants were beaten and then flogged with nettles. Over time, Elisabeth's tortures became more and more brutal. The bodies of unfortunate servants were torn out with reddish pliers. Sometimes the victim's skin was scorched with hot iron or its mouth was dragged for the corners for so long as to tear it completely out²⁰.

In 1601, Anna Darvulia, a witch described by the locals as a 'wild beast in a female body'²¹, became the countess's accomplice in crimes. Ever since she started to live in the castle, the personality of Elisabeth began to change. 'Mistress became crueller' – her subjects later recalled²². It was Darvulia who taught the countess how to kill. Báthory reported the cholera epidemic as an explanation for the death of her first victims. Official funerals with pastors and chants took place. The local clerics, however, became suspicious when more and more often they were asked to perform the funeral rites for servants who died either of 'cholera' or 'for unknown and mysterious reasons'²³. In 1602, the priest and scholar István

¹⁹ See M. Janion, *Wampir. Biografia symboliczna*, Gdańsk 2008, p. 57; B.G. Sala, *op. cit.*, p. 39; C. Santos, *op. cit.*, pp. 143–144.

²⁰ K.L. Craft, *Infamous Lady...*, pp. 202–211.

²¹ T. Telfer, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 32.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

Magyari publicly demanded the exhumation of the bodies. He also asked Count Nádasdy, together with another priest from the area of Sárvár, to stop his wife's cruelty to the innocent²⁴.

Ferenc Nádasdy died on January 4, 1604. It was officially stated that he died of combat injuries sustained several days earlier. The locals, however, speculated that Elisabeth herself or someone around her contributed to his death. Shortly after her husband's death, Báthory moved to Čachtice where she initially lived in a stronghold located near the church. Then, the number of victims of the 'Blood Princess' began to grow. The countess was furious, especially when she was going on a journey or waiting for a public appearance. Her lust for blood was still growing. Soon, she began to attack her victims with teeth and biting off pieces of their bodies from necks, arms or cheeks. She started to use razors, torches and tongs. She also used to stitch seamstresses' mouths if she did not like a new dress²⁵.

The most trusted servants of the lady of the house were: ugly dwarf, Ján Ujvári (Fičková), already mentioned Anna Darvulia; nurse of countess's children, Ilona Jó; witch Dorottya Széntes, called Dorka; laundress Katalin Benická as well as old local witch and poisoner, Busorka of Myjava (Erzsi Majerová), whom Elisabeth began to see with when Anna Darvulia became blind. The binders had their specialties. Dorka liked to cut fingers off with scissors, Darvulia preferred to give 500 strokes with a whip. Elisabeth liked everything. Ilona Jó later testified: 'Anywhere she went, she looked immediately for a place where they could torture the girls'²⁶. A local resident heard from the servants that 'their mistress could neither eat nor drink if she had not previously seen one of the virgins from amongst her maids killed in a bloody way'²⁷.

The count's death reminded Elisabeth that she would not live forever. She was a single widow of 40 ready to do anything to stop the destructive time. Every piece of her body was rubbed with new care products which she brought from many journeys. For hours, her hair was pinned up in various ways. Rumour had it

²⁴ K.L. Craft, *Infamous Lady...*, p. 218; S. Kazimierski, *Wampirzyca o królewskim rodowodzie*, 'Kurier Galicyjski' 2009, No. 5 (81), p. 16.

²⁵ 'For crying out loud, what a cruelty! There was no crueller butcher on Earth, I suppose' – wrote terrified pastor of Csejte when he heard about atrocities that were taking place in the countess's palace. See T. Telfer, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 26, 39, 43, 45. See K.L. Craft, *Infamous Lady...*, p. 263.

that when a servant made her hair inappropriately, the countess fell into a rage and massacred the girl. After having washed the maid's blood from the face, she saw that her skin was smoother and firmer. It was then that Báthory came up with an idea to take a bath in a tub filled with the blood and regain former beauty. She called Dorka and Fičkó, told them to undress the girl and hold her arms over a large vat – then, she cut the victim's arteries. When the maid bled, the countess took a bath in the blood which from now on was her miraculous elixir of life²⁸.

When one of girls was to die, there was an extraordinary silence in the castle and the adjacent stronghold. Those who came to speak with the lady of the house were hurriedly briefed on the pretext of her ill-being. Immediately after dark, the victim was sent to the cellar for wine where dwarf Fičkó overpowered her and killed with a knife. Elisabeth then hurried to the cellar with her maidservants who carried the dead to the prepared bathtub. After the bath, Báthory went to the room and the maidens gathered clods of dried blood which they later used to wrap the body of the lady. The dwarf's task was to hide the corpse in one of numerous underground passages. Sometimes the countess took the blood shower. On such an occasion young victim was closed in a cage which was too low to stand, too narrow to sit but full of studs. The cage was suspended in the ceiling. When the cage was rocking back and forth, the girl closed in it was torn to pieces between the studs. The so-called Iron Virgin²⁹ was used sometimes, too. The mannequin had five knives that slid out of the holes under its breasts, stabbing the poor victim to death³⁰.

At that time, widow Nádasdy travelled a lot. She usually left when the murders started to arouse suspicion among the locals. She visited Moravia, the Czech Republic, Austria and Poland. Wherever she was staying, girls immediately began to disappear while their

²⁸ B. Faron, A. Bukowczan-Rzeszut, *Siedem śmierci. Jak umierano w dawnych wiekach*, Kraków 2017, p. 191.

²⁹ L. Túróczi, *Ungaria suis cum regibus compendio data*, [no place] 1729, p. 191.

³⁰ The 'Iron Virgin' was a wooden torture instrument which consisted of two halves connected by hinges. Inside were two sharp iron tips. When a prisoner was closed in the interior, the iron tips did not hit important vital organs and the person was dying in long and severe pain. See *Stretnutie v čase. Alžbeta Bátoriová, Lukrecie Nekešová*, fond mikroprojektov 2014, p. 49, http://www.cykloklub.sk/data4/STRETNUTIE_V_CASE1.pdf (online: May 5, 2018).

mutilated, covered with numerous wounds bodies were later found in the fields. It never occurred to anyone, though, to attribute those crimes to the Hungarian aristocrat and her retinue.

When the countess noticed that blood of ordinary villagers gave a weak effect in improving the appearance of her complexion, she started to kill beautiful noblewomen from poorer families. In 1609³¹, she even opened an academy called *Gynaecaeum*. When affluent parents began to enquire about the fate of their children, Elisabeth's ridiculous explanations began to raise suspicion. At one point, it was no longer possible to invent a cholera epidemic. Thus, an accident on the hunt was being given as a reason for victim's death. Moreover, Báthory fell into madness and did not care for discretion anymore. When in the cellars there was no room for the graves of next victims, the bodies of the dead were buried in shallow pits in the courtyard or thrown into the castle moat where hungry dogs pulled them out. The corpses were also transported by a special carriage while the remains were thrown around the area from its windows. When things went too far, 12 various complaints were sent to the royal court and the Hungarian King Matthias II (1557–1619) initiated the investigation³².

In the spring of 1610, on behalf of the king and the parliament, the highest judge, György Thurzó (1567–1616), initiated the secret investigation. The witnesses were interrogated by investigators Mózes Cziráky and András Keresztúr. Fifty-two people were interviewed most of whom confirmed the worst suspicions. They spoke about tortured or murdered girls and reported cases of cannibalism. Still, none of the interviewed saw it with their own eyes. The report by pastors of Čachtice, Barosius and Ponikenusz, who discovered bodies in tunnels connecting the church with the castle³³, also helped in the case. Initially, Thurzó intended to close the countess in the monastery. When Elisabeth began to threaten him with the support of the pro-Turkish Báthory protectorate led by Gabriel, who was just rebelling against the Habsburgs, the palatine was left with no choice. He knew, however, that if he summoned the countess to the court and proved her guilty, her enormous fortune would have

³¹ Cruel Darvulia died of a stroke the same year.

³² S. Kazimierski, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

³³ It should be mentioned here that most victims were tortured not in the castle, but in the palace in Čachtice. According to legends, both places were connected by underground corridors. See *Stretnutie v čase...*, pp. 43, 50.

been confiscated, mostly by the King of Hungary. Thus, he made an agreement with Elisabeth's heirs. The countess was to be caught red-handed so that she could not deny the crime. She would spend the rest of her life locked in her castle³⁴.

Everyone waited for Christmas. On December 29, 1610, György Thurzó and his retinue entered the unguarded mansion under the castle. In front of Báthory's eyes, the palatine's people brought the bodies of victims to the courtyard. One of the girls was still alive. 'Who did hurt you?' – asked the highest judge. 'A woman named Katalin tore me with tongs and Lady Widow Nádasdy beat me with hand'. When the countess heard it, she tried to blame her servants: 'I let them do it because I even was afraid of them' – she said³⁵. After a long search, about 50 corpses were found. The countess was taken to the castle and her three servants as well as a dwarf, to Bytča, for interrogation. There, they were tortured. In their testimonies they tried to blame one another, their mistress and the late Darvulia³⁶.

Fičkó testified that widow Nádasdy mistreated servants when the count was still alive but when she hired Darvulia, she started to brutally murder her victims. According to him, she personally murdered 37 girls. Three servants, in turn, testified that their mistress killed between 36 and 50 people. The register³⁷ belonging to Báthory, however, was to indicate that the number of victims was much higher, reaching 650. After the hearings, a 14-member court met. The final verdict of January 7, 1611, charged Elisabeth with criminal offenses and her accomplices – with vampirism, sorcery and celebrating pagan rituals. The countess was sentenced to life imprisonment in her castle. Katalin, due to lack of evidence, was also sentenced to life imprisonment and other servants – to death. Fičkó, Ilona Jó and Dorottya Széntes were executed the same day. Because of his young age, a dwarf was beheaded and publicly burned. Both Elisabeth's helpers, due to the burden of the

³⁴ K.L. Craft, *Infamous Lady...*, pp. 195–196, 220; S. Kord, *Murderesses in German Writing, 1720–1860: Heroines of Horror*, New York 2009, p. 56.

³⁵ See K.L. Craft, *Infamous Lady...*, p. 266.

³⁶ I. PivárCSI, *Just a Bite: A Transylvania Vampire Expert's Short History of the Undead*, Williamstown, MA 2012, p. 147; A. Szabelski, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

³⁷ The registry was mentioned only once. A servant named Susannah testified that she had heard about it from Jacob Szilvásy, the overseer in Čachtice. Interestingly, the latter was never summoned to court to confirm that statement. See A. Codrescu, *The Blood Countess: A novel*, New York 2015, p. 333.

acts committed, were tortured before death. Busorka of Myjava was burnt alive without questioning two weeks later, on January 24³⁸.

The main accused, Countess Elisabeth Báthory, was spared due to her aristocratic origins. She was closed for a lifetime in an isolated room with only a small hole for food. Widow Nádasdy lived three more years. During that time, she protested against the verdict many times. Her letters prove that she had no remorse. The countess was found dead on August 21, 1614. Even today her death is a mystery. Some say she was poisoned, others that she died of hunger because she was walled in a tower. According to legends, her body was in a terrible state. Her forearms had tooth marks while earth around her body was covered with blood. She was buried in the crypt of the church in Čachtice. Until now, however, the body of the countess was not found which contributed to several conspiracy theories about her alleged escape³⁹.

That is what the legend says. Yet, it is worth taking a closer look at historical facts discovered in recent years by researchers interested in the countess's life and activity.

The most important monographs on Elisabeth Báthory

The legend of the 'Blood Princess' has been passed from mouth to mouth for centuries and became an element of folklore. At the turn of the 19th and 20th century, the story of a Hungarian aristocrat terrorising the oppressed Slovaks perfectly adapted to the Slovak nationalism. It was not until the eighties of the 20th century, though, that the Hungarian historian László Nagy wrote two books in which he tried to objectively present the story of the Lady of Čachtice⁴⁰. Undoubtedly, the book by the Hungarian researcher Irma Szádeczka-Kardoss⁴¹, where she described many new, previously unknown facts of the countess's life, is an important and interesting publication, too. The Slovak and Czech historians are rather reluctant to portray Báthory in a good light, proving that

³⁸ K.L. Craft, *Infamous Lady...*, pp. 227–238, 244, 299; *Stretnutie v čase...*, p. 52.

³⁹ B. Faron, A. Bukowczan-Rzeszut, *op. cit.*, p. 195; *Stretnutie v čase...*, p. 32.

⁴⁰ L. Nagy, *A rossz hírű Báthoryak*, Budapest 1984; *idem*, *Az erős fekete bég: Nádasdy Ferenc*, Budapest 1987.

⁴¹ I. Szádeczky-Kardoss, *Báthory Erzsébet igazsága*, Budapest 1993.

she was guilty of all crimes attributed to her⁴². However, also here there are some exceptions. The most important include a book by Pavel Dvořák and Karol Kalláy⁴³. The authors of the *Báthory – život a smrt*⁴⁴ are also convinced of Elisabeth's innocence. As regards the English-language publications, one cannot forget about the book by Kimberly L. Craft *Infamous Lady: The True Story of Countess Erzsébet Báthory*⁴⁵ published in 2009.

Elisabeth Báthory's biography according to historical sources

Elisabeth Báthory (hung. Báthory Erzsébet) was born on August 7, 1560, in Nyírbátor (north-eastern Hungary) in the Ecsed region⁴⁶. Little is known about her childhood and youth. From an early age she was considered prone to anger fits. Certainly, she was extremely beautiful and intelligent. Few preserved letters prove that she was literate. She spoke not only Hungarian and Slovak, but also Greek, Latin and German.

In 1573, Elisabeth was engaged with the heir of the Drághaffy family, Ferenc Nádasdy. After the wedding, which took place on May 8, 1575 in Vranov (today's eastern Slovakia), the young couple lived in the groom's castle of Sárvár. The marriage led to closer cooperation between two powerful families, possessing estates in both Transylvania and the Kingdom of Hungary⁴⁷.

⁴² T. Bednařík, *Čachtická pani: ďábel s tváří anděla*, Praha 2006; J.J. Duffack, *Bosorka Alžběta Nádašdyová, rozená Báthoryová, alias čachtická pani*, Praha 2008; J. Kočiš, *Alžbeta Báthoryová a palatín Thurzo*, Bratislava 1981; V. Liška, *Kletba Čachtické vrazedkyně: tajemství hrůzných činů hraběnky Báthoryové*, Praha 2007.

⁴³ P. Dvořák, K. Kalláy, *Krvavá grófká: Alžbeta Batoryová, fakty a výmysly*, Bratislava 1999.

⁴⁴ T. Lengyelová, G. Vákronyi, *Báthory – život a smrt*, Praha 2009.

⁴⁵ K.L. Craft, *Infamous Lady...*

⁴⁶ Two most important branches of the Báthorys were Somlyó and Ecsed. Stephen Báthory, the King of Poland, was a representative of the first one. His sister, Anna, married her distant cousin from the Ecsed branch, György. Stephen was their first child, Elisabeth – the second. See *Stretnutie v čase...*, p. 15.

⁴⁷ In 1575, 4299 settlements in 19 estates belonged to the Báthorys, while the Nádasdys owned 888.5 settlements. To the Nádasdys there belonged: Kerestúr, Kőszeg, Sárvár, Kapuvár, Lockenhaus (hung. Léka), Nagykanizsa, Csókakő, Csepreg, Egervár, Velika, Sjenieak, Čachtice, Beckov (hung. Beckó). To Elisabeth Báthory there belonged castles Ecsed, Füzér, Buják, Vranov, ěiěva, Fogaras (hung. Fogaras). Moreover, in 1605, she inherited part of Devin castle. The married couple also owned palaces in Vienna and Pressburg as well as a small mansion house in Piešťany (hung. Pöstyén). See *Stretnutie v čase...*, p. 29.

Báthory received the castle in Čachtice (then Hungary) with nearby villages as a wedding gift. However, she spent little time in it because, especially in winter, the castle was uninhabitable⁴⁸. Ferenc appeared at his wife's side only between successive battles. At that time, Elisabeth supervised the entire estate on his behalf, settled local disputes and helped to educate young noblewomen who came to her court.

Hungarian sources state that the spouses had six children: Anna (born 1585), Katalin (born 1594), Pál (born 1597), András (born 1598) and two more children whose dates of birth are unknown: Miklós and Orsolya⁴⁹.

When Ferenc Nádasdy died on January 4, 1604, the widow decided to move permanently to the castle in Čachtice which, after rebuilding, gained a new Renaissance appearance and rich furnishings. A year later, Elisabeth's brother, Stephen (1555–1605), died. After his death, the countess inherited Devín castle (hung. Dévény), a strategic point on the Austrian border. To avoid an awkward position, Báthory sold the castle for which she had never received payment⁵⁰.

Elisabeth managed a huge estate until December 29, 1610, when she was arrested and imprisoned by Palatine György Thurzó. She was accused of murders of noblewomen⁵¹, beatings and torture. Dorottya Széntes, Ilona Jó and dwarf Ján Ujvári admitted to all the charges. Women were burned alive while the dwarf, due to disease and young age, was first beheaded and then thrown into the fire. The clergy tried to force the palatine to add the accusation of witchcraft. Pastor Ponikenusz even wrote a letter in which he described how witnesses should testify, in his opinion, during torture⁵².

The countess never admitted to any of the alleged crimes. Until the end of her days, she was writing letters to the king, asking for an acquittal. There are documents showing that Matthias II demanded a re-examination of the case and further interrogations.

⁴⁸ A. Wasielewski, *Zamki i zamczyska Słowacji*, Białystok 2008, p. 145.

⁴⁹ Ł. Włodarski, *Elżbieta Batory – ofiara politycznego spisku*, <http://wmro-kuhistorii.blogspot.com/2015/08/elzbieta-batory-ofiara-politycznego.html> (online: July 13, 2018).

⁵⁰ B. Faron, A. Bukowczan-Rzeszut, *op. cit.*, p. 193; A. Szabelski, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

⁵¹ According to the law, in case of the peasant's murder it was up to the master whether to settle up with the family.

⁵² B. Faron, A. Bukowczan-Rzeszut, *op. cit.*, p. 194; S. Kord, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

In July and December 1611, reports with testimonies of 336 witnesses were added to the case files⁵³. Because Elisabeth was afraid of a possible conviction, just before her death, on July 31, 1614, she wrote a will in which she gave everything she possessed to her children. On August 21, 1614, Elisabeth Báthory was found dead on the floor of one of the chambers. She was buried three months later, on November 25, 1614, in the crypt of the church in Čachtice⁵⁴. When local residents demanded the removal of the body, she was buried again in 1617 in Nagyecsed, in north-eastern Hungary. However, when the family crypt was opened in 1995, the remains of the countess were not found in it. Some historians claim that her grave is located somewhere in the cemetery in Budapest, but there is no evidence to prove it⁵⁵.

Facts and myths about the countess's life

When comparing the legends with facts from life of the Lady of Čachtice, it is worth mentioning the most noticeable distortions in the biography of the Hungarian aristocrat. First of all, it is untrue that her alleged sadism was a result of an incestuous relationship of her parents. The Ecsed and Somlyó branches are separated by seven generations (over 200 years). What is more, although Elisabeth could have witnessed many drastic scenes that left a lasting impression on her psyche, the story about the Gypsy sewn in the horse's stomach seems to be untrue. Such an expensive punishment (the horse was worth more than the peasant's life) was reserved only for the chieftains of robbery bands⁵⁶.

Historians also deny that the Hungarian aristocrat gave birth to an illegitimate child. If she had become pregnant with a local peasant at such a young age, the family would not have allowed any records on the subject and would have sent her to the monastery. There is

⁵³ K.L. Craft, *Infamous Lady...*, pp. 255–294.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 245, 250; B. Faron, A. Bukowczan-Rzeszut, *op. cit.*, p. 195; Z. Sobczyk, *Z turystycznego szlaku – Krwawa księżna z Czachtic*, [in:] *Kalendarz Golezowski 2013*, ed. M. Szteler-Furmaniuk, Golezów 2012, p. 115; A. Wasielewski, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

⁵⁵ According to some researchers, it is unlikely that her body was transported to Transylvania. Theoretically, she could have been buried in the Nádasdys castle crypt in Lockenhaus that nowadays are located in the underground of the church. See *Stretnutie v čase...*, p. 54.

⁵⁶ I. Czamańska, *Batorowie*, [in:] *Słownik dynastii Europy*, eds J. Dobosz, M. Serwański, Poznań 1999, pp. 58–60; *Stretnutie v čase...*, p. 15.

also no evidence that the countess, during her husband's absence, participated in orgies organised by Aunt Clara. Even thousand guests could have been present during official balls but none of them ever described alleged excesses at the Vienna court in a letter nor a diary. Nor is it true that Báthory devoted herself to sorcery. Elisabeth was fascinated with herbalism, poisons, medicines and alchemy but she did not differ from other women of her time. The legend of tortures and murders of servants and young noblewomen seems also untrue. The countess would not allow a significant loss of servants at a time when, as a result of ubiquitous epidemics, there were no hands to work. In turn, if there had been any acts of sadism in the castle, rich families would have stopped sending daughters to the court of the Hungarian lady. Moreover, historians discovered that the probable cause of the death of Count Nádasdy was not the treacherous poison but mercury used to heal people suffering from various types of venereal diseases. The tales of Elisabeth's blood baths should be considered completely untrue, too. It would be necessary to obtain blood from about 30 victims for a single bath. What is more, the bloody custom was first mentioned by László Túróczi only over one hundred years after the death of Widow Nádasdy. Finally, Elisabeth was never accused of witchcraft and casting spells. In the act of prosecution, there is not a single word about the Iron Maiden or contacts with the devil, too⁵⁷.

As a result of the research, historians determined that the trial against Elisabeth was a spectacle aimed at destroying the power and influence of the Báthorys. The conspiracy was an intricate work of Palatine Thurzó who took advantage of the moods reflected in Čachtice. A Hungarian aristocrat in the Slovak lands did not arouse sympathy. The palatine tried to prove that a crazy woman living in the castle was abusing people with the help of a witch. The truth is, however, that the countess's great passion was healing. Each noblewoman in her castle had to learn the basics of anatomy as well as the simplest healing techniques. Yet, medical operations in Čachtice arouse even more suspicions when Elisabeth hired Anna Darvulia, a midwife and healer from Vienna. Her specialty was surgery, bloodletting, burning wounds with hot iron, cutting out tumours and birthmarks. The fevers were treated with alternating

⁵⁷ M. Użarowska, *Elżbieta Batory: Krwawa hrabina z Transylwanii*, <http://www.rp.pl/Rzecz-o-historii/180209370-Elzbieta-Batory-Krwawa-hrabina-z-Transylwanii.html> (online: July 13, 2018).

cold and hot baths and bubbles while infected tissues, boils or abscesses were removed. People began to believe that the countess (with the help of Darvulia) was committing terrible crimes. However, in chronicles the dates of deaths of young ladies coincided with well-documented cases of local epidemics of plague and typhus⁵⁸. In just one week in 1610 (just before the arrest of Elisabeth), eight women died in Čachtice. Probably it gave the palatine a pretext to arrest the aristocrat. One of the letters from that period, however, proved irrefutably that at that time Elisabeth and her daughter were staying in Vienna⁵⁹.

According to the indictment, on the day of the arrest, the palatine caught Widow Nádasdy red-handed⁶⁰. However, it is known that at that time a young woman, who had been attacked by a wild animal the day before, was being treated in the castle. The patient survived but her testimony did not appear in further interviews. Elisabeth herself did not plead guilty but she was not allowed to testify either. Still, she was not bricked up in one of her rooms. Thurzó remanded her into the custody of the guards and the countess was allowed to invite guests. Nevertheless, the imprisonment of a noblewoman without a court judgment was definitely an unprecedented event⁶¹.

Elisabeth Báthory as a victim of a political conspiracy

In the light of recent research, it turns out that Elisabeth Báthory was probably the victim of a conspiracy of her relatives and the Habsburgs. These assumptions are confirmed by historical facts. Let's look closer at the situation of Hungary at that time. The country was divided into three parts. The western part was ruled by a dynasty from Vienna, the central was part of the Ottoman Empire and from the eastern part the Duchy of Transylvania was created (the future king, Stephen, was its first prince from the Báthory

⁵⁸ Ł. Włodarski, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ B. Faron, A. Bukowczan-Rzeszut, *op. cit.*, p. 194; I. Górnicka, *Elżbieta Batory – 'Krwawa hrabina'*, [in:] *Ciekawostki z historii*, ed. D. Podoba, Lublin 2016, p. 33; V. Liška, *Temná duše, Téma měsíce: Tajemství Čachtické pani*, 'Regenerace' 2002, No. 11, <http://www.regenerace.net/Archiv/2002/11/temna.htm> (online: May 5, 2018).

⁶⁰ Ł. Włodarski, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ According to the Golden Bull of Andrew II of Hungary and the *Tripartitum*, the nobleman could not be held in captivity without court sentence unless there was hard evidence of guilt. See I. Górnicka, *op. cit.*, p. 32; A. Szabelski, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

family). Yet, already in 1602, that is during the reign of Sigismund Báthory (1572–1613), Transylvania fell into the hands of the Habsburgs. However, after the anti-Habsburg uprising of Stephen Bocskay (1604), the Habsburgs not only lost their influence in Transylvania but also had to significantly reduce their absolute power in the Kingdom of Hungary. In 1606, peace was concluded under which Vienna had to accept harsh conditions and give up several committees in favour of Bocskay who became the new prince of Transylvania. The same year, after heavy 15-year-long fights (the so-called long war), peace with Turkey was made in Zsitvatorok⁶².

After short rule of Sigismund Rákóczi (died 1608), in 1608 Gabriel Báthory (1589–1613), the grandson of the Polish ruler's brother, Andrew Báthory (died 1563), became the prince of Transylvania. He planned to reunite the kingdom and regained the former importance of Hungary⁶³. Both plans would seriously undermine the interests of the Habsburgs. The Polish king was already dead but Gabriel could get help from his wealthy relative who, after the death of her husband in 1604, inherited the fortune of two noble families. The strategic location of her castles was not without significance, too. If Gabriel had decided to send his Transylvanian army to Hungary, Elisabeth could have easily provided him with a safe passage, both through eastern Hungary and on the way to Poland. For this reason, some historians hypothesize that the Habsburgs entrusted the palatine of Hungary with the task of removing influential representatives of the Báthorys from the political scene⁶⁴.

There were more motives behind Thurzó's involvement in the overthrow of the countess – the financial one among them. The Hungarian King⁶⁵ Matthias II owed much money to Elisabeth after her husband's death⁶⁶. At the beginning of the 17th century it was

⁶² W. Felczak, *Historia Węgier*, Wrocław 1983, pp. 137–142.

⁶³ At the turn of 1610 and 1611, he suddenly invaded and occupied Walachia from where he intended to attack Moldova. However, already in July 1611, he suffered a devastating defeat at Braşov. See J. Demel, *Historia Rumunii*, Wrocław 1986, p. 167.

⁶⁴ At the same time Sigismund Báthory was captivated in Prague, Gabriel was assassinated in Oradea and Elisabeth was imprisoned in Hungary. See B. Faron, A. Bukowczan-Rzeszut, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

⁶⁵ Because of Rudolf II's mental illness, on April 25, 1606 the Habsburgs decided that his younger brother, Matthias, should rule the Hungary. After Rudolf's death in 1612, he became the emperor of Germany as well.

⁶⁶ When the count died, the king owed him almost 18,000 guildens. See T. Telfer, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

the royal treasury to take over the property of those convicted of crimes⁶⁷. When a nobleman was found guilty of killing someone from his family, he was sentenced to death and all his fortune was given to the ruler. If the murdered nobleman was from outside the family, then the king was entitled to one-third of the property of the accused. Should the king had taken over the property of the convicted countess, he would have enriched himself and got rid of his greatest creditor. Thus, the king and Thurzó wanted to seize all the Báthorys' goods. It is said that Elisabeth's sons-in-law (Miklós Zrínyi and György Hommonay) were taking part in the conspiracy as the highest judge met with them on June 7, 1610, at a secret council⁶⁸.

Báthory was imprisoned illegally as she had never been through a trial. Contradictory and often mutually exclusive testimonies of witnesses were main evidence in the case. The interviewed claimed that they had not seen anything and only heard about alleged killings. Thurzó was well aware of the fragility of evidence and deliberately postponed the end of the case. According to some researchers, when King Matthias II ordered him to start the official trial, the palatine contributed to the death of the countess who, however, outwitted him and wrote a will, giving everything to her children. She deprived herself of all means, so neither the king nor the palatine could count on her money anymore. At this point, it is worth noting that there are many followers of another theory. They point to the fact that György Thurzó was a close friend of Ferenc Nádasdy who a day before his death (January 3, 1604) asked the palatine to take care of his family. Thurzó was convinced of Elisabeth's guilt and decided to protect her from the consequences of a shameful trial. After the meeting with her relatives, he agreed to put a mentally ill woman in her castle for a life imprisonment⁶⁹.

Today, more than 400 years after the described events, we still do not know the whole truth about life and death of Elisabeth Báthory who, as it seems, have taken her secrets to the grave forever.

⁶⁷ Probably Elisabeth had never been accused of witchcraft to prevent the church from confiscating her lands and property.

⁶⁸ K.L. Craft, *Infamous Lady...*, p. 220; I. PivárCSI, *op. cit.*, p. 148; A. Szabelski, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

⁶⁹ K.L. Craft, *Infamous Lady...*, p. 253; A. Szabelski, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

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ALEKSANDRA BARTOSIEWICZ

Elżbieta Batory – historia prawdziwa

Niemal każdy słyszał legendę o okrutnej Elżbiecie Batory, która kąpała się we krwi młodych dziewcząt, by zachować wieczną młodość. Hrabina zapisała się na trwałe w historii jako jedna z najkrwawszych kobiet Europy. Została też wpisana na światową listę rekordów Guinnessa jako największa seryjna morderczyni wszechczasów. Jednak czy aby na pewno dopuściła się wszystkich zarzucanych jej czynów? W artykule przedstawione zostaną dwie wersje historii życia węgierskiej arystokratki: jedna, wywodząca się z legend, oraz druga, oparta na faktach, do których udało się dotrzeć współczesnym badaczom tematu.

Słowa kluczowe: Elżbieta Batory, legenda o “krwawej hrabinie”, palatyn Thurzó.