

FEATURE

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'God keep you from the hands of Senj'

Venetian saying

ONCE WERE PIRATES IN SEARCH OF THE USKOKS OF SENJ



by Rudolf Abraham

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Mile Vranešić sits below a shelf laden with religious icons, framed certificates and wooden folk art, mouth slightly open as he pauses mid-sentence, and examines me from beneath brooding eyebrows through a plume of cigarette smoke. Old bottles filled with home-made *rakija* stand on the heavy wooden table before him, and the dark walls are cluttered with densely-hung pictures — plaques and certificates,

ABOVE: Senj in Croatia — the port is intimately associated with Uskok history (photo by Rudolf Abraham).

local heraldry, and an old, faded photograph which shows an enormous cross being carried uphill by a procession of villagers.

I am sitting in the *župnik's* (parish priest's) office in the Croatian village of Stojdraga, close by the border with Slovenia. And I listen as Mile Vranešić recounts the history of the Uskoks — *uskoci* in Croatian. The Adriatic pirates of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they were much celebrated in popular folklore as defenders of Christendom, and the scourge of Ottoman and Venetian shipping in the region. And there is a

It seemed as though they had favourable winds, and seas, and devils.

Minucio Minuci, Archbishop of Zadar, writing of the Uskoks
in the early seventeenth century

connection with the inland village of Stojdraga, for it was to these low, wooded hills in the Žumberak region that many Uskoks were outlawed, just a little under 400 years ago. And it is here that one is most likely to find something of their past.

PATROLLING THE ADRIATIC

The word Uskok derives from the verb *uskočiti*, which literally translates as ‘to jump in’ (alluding to their propensity to dive into a fight). As typically recounted, the Uskoks’ story is that, displaced from their homelands further south and east by the Ottoman invasion of the Balkans,

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they entered the service of Austria as soldiers on the Croatian Military Frontier (*Vojna krajina*). They were based, among other places, at the strategic fortress of Klis, above Split, and in the port of Senj — the spot on the coast most closely associated with the Uskoks. And it was in Senj that the Uskoks, having repeatedly failed to receive any wages from

their Habsburg masters, turned to piracy in order to support themselves. The reality is of course slightly more complex, and the Uskoks themselves, among them Vlachs and Morlachs (and including Orthodox as well as

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MAP: Northern Croatia from the island of Krk to the capital, Zagreb, showing the location of communities mentioned in the text. The Žumberak hills are highlighted by the ellipse (map scale 1:1.5m).

Catholics in their numbers), had in many cases served as border troops for the Ottomans, and in response to a reduction in privileges were now enlisting for service under Austria. Senj was manned by a garrison of regular troops, who were increasingly joined by Uskoks and other irregulars as the latter were displaced from lands already under, or threatened by, the Ottomans. In particular, following the fall of Klis to the Ottomans in 1537, a large number of its defenders — many of whom were Uskoks — joined those already at Senj. And just as the Uskoks added their fighting strength to the Senj garrison, so the regular troops — who also frequently found themselves without pay — were

ŽUMBERAK HILLS

There is a small but excellent Uskok Museum in Stojdraga, next to the Greek Catholic church. It is open by request, ☎ +385 1 3387 600 or +385 91 5042 062 (mobile); the Ethnographic Museum at the Basilian Convent in Sošice is also open by appointment, ☎ +385 1 6297 559.

Hotel Livadić (www.hotel-livadic.hr) in Samobor makes a good base for exploring the Žumberak (and its café coincidentally serves the best *kremšnite* in town). Gostionica Radić-Ilas (☎ +385 1 6297 518) is a good local restaurant to sample traditional Žumberak dishes while in Sošice.

There is a reasonable network of local buses, some of them rather infrequent, linking the Žumberak villages. You can check times at www.samoborcek.hr/voznired.php. For further information see the website of Park prirode Žumberak (www.park-zumberak.hr).

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often more than happy to join in the Uskok raids for a share in the booty. Later, as news spread of great plunder to be had on the Adriatic, they were joined by men of fortune from across Europe, including Italy and England.

Initially directed at Ottoman vessels and caravans, Uskok piracy gradually extended to target

Roman Catholic chapel of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (left) and the Greek Catholic church of Sts Peter and Paul (right), in Sošice in the Žumberak hills, Croatia (photo by Rudolf Abraham).



those of Venice as well. This latter impertinence was doubtless encouraged by the consideration that Venice had made peace with the Ottomans as early as 1539 in return for trading privileges. Venice repeatedly blockaded the Adriatic around Senj in an attempt to suppress Uskok activities, and made numerous complaints about their raids to Austria (the Uskoks of course being Habsburg subjects).

In 1615 Venice declared war on Austria, a conflict known as the Uskok War, that was to last some two years. In 1618 however, with the Ottoman threat receding slightly as far as Austria was concerned, the two powerful states found it mutually convenient to disband the Uskoks, behead several of their leaders, and banish them to the Croatian interior, a minimum of ten leagues from Senj — so to inland communities in the Karlovac, Bihać, Otočac and Žumberak areas. Rebecca West, never one to mince words, describes the treatment of the Uskoks at the hands of Austria and Venice with characteristic flair, commenting that “it is sometimes very hard to tell the difference between history and the smell of skunk.”

As well as maintaining that, so long as Austria neglected to pay them, their raids were essential to their survival, the Uskoks always portrayed their own activities in terms of a Holy War against the Ottomans. Within the Uskok frame of reference, their activities were all directed to defending

the boundaries of Christendom. The Uskoks professed to follow a strict moral code — though the degree to which this was upheld is questionable, and certainly it played no part in raids by those who opportunistically pretended to be *uskoci*.

In any case the fearless Uskoks became the subject of heroic epics, and their deeds entered the realm of legend — even Count Josip Rabatta, Habsburg Commissioner to Senj, commented that “the Uskoks could, whenever they wanted, make the northern wind blow. [Then] they simply made fire on the side... and the *bura* stopped.”

THE ŽUMBERAK HILLS

As the road winds up through the Žumberak hills from the pretty little baroque town of Samobor, it passes forest glades strewn with wild flowers, with long grass swaying in the breeze, and small clusters of picnic tables. The Uskoks had been in the Žumberak (and Gorjanci, as the area is called on the Slovenian side of the border) from long before the fall of Senj — as early as 1537 several thousand of them, of Orthodox faith and originally from Bosnia, were moved here to patrol the Habsburg Military Frontier.

With Croatia nowadays edging closer to the European Union, and the border with neighbouring Slovenia in the Žumberak region very peaceful, it is hard to imagine this area as an erstwhile military frontier. But such it was, and the line

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of the *Vojna krajina* can still be traced in a string of forts from Senj on the coast through Karlovac and the Žumberak hills to Sisak on the River Sava. The ruins of Stari grad Žumberak, a defensive fortress originally built in the thirteenth century, can still be seen from the unsealed road between Petričko selo and Sošice —

just the base of a square tower surrounded by a few low walls, on a small knoll protruding above the surrounding woodland.

A later fort, Novi grad Žumberak, was built nearby, though there's virtually nothing left of it now, just a lone church at the end of a winding road — hidden among the Žumberak hills — beside which the beginnings of some minor excavations are visible among the bushes.

The legacy of the Uskoks remains in the area in the form of locals' surnames, the names of their towns and villages and in their faith. There are over thirty family names of Uskok origin in the Žumberak region. Characteristic Uskok surnames are found elsewhere in the interior of northern



The Uskok Museum in the village of Stojdraga in the Žumberak nature park, Croatia (photo by Rudolf Abraham).

Croatia. You will run across them in the remote Ćićarija region (the limestone mountains north-west of Rijeka), as well as over the border in Slovenia. And in the hilly Istrian interior just west of Ćićarija, near the town of Buzet — an area better known for its truffles — is a tiny village, called Senj.

One of the most distinctive, and perhaps unexpected, legacies of the Uskoks among the people of Žumberak is their religion. Originally Orthodox, the Uskoks were allowed to keep their Byzantine rites while recognising the authority of the Pope and the Church of Rome. They are now called by the slightly ambiguous title of 'Greek Catholics'. There are some sixty Greek Catholic villages in the Žumberak region, Stojdraga among them, its parish church of *sveti Juraj* (St George) poking out of the trees above the village.

South-west from Stojdraga, still on the Croatian side of the hills, is the village of Sošice. Here, the *kapela Uznesenja Blažene Djevice Marije* (Chapel of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary) and *sveti Petar i Pavao* (Church of Sts Peter and Paul) — the former Roman Catholic, the latter Greek Catholic — have stood happily together, side by side, for around two hundred years. The



Sculpture of possibly an Uskok head, above a door in Senj, Croatia (photo by Rudolf Abraham).

villagers just go to one or the other. “No-one really minds which,” says Sister Draga as she unlocks the churches so I can see the interiors. Sister Draga also looks after the museum, with its fine ethnographic collection, which is housed in the Basilian convent a little way down the road from the churches.

I went to Žumberak assuming that its Uskok past would be something to which people attached little relevance or importance in the twenty-first century — this was, surely, of more interest to visitors and historians. But I was pleasantly surprised to find this was not the case, and several times when visiting the area I have heard the words *mi uskoci* — ‘we Uskoks’ — in conversation.

SENJ

Back down on the coast, the Nehaj fortress is one of the most impressive pieces of defensive architecture anywhere on the Adriatic. It stands on a low hill above the town of Senj, looking down across a channel to the island of Krk beyond. The Nehaj fortress is a stout, square-shaped building, with four square corner towers (one of them blown to bits by lightning and later restored) and a fifth above the narrow entrance bridge. Its massive walls are over three metres thick at their base. “The only fortress in the state,” the Holy Roman Emperor (and King of Hungary and Croatia 1572–1608) Rudolf II is said to have called it. The word *nehaj* means ‘fearless’.

On the first floor of the Nehaj fortress, I find a relief of Ivan Lenković, Captain of Senj and Commander of the Croatian Military Frontier, who built the fort in 1538. He stands, full-bearded and in full armour, a mace in his left hand and a standard in his other. Lenković was originally from Novo Mesto in modern day Slovenia, and this relief is a copy of the original in the Franciscan church there. Lenković was granted permission to demolish all the buildings outside the town walls, and it is with the stone from these that the Nehaj fortress was built — as various fragments

SENJ AND THE COAST

The Nehaj fortress is open May–October, and outside these months by appointment; Senj’s Town Museum is open daily in July–August and on weekdays during other months (☎ +385 53 881 141). There is a direct bus to Senj from Zagreb every morning at 08.30, and buses running along the Magistrale (the main coastal highway) stop there. For further bus timetables see www.akz.hr. The Senj tourist office has a website at www.tz-senj.hr. Anxious to cash in on the Uskok

connection, the authorities in Senj organize an annual ‘Uskok Days’ festival in mid-July each year. Whether it has anything to do with real Uskok life and culture is a matter for debate. But it is certainly fun.

If you wish to delve further into Uskok history, I would encourage you to read Catherine Wendy Bracewell’s fascinating book, *The Uskoks of Senj. Piracy, Banditry and Holy War in the 16th-Century Adriatic* (Cornell University Press, 1992).

of reliefs, window sills and other bits of masonry within its mighty walls show.

Wandering about the streets of old Senj, the keen-eyed will notice several sculpted stone heads above various doorways — thought to be portraits of the buildings' former inhabitants, perhaps *uskoci*, perhaps local noble families. There are five of them in all, the most striking being that above the door of an old palace, now the offices of the Gospić-Senj Bishopric, just around the corner from the Town Museum — a charismatic face with promi-

Back down on the coast, the Nehaj fortress is one of the most impressive pieces of defensive architecture anywhere on the Adriatic. It stands on a low hill above the town of Senj.

nent cheekbones, heavy brow, slightly hooked nose and long, luxuriant moustaches. If you miss some of them, there are copies of all the remaining heads on the ground floor of the Nehaj fortress.

And when you tire of craning your neck to look above doorways, turn your attention to the lower corner of buildings. Many of the older houses have a wedge-shaped section of the original pale stone left exposed, protruding from the surrounding (often brightly painted) concrete overlay.

At the end of an afternoon in Senj — not having found the *Niko Tavern* mentioned in August Šenoa's short novel *Čuvaj se senjske ruke* ('Beware the Hands of Senj') — I sit at a table outside the appropriately named *Café Uskok* and order a coffee. As I pay for my espresso I ask the waitress, "So what do you think of these uskoci?" "Pa ništa!" ("Nothing at all!") she retorts, laughing, and walks away. The descendants of the Uskoks are not to be found here, but up in the hills of Žumberak, in Gorjanci, in Čićarija.

Mile Vranešić stubs his cigarette out in the ashtray beside him, slowly and deliberately. His full beard and roguish expression are somehow appropriate, I can't help thinking, as we get up to visit the small museum next door, for a descendant of the *uskoci*. "There you have it," he summarizes with a hint of



The sixteenth-century Nehaj fortress, stronghold of the Uskoks until 1618, in Senj, Croatia (photo by Rudolf Abraham).

irony, "the history of the Uskoks in a nutshell." Then he adds, pausing and opening the bottle of *vilnja* (*rakija* made with pears) again, "Have another *rakija*. Besides, you're not driving." ■

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A regular contributor to *HIDDEN EUROPE*, writer and photographer Rudolf Abraham has long been a frequent visitor to Croatia. He lived and worked in Zagreb for two years and is the author of 'National Geographic Traveller Croatia' and Cicerone's 'Walking in Croatia'. Rudolf has updated Croatia guides for Bradt and Time Out. Find out more about him and his work at www.rudolfabraham.co.uk.