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II. The Soldier

18th Century

MICHAEL KOWATS

In the life and death struggle to establish the first real democracy in the world—the United States—many European professional soldiers and adventurers offered their services to the American cause. After some bitter disappointments, Washington was far from enthusiastic in appointing newcomers. One of them, however, a Hungarian named Michael Kowats (1724-1799) came with such recommendations that Washington appointed him second-in-command in the newly formed Pulaski Legion. If you want to know what kind of man the Kowats was, read his manuscript letters in the Washington collection of the Library of Congress, or the one dated Bourdeaux, France, Jan. 13, 1777, written to Benjamin Franklin, the original in possession of the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, Pa. Kowats, who was about 53 years of age at that time, spent his entire life in military service, serving many years under Frederick the Great. In offering his services, he wrote this letter in impeccable Latin, with neat penmanship, with the closing words: "Fidelissimus ad mortem." Faithful unto death—which words, incidentally, after the discovery of this document, became the honored motto of the American Hungarian Federation.

Kowats, as his letters demonstrate, was not a soldier of the educated man, much more so than his immediate superior, the young and light-headed Count Pulaski. When he offered his services through Franklin, he wrote: "totum me fidelissime sacrificaturum" and "jugi cum obsequio vivam et moriar." These are not the words of an adventurer or a mercenary. Through them speaks a man, who however dimly, senses the tremendous significance of the struggle across the ocean. A new moral and social world tries to emerge there, introducing a more abundant, more just, and a more dignified way of living for all humanity, totally different from the life the aging soldier witnessed and shared in many countries of Europe. There is something worth fighting for, worth sacrificing even life itself for the realization of its grandiose dreams and visions. The aging soldier realized that while he had been fighting through all his life, all of it was for unworthy causes, only for the temporary gains of the powerful. Whatever he did, he did not promote the highest and truest ideals of mankind. A small group of noble-minded people across the ocean wanted to create a different new world: he felt that he must make amends for his wasted and useless life, and while he was still able to mount a horse and raise his saber, he wanted to be a soldier in the new world's ragged army: to fight, live or die for the better future of mankind.

So, shortly after arriving in the new world and organizing the cavalry of the Pulaski Legion, he fell before Charleston, S. C. May 11, 1779, slain by an English bullet. He was buried at the very spot where he died. The sprawling city of Charleston, S. C. long ago covered the place with streets and buildings. The bones of this noble Hungarian turned to dust in the soil of the new world, helped to cement the foundations of real democracy.

The Hungarian soldier has kept the faith—unto death.

(Edmund Vasary)

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