

— Extensions of Remarks

E 6213

## A CENTURY OF MORAVIAN SISTERS

SPEECH OF

**HON. FRED B. ROONEY**

OF PENNSYLVANIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, September 26, 1974

Mr. ROONEY of Pennsylvania. Mr. Speaker, in commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the birth of Col. Michael Kovats, the Hungarian-American hero of the Revolutionary War, I would like to call to the attention of my colleagues his activities among the Pennsylvania Moravians, only a small part of his total war effort on behalf of the American Colonies:

Elizabeth Lehman Myers writes in her fine book, "A Century of Moravian Sisters" about the visit of Count Casimir Pulaski and Col. Michael de Kovats to Bethlehem, Pa., the center of the Moravian Church:

It was these very dangers and troubles (of the warring times) however, that were responsible for one of the most famous romantic stories of the Revolution, the story of the Pulaski banner.

Count Casimir Pulaski was first in Bethlehem on Maunday Thursday, in the Holy Week of 1778, accompanied by Colonel Ko-

batsch (i.e. Kovats), a Prussian officer. The two foreigners attended the church service always held on Maunday Thursday, and at that time in the Old Chapel on Cedar Square, and were very much impressed by the solemnity of the occasion.

While Count Pulaski may have been in Bethlehem for the first time, we know again from the various notes of the Moravian chroniclers—that Colonel Kovats visited the Pennsylvania Moravians as early as in September 1777, when the diary of the Nazareth Moravians make the first mention of the presence of Colonel Kovats, the "famous Prussian Hussar officer" who had already been in the country for some time. Kovats' fame thus preceded him everywhere among the Moravians, the followers of Count Zinzendorf, whose estates and activities in the German lands around the middle of the 18th century were well known to Kovats who, from 1745 to 1761, served in the army of Frederick, the Great, King of Prussia.

It has to be accepted also as a historical fact that the news about Kovats' past was spread most eagerly by the deaconess of the Moravian Sisters, Countess Susan von Gersdorf, who came from a prominent German family deeply grateful to the Hungarian-born Hussar officer. Kovats' last assignment as a commander in the Prussian Army was with a unit known as the "Gersdorf Free Hussars," the remnants of a famous regiment which, without its own fault, was captured by the Austrian Army and, as was the rule in Frederick's army, fell into disgrace. Known for his excellent character traits and professional abilities as a cavalry commander, Michael Kovats, then a captain of the Hussars, was appointed as the commanding officer of this corps, whose soldiers and officers were burning with desire to restore their high reputation in the eyes of the Prussian King. Kovats did an impeccable job and earned the gratitude of the Von Gersdorf family.

In the United States, Count Pulaski, himself a Catholic, must have followed the suggestions of his Hungarian friend, a Protestant, to establish close contacts with the Protestant Moravians. Later events focused all attention upon the colorful and impressive personality of the young Polish aristocrat, and, thus, we find the following story of the presentation of the "Pulaski Banner" in the above-mentioned source:

Pulaski made several visits, and was shown around the village by the guide appointed for such purposes. The brethren found it necessary to have an official guide, as so many people came to visit Bethlehem, that it took up entirely too much time for the pastor or his assistants, and so a special position was created, and a brother appointed to fill it.

Count Pulaski was charmed with all that he saw and heard in Bethlehem and when again unruly troops threatened the seclusion and peace of the poor sisters, he, too, detailed a guard for its doors, and one night stood guard himself.

The sisters were so grateful to him that they desired to express their appreciation in a substantial way. Sister von Gersdorf suggested the making of a banner for the Gallant Pole, and placed the matter in the hands of Sister Rebecca Langly.

Becky, as she was called, was an expert

needle-woman, who had introduced the making of fine embroideries into the Sisters' House, and she designed the banner. Six young women, one of whom was her sister, Erdmuth, assisted her, and when completed it was a thing of beauty. Not large, it was designed to be carried on a lance. Made of scarlet silk, with a green fringe, it had a very elaborate design upon it embroidered in yellow.

I regret to say, there is no record of a presentation such as there was of the gift of General Gates, and so the beautiful poem written by Longfellow, is only exquisite fancy. But the lines,

"The warrior took the banner proud  
And it was his martial cloak and shroud"

were partly true, as Pulaski fell at the battle of Savannah while carrying it.

Wounded unto death, he was carried aboard a vessel in the harbor. His first lieutenant caught the banner as it fell, and through him it was sent to Baltimore, where it was finally presented to the Maryland Historical Society in whose care it now is. The brilliant crimson is darkened by time to a reddish brown, the yellows are dulled, but the exquisite stitchery is still there, put in by the skilled fingers long since crumbled to dust.

The banner was carried in the procession which welcomed Lafayette to Baltimore in 1824. Perhaps the sight of the banner recalled the sweet Moravian sisters to Lafayette, for once more he came to Bethlehem. His faithful little nurse (who cared for him in 1778 while, wounded, he rested at Bethlehem) lay in the old graveyard, her ministry over; but he chatted with his step-mother then living in the Gemein House . . .

The colors of the banner, long faded, approximated those of the Hungarian national flag, red-white-green, reflecting the same composition of colors in the uniforms of the Pulaski Legion which were designed by their "Colonel Commandant," Michael de Kovats. As it appears in George Gray's mural in the Hotel Bethlehem, the uniforms of the Pulaski Hussars were similar to those of the contemporary Hussar regiments which, following the Hungarian example in the training and organization of the light cavalry, further emphasized their "true Hungarian character" by the adoption of the Hungarian Hussar uniform and armament.

However, far beyond such impressive episodes of lasting memory, it was here, in Bethlehem and its environment, where the smaller units of the Pulaski Legion conducted their assigned duties and received their progressive training in the Hussar type tactics of light cavalry, that the thoughts of Pulaski and his Hungarian senior officer crystallized and led to improved concepts of a new American cavalry as an independent branch of the Armed Forces of the United States.

The everlasting memory of their chivalric and gentlemanly behavior might have helped to cement the acceptance of the cause of liberty and independence of the United States of the part of the Moravian Brethren whose position on this important matter was formally defined by a conference of 30 ministers in Bethlehem in 1781—as reported in the splendid work, entitled "Bethlehem of Pennsylvania, the First One Hundred Years, 1741 to 1841," a publication of the Bethlehem Chamber of Commerce issued in 1968. The agreement took the form of a covenant, called the "Brotherly Agreement," and carried the assurance

#### E 6214

that the Brethren who were, by the way of their worldwide contacts and affiliated organization in England, very often adversely influenced against the American cause, will henceforth cordially subject themselves to the government that is in power over them, and "will conform to all human ordinances of the land" in which they live.

The soldiers of the Pulaski Legion were largely recruited from this same area. Col. Michael de Kovats, partly by his fluency in German, conducting the recruiting here till the early months of 1771. It is noteworthy that a "Recruiting Ballad," dated in 1778, and extolling the virtues of the new "Pulaski Chorus" was found among the relics of this age, and published by John Joseph Stoudt in his collection "Pennsylvania German Poetry, 1685-1830," in the 1955 volume of "Pennsylvania Folklore."

Many are the relics and memories which will help us and dedicated scholars and public leaders to recall the spiritual and political heritage of the most important period of American history, the dramatic founding years of this democracy.

The service rendered by Col. Michael de Kovats of Hungary to this country will always be remembered and will be regarded as the foundation of the friendship and mutual dedication to the cause of freedom, liberty, and democracy by Americans and Hungarians alike.

