

ON THE ROAD TO SAFETY – PART II. THE EXPERIENCE OF TRAVEL OF CROATIAN REFUGEES FLEEING THE OTTOMANS, AS DESCRIBED IN LETTERS OF FRANCIS BATTHYÁN (1538-1548)

**W drodze do bezpieczeństwa – część II. Doświadczenia podróży chorwackich
uchodźców uciekających przed Osmanami w świetle listów Franciszka Batthyány'ego
(1538-1548)**

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Abstrakt: Najazdy osmańskie na chorwackie tereny historyczne były udokumentowane już na początku XV wieku; ich częstotliwość znacząco wzrosła po zajęciu średniowiecznego Królestwa Bośni przez Osmanów w 1463 roku. Jedną z istotnych konsekwencji najazdów osmańskich było narastające poczucie zagrożenia, a następnie przesiedlanie się miejscowej ludności w bezpieczniejsze rejony. W regionie Burgenlandu pierwsze wzmianki o chorwackich uchodźcach pojawiają się w połowie drugiej dekady XVI wieku (ok. 1515), natomiast kulminacja migracji do Burgenlandu przypada na połowę XVI wieku. Niniejsze studium stanowi drugą część dwuczęściowej analizy doświadczeń emigracji ludności chorwackiej z Chorwacji i Sławonii w połowie XVI wieku, spowodowanej narastającym zagrożeniem osmańskim, do terenów ówczesnych południowo-zachodnich Węgier, czyli dzisiejszego Burgenlandu. Obszary te były znacznie bezpieczniejsze i w znacznie mniejszym stopniu narażone na najazdy osmańskie. Artykuł koncentruje się przede wszystkim na różnych aspektach samego procesu emigracji, takich jak organizacja migracji, jej czas, przebieg i motywacje, trudności napotykane przez uchodźców w drodze do bezpieczniejszych terenów, sposoby podróżowania oraz przynależność społeczna migrantów w ich ojczyźnie. Ponadto podjęto wiele innych kwestii. Szczególnie cenne są listy kierowane w latach 1538-1548 do Krzysztofa Batthyány'ego, pana ważnego zamku Grebengrad i przynależącej do niego posiadłości w ówczesnej Sławonii (współcześnie północno-zachodnia Chorwacja).

Słowa kluczowe: wojny osmańskie, migracja późnośredniowiecznych uchodźców, Burgenland, Grebengrad, Güssing, Franciszek Batthyány, Krzysztof Batthyány, połowa XVI wieku

Abstract: The Ottoman raids on Croatian historical areas were documented as early as the beginning of the 15th century; their frequency significantly increased after the Ottomans seized the medieval Bosnian Kingdom in 1463. One significant outcome of the Ottoman incursions was the prevailing sense of insecurity and the subsequent displacement of the indigenous populace to safer regions. In the Burgenland region, the first recorded Croatian refugees emerged in the middle of the second decade (c. 1515), with the peak of immigration to Burgenland transpiring in the mid-16th century. This study is the second part of a two-part study on the experience of Croatian population emigration from Croatia

and Slavonia in the mid-16th century due to the growing Ottoman threat, migrating to the territories of southwestern Hungary at the time, i.e., present-day Burgenland. These areas were significantly safer and considerably less threatened by Ottoman raiders. This paper primarily concerns various aspects of the emigration process itself, such as who organized the migration, when, how, and why it occurred, the obstacles the refugees faced on their journey to safer areas, how they traveled, and which social groups they belonged to in their homeland. Additionally, many other questions are addressed. The letters sent between 1538 and 1548 to Christopher Batthyány, lord of the important Grebengrad castle and its associated manor in what was then Slavonia (modern-day northwestern Croatia), are particularly valuable.

Keywords: Ottoman wars, migration of late medieval refugees, Burgenland, Grebengrad, Güssing, Francis Batthyány, Christopher Batthyány mid-16th century

1. Introduction

This paper begins with a historical account that illuminates the 16th-century migration of Croats to the significantly safer western regions due to the growing Ottoman threat. In a document from 1524, Archduke Ferdinand I of Habsburg issued a directive to Austrian captains, instructing them to grant safe passage to the Croatian nobleman Michael Bučić and his retinue. Forced to leave their homeland due to the Ottoman threat, Bučić and his followers were officially permitted to settle in Austria. Notably, Archduke Ferdinand exempted them from tolls and customs duties, ensuring their unimpeded travel throughout the region. He also ordered his captains to provide assistance and support to these displaced individuals as they sought safety.¹

This letter from Archduke Ferdinand offers valuable insights into the experience of Croatian refugees fleeing Ottoman threats in the first half of the 16th century. It becomes clear that the primary motivation behind Michael Bučić's migration was the looming danger posed by the Ottomans. Additionally, the letter reveals that this migration was a well-organized effort, involving the relocation of people from vulnerable regions in Croatia to the relatively secure territories of present-day Austria. The organization of this migration is evident on two levels. First, Michael Bučić did not make the journey alone – he was accompanied by his servants and subjects, highlighting the communal nature of the migration. Second, the letter emphasizes that the migration had the explicit approval of the ruling authority. Archduke Ferdinand not only instructed Austrian captains to allow the refugees safe passage but also directed them to extend support to the group. This document also sheds light on one of the key challenges faced by Croatian refugees during this period – the burden of tolls and fees. Archduke Ferdinand's decision to exempt Bučić and his followers from these obligations underscores the ruler's efforts to facilitate their migration and alleviate the difficulties they encountered on their journey to safety.

The migration of populations from medieval Croatia and Slavonia to western Hungary – now primarily part of the Austrian federal state of Burgenland (Cro. Gradišće, Hun. Órvidék), as well as modern-day southern Moravia in the Czech Republic, areas around Bratislava in southern Slovakia, and the westernmost regions of Hungary around the city of Sopron (Ger.

¹ *Codex diplomaticus partium Regno Hungariae adnexarum. Magyarország melléktartományainak oklevéltára. A Horvát véghelyek oklevéltára. I. kötet. 1490-1527*, eds. L. Thallóczy, A. Hodinka, Budapest 1903, p. 288.

Ödenburg; Cro. Šopron) – during the 16th century, driven by the growing Ottoman threat, has been the focus of numerous studies, analyzing various aspects of these processes.² While previous studies have illuminated many aspects of the Croatian migration to Burgenland during the 16th and 17th centuries, a few research questions remain unanswered.

This primarily concerns various aspects of the emigration process itself, such as who organized the migration, when, how, and why it occurred, the obstacles the refugees faced on their journey to safer areas, how they traveled, and which social groups they belonged to in their homeland. Additionally, many other questions can be addressed by analyzing the diverse written sources preserved from that era. In this regard, the letters sent between 1538 and 1548 to Christopher Batthyány (Cro. Kristo Baćani, Hun. Batthyány Kristóf), lord of the important Grebengrad castle and its associated manor in what was then Slavonia (modern-day northwestern Croatia), are particularly valuable. These letters, mostly written by his uncle Francis Batthyány (Cro. Franjo Baćani, Hun. Batthyány Ferenc), lord of the town and estate of Güssing (Cro. Novigrad, Hun. Nemetújvár) in what is now southern Burgenland – then part of the Kingdom of Hungary – provide crucial insights. The content of these letters primarily concerns the transport of refugees from Slavonia to Francis Batthyány's estates near Güssing, in which Francis was very interested, offering numerous details that further illuminate the questions mentioned above. Most of the letters, written between 1538 and 1548, are preserved in the National Archives of Hungary (*Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára*) in Budapest within the Batthyány family collection,³ and most of them were published in 1999.⁴ Recently, a portion of these letters was analyzed by Robert Hajszan.⁵ His primary focus was on the details regarding the settlements where Croatian refugees settled, their numbers, and to some extent, an anthroponymic analysis. However, he did not dedicate much attention to the travel experiences of the Croatian refugees, which these letters vividly recount, nor did he analyze all the preserved letters of Francis Batthyány from that period. Therefore, the analysis of all of these letters forms the central focus of this paper, with the goal of answering the aforementioned research questions.

2. The Travel Experiences of Croatian Refugees in Southwestern Hungary

2.1. Motivations for Emigration and Types of Refugees

To begin with, it should be noted that, according to a document containing witness statements from the lawsuit between Francis Batthyány and Erhard von Polheim, Francis became the owner of the Güssing manor on March 8, 1528.⁶ Later that same year, he settled

² For a list of relevant scholarly literature, see: H. Kekez, *On the Road to Safety – Part I. The Attitude of Social Elites Towards Migrations from Croatia and Slavonia to the Territories of Present-Day Burgenland in the Mid-16th Century*, "Saeculum Christianum", 33/2025, no. 2, pp. 126-137.

³ Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára (MNLOL), P 1314, Batthyány cs. lt, Missiles.

⁴ *Ausgewählte Dokumente zur Migration der Burgenländischen Kroaten im 16. Jarhundert. Odabrani dokumenti o seobi Gradišćanskih Hrvata u 16. stoljeću*, eds. G. Pálffy, M. Pandžić, F. Tobler, Eisenstadt/Zeljezo 1999.

⁵ R. Hajszan, *Naseljenje južnogradišćanskih Hrvata u XVI. stoljeću u zrcalu urbana i pisama Ferenc Batthyányja*, in: *Dani hrvatske knjige i riječi 2021. Dani Balinta Vujkova. Zbornik radova*, Subotica 2022, pp. 229-250.

⁶ "...quod dominus Franciscus Batthyani anno Domini 1528 circa Dominicam Reminiscere ejusdem anni se in dominium castro N[émet] Ujvár et omnium pertinentiarum ejusde introduce suscepisset et pacificarum possessionem habuisset utique dominium ejusdem castrum ac terrarium..., *Ausgewählte Dokumente...*, p. 47.

approximately twenty serf families in the area,⁷ having received royal permission to relocate refugees from endangered Croatian regions. Specifically, a document from King Louis II Jagiellon of Hungary, dated May 17, 1524, has been preserved.⁸ In this document, at the request of his royal cupbearer Francis Batthyány, the king allowed Croats – who could no longer live peacefully and safely in Croatia due to constant Ottoman attacks, whose homes had been burned, and whose possessions had been looted by the enemy – to settle on Batthyány's estates in Wnying and in Batthyán. The king also decreed that the relevant officials should allow the emigrants to pass with their belongings and wagons without obstruction or the imposition of customs and tolls.

Furthermore, in a letter dated May 4, 1546, addressed to his nephew Christopher Batthyány, lord of Grebengrad, Francis' primary motivation for relocating Croatian refugees to his estates becomes clear. In the letter, he explicitly instructs his nephew to care for the refugees and prevent them from leaving the Turnišće estate, emphasizing that the estate is worthless without subjects to cultivate the land.⁹ Clearly, Francis Batthyány faced a shortage of subjects on his estates in southwestern Hungary and needed more labor.

To facilitate the refugees' immigration and encourage them to settle on his lands, Francis often exempted them from certain contributions that his other subjects were required to pay. In this same letter to Christopher Batthyány, he stressed that the newly settled refugees should not be burdened with the special contributions that had been imposed previously.¹⁰ This tax exemption for Croatian refugee settlers was a strong motivation for them, which Francis was well aware of and had utilized before. For example, on December 12, 1540, at Francis' request, King Ferdinand I of Habsburg issued a decree granting a six-year tax exemption to subjects who had been driven from their homes in Slavonia by the Ottomans in 1540 and who had relocated to Francis' estates in Hungary.¹¹

In addition to tax exemptions, Francis was also willing to provide refugees with both accommodation and plots of land on his estates to encourage them to settle there, as evidenced by his letters. For instance, in a letter dated September 7, 1547, addressed to his nephew Christopher, Francis mentioned that he was unable to send a wagon to collect the refugees at that time. However, he made it clear that if they wished to come to Güssing, he was prepared to offer them lodging and land to settle.¹²

The letters Francis Batthyány sent to his nephew Christopher between 1538 and 1548 reveal much about the reasons Croatian refugees chose to relocate to Francis' estates in southwestern Hungary. Chief among these was the fear of the Ottomans and the destruction of their homes. For example, in a letter dated May 25, 1539, Francis' subjects from Zamlača, along with others from Slavonia and Croatia, reported reaching the area near Varaždin, where Francis himself was at the time. They requested that he allow them to settle on his estates in Hungary, as they did not want to leave his protection and would prefer to remain on his

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ *Codex diplomaticus partium...*, pp. 327-328

⁹ *Ausgewählte Dokumente...*, p. 127.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ *Acta comitialia Regni Croatiae Dalmatiae et Slavoniae. Hrvatski saborski spisi*, ed. F. Šišić, vol. 3, Zagreb 1916, p. 36.

¹² *Ausgewählte Dokumente...*, p. 128.

estates.¹³ The same motivation is evident in a letter from Francis Batthyány dated February 17, 1540, in which he informed his nephew Christopher that impoverished subjects, devastated by the Ottomans and the destruction of their homeland, wished to live the remainder of their lives among Christians and, therefore, sought refuge outside of Croatia.¹⁴ Francis also remarked that it would be better for them to settle on his estates than to relocate elsewhere and concluded that Christopher should not interfere with their resettlement.

Similar reasons for the emigration of Croats from their homeland were cited by other dignitaries of the time. For instance, in a letter dated June 20, 1538, Francis Tahy informed Alxius Thurzó, the governor of the Kingdom of Hungary, that the army of the Pasha of Bosnia and Herzegovina had advanced by night all the way to the Koprivnica fortress, from where it swept through to Križevci and to the ford on the Drava River, capturing many Christians and livestock. According to Francis' writing, the people were frightened, desperate, and fleeing across the Drava, feeling that no help was forthcoming.¹⁵

While Ottoman raids and the devastation of Croatian regions were undoubtedly the primary motives for migration westward to more distant and safe areas, it is interesting to note that refugees also cited other sources of violence as reasons for their emigration. For example, in a letter dated March 25, 1544, subjects of the Batthyány family residing in Zamlača expressed that they would be forced to leave their homes not only because Francis Batthyány had failed to fulfill his promise to personally pay the royal war tax (*dica*) on their behalf, but also due to significant damage caused by soldiers of Ban Nicholas of Zrin (Cro. Nikola Zrinski; Hun. Miklós Zrínyi), who had been stationed on their estates the previous year. They mentioned that even their horses had become emaciated from a lack of food.¹⁶

The letters of Francis Batthyány clearly reveal that the vast majority of Croatian refugees who sought to move to his estates in what was then southwestern Hungary, near Güssing, in the late 1530s and throughout the 1540s, were subjects fleeing from Croatian territories threatened by the Ottomans and their frequent raids. Additionally, these refugees primarily came from the estates of the Batthyány family in Croatia and even more in Slavonia, and sought to relocate to the Batthyány family's estates in southwestern Hungary. For example, in a letter dated June 30, 1538, Catharine Švetković (*Schwetkovitsch*), Francis Batthyány's wife, informed Christopher Batthyány that several families of her subjects from Kristalovac near Grebengrad wished to move to Hungary.¹⁷ She requested that the residents of Grebengrad assist these refugees by transporting their belongings to Turnišće. Subjects of the Batthyány family on their estates primarily in Slavonia wishing to relocate to their land estates in southwestern Hungary are also mentioned in other letters by Francis Batthyány, such as those dated October 26, 1538, May 16, 1539, and July 8, 1540, as well as in many of his other letters.¹⁸

The analyzed letters clearly demonstrate that Croatian refugees brought their entire families with them. Francis Batthyány even encouraged the relocation of entire families,

¹³ Ibidem, pp. 98-99.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 106.

¹⁵ *Acta comitalia Regni Croatiae, Dalmatiae et Slavoniae. Hrvatski saborski spisi*, ed. F. Šišić, vol. 2, Zagreb 1915, p. 238.

¹⁶ *Ausgewählte Dokumente*..., p. 125.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 85.

¹⁸ Ibidem, pp. 90-91, 95-96, and 112.

likely anticipating that, in that case, the Croatian refugees settling on his estates in Hungary would be more inclined to stay permanently. In a letter dated October 26, 1538, Batthyány sent his servant, Andrew Nagy, to assist the refugees arriving in Hungary and instructed him to compel those in extreme danger to relocate to Hungary with their children.¹⁹ Additionally, in a letter dated June 10, 1539, Mihael Szentiványi, a servant of the Batthyány family in Gragnica, informed his master, Christopher Batthyány, that several married subjects from Bela estate were coming to Grebengrad who could serve him well and requested that they be settled on his properties.²⁰

The letters also mention orphans among the refugees, specifically children without parental care, highlighting the unique challenges this most vulnerable group faced during their journey. In a letter dated May 16, 1539, Francis Batthyány informed his nephew Christopher that he had enclosed a letter from his wife, Catharine Švetković, in which she detailed instructions for Christopher on how to care for the children and orphans in Hungary.²¹ Although Catharine's attached letter has not survived, it is notable that Francis' wife, the mother herself, took a personal interest in the welfare of the unprotected refugee orphans. Another letter from her to Christopher, dated July 7, 1538, has been preserved, revealing her deep concern for refugee orphans.²² In that letter, she recounted hearing from women who had relocated from Croatia to Hungary that a poor orphan had fallen out of a serf wagon traveling from Zamlača and had injured her leg. Catharine ultimately ordered an investigation into the incident and demanded that those responsible be held accountable.

In addition to the subjects from noble estates, who often moved with their families, property, and livestock to safer areas of what was then southwestern Hungary, the analyzed letters also document the migration of individuals with unique social positions in their homeland. Because of their specialized knowledge and skills, these individuals were of particular interest to Francis Batthyány, who sought to relocate them to his estates. Francis paid special attention to the relocation of various craftsmen from endangered Croatian regions to his properties in Hungary. For example, in a letter dated November 11, 1539, he informed his nephew, Christopher Batthyány, that he had learned of a harness maker from Kristalovac who wanted to come to Hungary.²³ Francis instructed his servant, Mihael Szentiványi, to send this man to Christopher, as he was needed as a master craftsman in Güssing. Additionally, a letter from Catharine Švetković to Christopher Batthyány, dated November 13, mentions that her household servant, David, wished to relocate with his family from the Zagreb diocese to Hungary.²⁴ She requested that Christopher assist David with the journey alongside his subjects. It is evident that David, although little else is known about him from the letter, was especially valuable to Catharine due to his specific skills and knowledge as a household servant.

As Croatian refugees settled in areas predominantly inhabited by Hungarian and German populations, Francis Batthyány sought to bring Croatian Catholic priests to serve

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 90.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 100.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 95.

²² Ibidem, p. 87.

²³ Ibidem, p. 105.

²⁴ Ibidem, pp. 122-123.

as spiritual caretakers for the Croatian settlers on his estates in southwestern Hungary. Two preserved letters reveal Francis' efforts to locate priests from Croatian regions threatened by the Ottomans who might be willing to relocate to his estates and provide spiritual guidance to the Croatian immigrants. In a letter dated April 2, 1540, he informed his nephew, Christopher, that Michael Raveni, the protonotary of Slavonia, had identified two priests interested in relocating – one from Čazma and the other from Toplica. Francis requested that Christopher organize their journey and added that, if the Croatian priest George was willing to come to Hungary, Christopher should notify him, as a group of Croatians had recently settled on his Solunk estate near Güssing without a priest, and George's presence would be beneficial.²⁵

Furthermore, Francis' letter to Christopher dated November 5, 1541, indicates that some priests from endangered Croatian regions were reaching out to him independently, expressing a desire to settle on his Hungarian estates. In this letter, Francis mentioned that John Preszri, the parish priest in St. Elijah (Cro. Sveti Ilija) near Obrež, had informed him that he could no longer remain in his village due to Ottoman raiders and had requested relocation to Batthyány's estates in Hungary.²⁶ Francis asked Christopher to send Priest John, along with his belongings, to Turnišće, from where he would personally arrange for his transport to Güssing, as he was always in need of people like him. The role of Croatian priests among Croatian colonists in southwestern Hungary is perhaps best illustrated by a Croatian record written in 1564 by George (Cro. Juraj) Vuković, a priest in the village of Klimpuh (Ger. Klingebach, Hun. Kelénpatak), inhabited by Croatian settlers. Vuković himself had fled from Jastrebarsko in Slavonia to southwestern Hungary in the 1530s. He left a note in Croatian on a Latin missal, including the *Pater Noster* prayer written in Croatian and a song entitled "Song of the Resurrection of the Lord" (Cro. Pjesma o uskrsnuću Gospodina), also in Croatian.²⁷

2.2. Challenges and Assistance Along the Journey

The preserved letters analyzed here reveal the numerous challenges Croatian refugees faced on their journey to the safer regions of what was then southwestern Hungary. One of the greatest obstacles was crossing rivers, which posed significant technical difficulties. Like Francis Batthyány and other influential figures, they sought solutions to this issue. For instance, John Szalay de Kereczeny (Cro. Ivan Szalay de Kerečeni) and Caspar Ernst of Čakovec (Hun. Csáktornya) petitioned King Ferdinand I of Habsburg to permit the construction of a pontoon bridge over the Mura River near Legrad and Dubrava, due to the large number of Croatian refugees fleeing from Slavonia and other areas with their wagons, livestock, and possessions into the interior of Hungary, in fear of the Ottomans. The king granted permission on October 10, 1537, allowing them not only to build the bridge but also to charge a customary toll for its use.²⁸ Evidently, Kereczeny and Ernst's motivation to construct the bridge extended beyond

²⁵ Ibidem, pp. 109-110.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 121.

²⁷ See in more details: A. Jembrih, *Hrvatski zapis (1564.) Jurja Vukovića iz Jastrebarskoga u latinskom misalu župe Klimpuhu*, "Kroatologija", 2/2011, pp. 44-67.

²⁸ *Monumetna Habsburgica regni Croatiae Dalmatiae Slavoniae. Habsburški spomenici Kraljevine Hrvatske Dalmacije i Slavonije*, ed. E. Laszowski, vol. 2, Zagreb 1916, p. 324.

aiding the Croatian refugees – they also recognized a financial opportunity due to the high volume of travelers, primarily refugees, who would be using the bridge.

Refugees fleeing from Slavonia, and to a lesser extent from Croatia to the estates of Francis Batthyány in southwestern Hungary encountered similar difficulties when crossing rivers. Some individuals took advantage of this situation, particularly regarding crossing the Drava River on the ford near Varaždin. Although King Ferdinand had exempted Croatian refugees from the usual tolls on river crossings due to their dire circumstances and poverty, as evidenced by the case of the nobleman Michael Bučić mentioned in this study's introduction, it appears this exemption was not always respected. Those guarding the river crossings still charged the refugees for passage. Consequently, in a letter dated July 11, 1538, Francis Batthyány sent his nephew Christopher Batthyány a royal decree from King Ferdinand addressed to the toll collectors and customs officials in Slavonia.²⁹ In this decree, the king granted impoverished refugees complete exemption from paying tolls along the way and instructed Christopher to deliver this decree to refugees traveling to Hungary.

Despite this measure, issues with toll collection at the ford on the Drava River near Varaždin persisted the following year. In a letter dated May 16, 1539, Francis Batthyány instructed his nephew, Christopher, to send one of his servants to monitor the Drava River crossing near Varaždin and ensure that no one prevented the refugees from crossing.³⁰ While there is no record confirming that Christopher acted on this request, the problems continued in the subsequent months. The river crossing guards continued to charge Croatian refugees a toll, prompting Francis to write another letter to Christopher on August 24.³¹ In it, he reported that he had learned that the illegal practice of charging poor refugees a high toll had persisted on the road to Güssing. He therefore ordered Christopher to deliver the royal decree on toll exemptions to the river guards and to request a refund of the amounts improperly charged to the refugees.

Since most Croatian refugees traveling to safer areas were of low status and impoverished, as emphasized by numerous written sources, they likely traveled primarily on foot, which lengthened their journey and made it more exhausting. On several occasions, Francis Batthyány instructed his nephew, Christopher Batthyány, to prepare carts for the refugees. For instance, in a letter dated October 30, 1538, he asked Christopher to prepare several carts for the refugees gathering near Grebengrad and to send them out.³² The following year, Francis repeated this request in three separate letters. In one letter, dated May 16, 1539, he instructed Christopher to order the judge in Turnišće to send several wagons and men to the Drava River crossing near Varaždin, where a group of Croatian refugees was waiting, and to transport them to Turnišće in these wagons. From there, the judge was to further arrange transport by wagon to Güssing.³³ Just a few days later, in a letter dated May 25, Francis contacted Christopher again regarding refugee transportation, instructing him to prepare two carts for refugees from Zamlača so they could carry their belongings.³⁴ He also informed him that he

²⁹ *Ausgewählte Dokumente...*, p. 88.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 95.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 104.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 93.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 95.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 97.

had ordered the prefect in Turnišće to send several carts to help transport them to the Drava River crossing near Varaždin, where Batthyány's subjects would take them to Turnišće and, from there, continue on to Güssing.

It appears that Christopher faced difficulties in securing carts for refugee transport or perhaps showed some reluctance in following his uncle's instructions. Consequently, Francis Batthyány sent a rather stern letter to his nephew on June 27, 1539, addressing the issue.³⁵ In this letter, Francis mentioned that he had learned that around three hundred refugees had arrived in Grebengrad, and that, despite his earlier request, Christopher had not adequately arranged their onward transport to Güssing. In response, Francis demanded that his nephew assign someone to oversee the refugees' journey to Hungary. He added that a certain Caspar Hampo, evidently one of Francis' servants, had offered to provide several carts for the refugees at Francis' request. Francis closed the letter with a somewhat frustrated tone, emphasizing that Christopher should handle these refugees with proper care to avoid them being forced to flee.

The issue of transporting Croatian refugees by cart persisted in the subsequent years, and finding a solution was not without its challenges. In a letter addressed to Christopher on September 7, 1547, Francis noted that he was unable to secure a cart for the refugees.³⁶ However, Francis emphasized to his nephew that if these Croatian refugees wished to come to Güssing, he was prepared to provide them with accommodation and plots of land for resettlement.

The journey of Croatian refugees to safer areas in what was then southwestern Hungary was clearly long and exhausting, and one of the significant challenges they faced was the lack of food. In numerous letters, Francis Batthyány consistently urged his nephew to care for the refugees gathered around Grebengrad, which undoubtedly included providing them with food. However, in only one letter addressed to Christopher Batthyány did Francis explicitly order that food be provided for the refugees' journey. In a letter dated May 25, 1539, he instructed that each refugee be given a piece of bread for the journey.³⁷

One of the significant challenges faced by Croatian refugees during their journey was their safety. They were evidently targets for various road robbers and others who resorted to violence against them. Francis Batthyány sought to address this issue as well. In a letter dated May 25, 1539, he instructed his nephew Christopher to send a few armed men with rifles to protect the refugees from robbers.³⁸ In the same letter, Francis noted that several axes had been taken from his subjects in Zamlača who intended to relocate to southwestern Hungary. He expressed understanding for this theft, as it seemed to be an attempt to prevent the cutting of trees in the forests. Nevertheless, Francis ordered Christopher to ensure that the axes were returned to the refugees so they could continue to use the forest peacefully and according to tradition.³⁹

The refugees were not only targets of road robbers but also victims of various individuals who attacked them, robbed them, and tried to obstruct their migration. In a letter dated

³⁵ Ibidem, pp. 102-103

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 128.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 97.

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ Ibidem.

October 17, 1538, Francis Batthyány instructed his nephew Christopher to arrest the judge and manager of the castle of Nicholas of Zrin in Lakovec, a man named *literatus* Emerik, if possible. Emerik had been preventing Francis' serfs from emigrating and had even robbed them, keeping one of them captive in his castle.⁴⁰ In an effort to ensure that his subjects could travel freely and to secure the release of those who were imprisoned, Francis Batthyány and his wife, Catharine Švetković, on October 26 wrote to Christopher, instructing him to send a letter to the judge and manager of Nicholas of Zrin in Čakovec, in the event that Christopher had not yet arrested the aforementioned judge, as per the previous order dated October 17.⁴¹

This was not the only recorded instance of individuals, often of noble status, capturing subjects of the Batthyány family who sought to relocate from threatened areas to safer parts of southwestern Hungary. For example, in a letter dated June 27, 1539, Francis Batthyány instructed Christopher to demand the release of one of his serfs, Peter Szelek, who had been captured by Christopher's servant, Stephen Gliti.⁴² Francis emphasized that such actions were contrary to his wishes, and if Gliti had any complaints about the serf, they should be resolved through legal means.

2.3. Organization of Refugee Travel

From the preserved letters of Francis Batthyány and the information presented thus far, it is evident that the resettlement of Croatian refugees from areas threatened by the Ottomans – in this case primarily from the Batthyány family estates in what was then Slavonia to safer areas and this family's estates in southwestern Hungary – was a complex and relatively well-organized undertaking. Therefore, in the continuation of this study, we will aim to outline the key locations and routes of the Croatian refugees, as well as identify the individuals and groups involved in this effort.

The analyzed letters of Francis Batthyány reveal that the Grebengrad castle functioned as a gathering place for refugees seeking to move to the Batthyány family estates near Güssing (map 1). This important castle, along with the surrounding property bearing the same name, stretched across the northern and southern slopes of the easternmost ridge of Mount Ivanščica. In 1490, the Batthyány family acquired this property, which subsequently became their most significant holding in Croatian historical regions, specifically in medieval Slavonia.⁴³ Refugees gathered near Grebengrad, consisting mainly of subjects from the Batthyány estates, as well as others who wished to relocate to Batthyány family lands in what was then southwestern Hungary.⁴⁴

From there the refugees moved north toward the Drava River, specifically toward a crossing near Varaždin. The preserved letters clearly indicate that the responsibility for transporting refugees from Grebengrad to this crossing, as well as ensuring their safe and

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 90.

⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 103.

⁴³ More about the Grebengrad castle and manor, including the circumstances surrounding its takeover by the Batthyány family, see in: J. Adamček, *Vlastelinstvo Greben*, "Kaj: časopis za književnost, umjetnost, kulturu", 6/1973, no. 4-5, pp. 16-23.

⁴⁴ *Ausgewählte Dokumente...*, pp. 85, 100, 102-103, 109-110 and 111.



Map 1. Map showing the route of Croatian refugees from Grebengrad to Güssing in mid-16th century (made by Hrvoje Kekez)

smooth passage, fell to Christopher Batthyány, the master of Grebengrad.⁴⁵ From that river ford, the refugees continued north to Turnišče, now a settlement in Slovenia, which at the time served as the center of the other Batthyány family's holdings. The preserved letters reveal that the responsibility for transporting refugees from the Drava River ford to Turnišče rested with the count of that settlement, who was also a servant of the Batthyány family.⁴⁶ From Turnišče, the Croatian refugees traveled further north to the Batthyány family estate near Güssing. The responsibility for this leg of the journey, as well as the transportation of refugees, fell to the subjects and servants of the Batthyány family from Güssing.⁴⁷

As the preserved documents reveal, several individuals and even groups were involved in organizing the migration of Croatian refugees to the Batthyány family estates in the late 1530s and during the 1540s. However, Francis Batthyány himself played the central role, not only approving and assisting the migration with specific measures but actively encouraging it – primarily focusing on relocating his own subjects from the Batthyány estates in Slavonia to his holdings near Güssing. He personally engaged in the migration process by interacting with the refugees and overseeing their resettlement. For instance, on July 8, 1540, he traveled to Ptuj (Ger. Pettau) to assist Hans Ungnad, the commander-in-chief of the Slavonian and Croatian Military Border (Ger. Slawonische und Kroatische Militärgrenze), in transferring

⁴⁵ Ibidem, pp. 95-99 and 103-104.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, pp. 85, 95-97, 121 and 127.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, pp. 85, 95-97, 102-104, 109 and 121.

Francis' subjects gathered there. He informed his nephew Christopher of this visit in a letter that same day.⁴⁸ A year earlier, he stayed at his estate in Zamlača to coordinate the relocation of a large group of subjects who planned to move to the Batthyány estates around Güssing, as he conveyed to Christopher Batthyány in a letter dated May 25, 1539.⁴⁹ Interestingly, his wife, Catharine Švetković, also encouraged and supported the migration of refugees to the Batthyány family estates near Güssing. Her letters to Christopher Batthyány mostly reveal her concern for the most vulnerable participants in the migration – orphans and women – as well as for her personal servants who wished to relocate.⁵⁰

Christopher Batthyány, lord of Grebengrad, played a crucial role in the resettlement of Croatian refugees to the Batthyány family properties near Güssing. As mentioned, groups of refugees gathered at his castle, where Christopher's servants provided them with protection, food, and transportation to the Drava River crossing near Varaždin. Additionally, the letters reveal another significant task assigned to him. Specifically, it is documented that his uncle, Francis Batthyány, entrusted him with ransoming their subjects who had fallen into Ottoman captivity. In a letter dated April 2, 1540, Francis noted that he had learned Christopher had recently sent his servant, Michael Svetački (Hun. Szemchey), to collect the so-called ransom for prisoners (*pecunia plagiatoris*).⁵¹ Francis instructed his nephew to accept the money, as it was the only means to secure the prisoners' release.

During the relocation of Croatian refugees, numerous servants played a role, including servants from Christopher Batthyány's Grebengrad estate, as well as Francis Batthyány's servants from his estates in Turnišće and Güssing. Although these individuals actively participated as guides, travel organizers, and even armed escorts, their names, or rather their identities, were mostly unrecorded in the preserved written sources. Nevertheless, a few individuals involved in the relocation process were documented. For instance, a letter from October 26, 1538, mentions Andrew Nagy, a servant of Francis Batthyány, whom Christopher sent to assist subjects traveling to Hungary.⁵² Similarly, a letter from June 26, 1539, records Mihael Szentiványi, a servant of the Batthyány family in Gragnica, who planned to relocate several married subjects from the Bela estate to the Batthyány family's estates in southwestern Hungary.⁵³ Moreover, a letter from November 11, 1539, refers to Michael Szentiványi, Francis Batthyány's servant, who was tasked with bringing a leatherworker from Kristalovac who wished to relocate to Hungary.⁵⁴ Finally, in a letter dated May 25, 1548, Catharine Švetković instructed Christopher to send his servant, Marc (Cro. Marko) Horváth-Stančić, to bring her subjects from Croatia to her Hungarian estates.⁵⁵ The later life of Marc Stančić is quite notable. In 1559, Ottoman records refer to him as "Croat Marc, known as the bey of Szigetvár (Cro. Siget)". He led Christian units that carried out raids near Sombor (Hun. Zombor) in present-day Bačka, targeting the local population and travelers, making life hazardous for

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 112.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 97.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, pp. 85, 87, 90-91, 95-96 and 122-123.

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 109.

⁵² Ibidem, p. 91.

⁵³ Ibidem, p. 100.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, p. 105.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 131.

both Muslims and Christians. In addition to seizing booty and livestock, he frequently relocated people to areas under Christian rule.⁵⁶ Stančić had prior experience in organizing the relocation of the Croatian population from Slavonia to the estates of the Batthyány family around Güssing in an earlier period. It can be concluded that Stančić was one of the *locatores* referenced in the conclusions of the Croatian Estates assembly, as it was previously stated in the first part of this study.⁵⁷ This suggests that he systematically managed the resettlement of Croatian refugees to safer western regions.

3. Conclusion

The letters, primarily written by Francis Batthyány to his nephew Christopher Batthyány between 1538 and 1548, provide remarkable evidence of the emigration of Croats from regions threatened by frequent Ottoman raids to what was then southwestern Hungary, now modern-day southern Burgenland. These letters not only document the rise and consequences of this migration but also offer an exceptional insight into the emigration process itself, including the motivations, travel arrangements, and challenges faced by refugees seeking safety in less threatened areas.

The analysis presented here highlights that Francis Batthyány was the primary initiator of this migration, aiming to relocate serfs from his family's estates in medieval Slavonia to his properties near Güssing in southwestern Hungary. The letters clearly show that this was a well-organized endeavor, with various individuals and groups assigned specific roles. Christopher Batthyány, the lord of Grebengrad, took on the responsibilities of gathering, transporting, managing, and protecting the refugees, all under the directive of his uncle, Francis. Furthermore, the letters reveal that the Batthyány family's servants were charged with transporting refugees across their estates, which served as pathways for the Croatian migrants seeking refuge.

The primary motivation for Croatian refugees to seek refuge in safer areas of what was then southwestern Hungary was the increasing frequency of Ottoman raids. These attacks brought widespread devastation to the estates of Slavonian nobles, the enslavement of local serfs, livestock theft, and an overall sense of insecurity. The majority of these refugees were serfs from the Batthyány family estates in Slavonia, who became the main settlers on properties around Güssing. Additionally, Francis Batthyány encouraged individuals of higher status, such as artisans and priests, to relocate to his estates in southwestern Hungary by offering them various privileges.

On their journey, Croatian refugees encountered numerous challenges, including the long distances they often traveled on foot, frequent harassment by robbers, and a lack of food. A particularly significant obstacle, as revealed in Francis Batthyány's letters, was crossing the Drava River via a ford near Varaždin. Although King Ferdinand I of Habsburg issued several decrees allowing Ottoman refugees to cross the river free of charge, Francis' letters

⁵⁶ On Stančić's activities in 1550s, see in more detail: M. Bara, *Autohtonost i migracije: Hrvati u ugarskom Podunavlju*, "Godišnjak za znanstvena istraživanja", 13/2021, pp. 31-32. According to Jurković, this group of displaced Croats would be classified as exiles – individuals who initially welcomed and accepted Ottoman rule, remaining on their properties. However, they were soon expelled for various reasons, most commonly due to religious, political, or ethnic factors (I. Jurković, *Klasifikacija hrvatskih raseljenika za trajanja osmanske ugroze (od 1463. do 1593.)*, "Migracijske i etničke teme", 19/2003, no.2-3, p. 160).

⁵⁷ H. Kekez, *On the Road to Safety – Part I.*, pp. 126-137.

indicate that this exemption was rarely honored. He frequently highlighted these issues in his correspondence, demonstrating his ongoing efforts to address these hardships faced by the refugees.

The letters analyzed here offer a detailed insight into the emigration of the Croatian population from their homeland in response to the growing Ottoman threat, focusing on the daily experiences of individuals, often serfs from manorial estates. Further analysis of similar sources could provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of migration in the early modern period, which was fundamentally a form of forced migration.

At the end of this paper, it can be said that unfortunately, due to the scarcity of preserved written historical documents, determining the exact number of Croatian immigrants to Burgenland during this period proves challenging. Estimates range widely, from around 60,000 to 200,000 individuals.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the Croatian colonization in modern-day Burgenland significantly altered the region's ethnic structure. Despite assimilation, it is noteworthy that a considerable number of Croats in Burgenland still identify strongly with their heritage.

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⁵⁸ As early as 1915, Mohl estimated that around 100,000 Croatian settlers moved to what was then western Hungary during the 16th century (A. Mohl, *A horvátok bevándorlása 1533-ban*, Budapest 1915, p. 34). In contrast, Ujević was somewhat more conservative, estimating the number of settlers at around 60,000 (M. Ujević, *Gradišćanski Hrvati*, Zagreb 1934, p. 9). Meanwhile, Valentić provided the highest estimate, suggesting that as many as 150,000 Croatian settlers had moved to the area now known as Burgenland during 16th century (M. Valentić, *Gradišćanski Hrvati od XVI. st. do danas*, Zagreb 197, p. 18). A few years later, after further detailed study of the Croatian immigration to present-day Burgenland, Valentić concluded that the number of Croats who settled in the area may have been even higher than his initial estimate, potentially reaching around 200,000 individuals (M. Valentić, *Obilježja povijesnog razvitka Gradišćanskih Hrvata*, “Časopis za suvremenu povijest”, 9/1977, no. 1, p. 96). However, it should be noted that all these figures are based on estimates rather than a detailed analysis of preserved historical records from the 16th century. It is also questionable whether it will ever be possible to determine the exact number of Croats who arrived in modern-day Burgenland, given the condition, quantity, and quality of the surviving sources from that period.

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