

## Articles

### *The Life and Times of Countess Erzsébet Bathory*

The legend of the "Blood Countess" who bathed in and drank the blood of young women in order to maintain her beauty is part and parcel with the vampire lore of Eastern Europe. She has been recorded as one of the earliest medieval serial killers who allegedly dispatched over 650 victims during her lifetime. Vampire lore is common. There are depictions of vampires on Babylonian and Assyrian pottery. In Peru, there were legends of the Canchus, demon worshippers who drank the blood of sleeping children. Among the ancient Chinese, there are the legends of the Giang Shi, a demon who drank blood. The Greeks had legends of the Empuse or Lamia, winged demon-

women who hunted handsome young men and drank their blood. In Turkey, there are legends of the “Uber”, the ghosts of wizards or witches who hunt at night and terrorize whole villages and towns. In Siberia, the local folklore combined two mythical creatures, the vampire and the werewolf, into the “vulkadlak”, a being that hunted the living during the cold winter months and drank their blood. The tradition of a wolf-like blood drinker is prevalent throughout Eastern Europe folklore. They are the “Wilkalak” in Poland, the “Vulcadlak” in Slovenia, the “Varcolae” in Romania and the “Varaolae” in Albania. Other traditions involve the “undead” who feed upon the living and cannot find rest in the afterlife. This folklore tradition still permeates our culture today and forms the basis of a flood of novels, movies, television shows and role-playing games.

### **The Life and Times of Erzsebet Bathory**

The true story of Erzebet Bathory is stranger and more complicated than the legend. She was born on August 7, 1560 into one of the most illustrious and wealthy families in Hungary. Several uncles had been Princes (Voivods) of Transylvania and another was a King of Poland. Three of her cousins became Voivods. She grew up at the family estate in Nyirbator, Hungary near the Romanian border and was raised as a Protestant in a time when most of the great Lords and the King of Hungary were Catholic. Only one of her brothers survive into adulthood and very little is known about him. What is known about her childhood is that she suffered migraines and seizures as a result of epilepsy as well as fits of uncontrollable rage.



A peasant revolt in 1514 erased what little gains had been made in the “rights” of the commoners in Hungary. The backlash was enshrined in a legal code known as the Tripartitum that reduced them to the status of property. Nobles had the right to act as both judge and jury and could dispense “justice” which included the death penalty. Hanging and dismemberment were common punishments, and Erzsebet Bathory was a member of the ruling elite.

Erzsebet Bathory’s education was remarkable for its time and even more remarkable because she was a woman. Few nobles could read or write and most used secretaries to handle virtually all personal and official correspondence. Erzsebet could read and write Latin, German, Slovak, Greek and Hungarian. She learned mathematics, botany, biology, astronomy and religion. She would continue her education throughout her lifetime by buying and reading books and there still exist documents in her own handwriting today.

She was engaged to 16-year-old Count Ferenc Nadasdy in 1571. She was twelve years old. It was a business arrangement between two wealthy and powerful families. Ferenc began his military training at 13. He had become both a warrior and athlete by age 15 but



was no scholar. He was heir to his family's fortune and Erzsebet was already known throughout her social circles for her intelligence. It was, as the English say, a sensible arrangement with fairly extensive negotiations on both sides. Erzsebet began her training in the management of their mutual estates with her future in-laws at Castle Sarvar shortly after her engagement.

There are some documents that indicate that life was not as mundane for Erzsebet as it appeared during this time. Legend has it that Erzsebet became infatuated with Laszlo or "Ladisles" Bende, a young nobleman, during the summer of 1573. Whether by force or by seduction, this affair allegedly resulted in the birth of a daughter. Large amounts of hush money were allegedly paid by the Bathory family to cover the scandal and the child was taken into Transylvania never to be seen or heard of again. The union of the great families went forward and legend has it that Ferenc Nadasdy castrated Laszlo and feed his hounds with the remains.

### **The Marriage of Erzsebet Bathory and Ferenc Nadasdy**

Erzsebet and Ferenc were married on May 8, 1575 in a celebration that went on for days. They inherited their parents' properties and, as a couple, held more land and estates than the King of Hungary. By her 20s, Countess Bathory settled into the routine that dominated the remainder of her life. She traveled from castle to castle paying bills, consulting with her court officials and supervisors, managing the family estates, and receiving social guests in displays of wealth. The surviving correspondence and documents clearly indicate that she ran a tight ship, perhaps too tight of a ship, as later events would reveal.

The Ottoman Turks, the old enemies of the Hungarians, began conducting raids across the countryside again in 1578. Ferenc rose to the challenge and began his career as a Captain of the Hungarian army. He spent his lifetime pursuing this vocation. He would periodically return for weeks or months at a time bringing with him the nobles that he served with as well as the spoils of war that would replenish the family coffers. Celebrations accompanied his returns from the wars and the routine would settle in again upon his departure. His military exploits earned him the title of "The Black Bey" or "the Black Knight of Hungary". These nicknames were the result of a fierce reputation as a ruthless warrior and a skilled interrogator of Ottoman prisoners. He was known to conduct brutal retributions against his enemies and occasionally against his own troops. In 1600, Flemish and French mercenaries in the market town of Papa revolted over the issue of nonpayment of wages. The Hungarians were unable to pay the back wages and the Ottoman paid the troops 10,000 ducats to plunder the town. The mercenaries took to the task with pleasure. Ferenc was one of the Captains sent to put down the rebellion with particular brutality to serve as an example to any troops who would ever think of rebelling again. He would later receive special honors for his role from the royal family of the Hapsburgs. Ferenc participated in almost every major battle involving Hungary during his lifetime.

There is very little evidence on whether the marriage was a happy one. Nobility typically slept in separate rooms and maintained separate personal staff. Many marriages were matters of state with little to no personal affection. It was almost ten years before the birth of their first child, Anna, in 1585. Whether this absence of children was the result of her husband's prolonged service or for other reasons is unknown. Birth rates among the Hungarian nobility were low as a result of intermarriages accompanied by a host of sterility and infertility problems. There is no evidence that Erzsebet ever took a lover during her husband's frequent absences. In fact, the correspondence of the time strongly indicates that most nobles thought of her as an example to be emulated by their own daughters.

There must have been pressure on Erzsebet to produce an heir. The couple would eventually have at least five children. Three daughters, Anna, Orsolya, and Katalin were born by 1596. Andras, their first son, was born in 1596. Pal, their second son, was born in 1598. As was the custom of the time, all of the children were entrusted to a nurse and were raised by tutors. In the case of the Bathory children, the nurse was Ilona Jo, the wife of Istvan Nagy, one of her coachmen. Only Anne, Katalin, and Pal would survive into adulthood. Erzsebet was a shrewd negotiator and both of her surviving daughters were placed into extremely good marriages. Anna was married to Count Nicolaus Zrinyi in 1605. Katalin would eventually wed Count Gyorgy Drugeth de Homonnay. Both sons-in-law were from influential and wealthy families. Pal was eventually entrusted to a tutor and governor at Sarvar named Imre Megyeri.

### **The Disappearances**

Servant girls began to disappear from the Bathory households in 1585. These disappearances were only random occurrences at first. One or two servant girls would, upon occasion, pass away in the night and a local pastor would be summoned to perform funeral services. The deaths went largely unnoticed. The wars left a glut of young unmarried women and a shortage of available men. It was considered an honor to be selected to serve in one of the great households. In addition, disease, illness and death were commonplace. Medical services were extremely primitive and consisted largely of folk remedies. More and more disappearances and deaths occurred over time. The official reason was usually cholera, a disease which was all too common. The local clergy accepted the explanations and continued to perform funeral rights. However, a pattern began to emerge. The victims were usually young servant girls between the ages of 10 to 15. There were always areas within the couple's estates that outsiders were never allowed to enter. The deaths and disappearance were not confined to a single area but occurred at Beckov, Kerseztur, Csejthe, Kosztolany, and the couple's mansion at Labkowitz Square in Vienna. The cries of her victims were allegedly so loud in Vienna that monks in the neighboring Augustine monastery threw their pots and pans against the walls to drown out the screams.

The number of deaths which followed Erzsebet Bathory became unusual and rumors of torture and bizarre behavior at her estates surfaced among the local gentry and clergy. By 1601, these rumors began to center around Anna Darvolya, one of Erzsebet's favorite



personal servants who was said to be running a torture chamber within Erzsebet's household. The rumors would later encompass Ilona Jo, the children's nurse, Dorottya Szentes, an elderly friend of Ilona, Katalin Beneczky, a washer woman, and a young deformed man named Janos Ujuary or "Ficvko".

By 1602, Istvan Magyari, a noted theologian and member of the Lutheran clergy, was publicly questioning the deaths during his sermons. The local pastors were writing to their superiors for "guidance" on this and whether they could give communion to Erzsebet's servants. Count Ferenc was able to quiet the clergy during his returns from the wars. After all, he was a substantial donor to the Lutheran Church. While the clergy and the local nobility were concerned about the rumors, there was very little they could do without hard evidence. Peasants were considered the property of the nobles and any move against Erzsebet would become an action against Ferenc, a decorated war hero who had spent most of his life keeping Hungary safe from the Ottomans. The failure to successfully prosecute a legal action against the Countess Erzsebet on behalf of a commoner would have terminal consequences. In addition, Ferenc had loaned enormous amounts of money to the Hungarian Crown. At the time of Ferenc's death, King Matyas II owed Ferenc nearly 18,000 Gulden. As long as Ferenc was alive, the loans protected them. Once he was dead, the Hungarian Crown would have reasons to liquidate this obligation.

Count Nadasdy's health began to fail in March of 1601. He recovered and continued to fight with the aid of Count Gyorgy Thurzo against the Ottomans along the Danube River. He also continued to lend monies to the King of Hungary and the Hapsburg royal family. He fell ill again in 1603 and made arrangements for the protection of his family. On his deathbed, he made Count Gyorgy Thurzo promise to protect his wife and his children. Gyorgy Thurzo was already one of the most powerful men in Hungary. Ferenc passed away on January 4, 1604 and was given a lavish military funeral. Istvan Bathory, Erzsebet's older brother and a Chief Justice of Hungary, passed away in July of 1605.

Erzsebet was now a widow and one of the few women in Hungary who wielded real power in a world dominated by men. She established her primary residence at Castle Csejthe. She paid her husband's debts and continued to support his charitable endeavors. She also protected the Protestant clergy from actions by the local Catholic nobility. However, the river of monies that Ferenc had provided in the form of war booty and ransom were no longer available. Her vast properties were expensive to operate. Her wealth was not easily converted into cash to pay the ever mounting tax bills. Despite repeated requests, the Hungarian Crown showed no interest in repaying any of the monies loaned by her late husband. Erzsebet began trading jewelry and selling off plunder and pieces of her properties. The Hungarian Crown purchased some of these properties including her castles at Theben and Blindoc. The financial strain increased as did the disappearances and deaths of her servants. Parents began hiding their daughters whenever Countess Bathory visited their towns.

Countess Erzsebet Bathory opened an academy of etiquette for young highborn women in the winter of 1609. The academy brought in much needed revenue. It also provided



Erzsebet with access to young noblewomen. It wasn't long before her students began to disappear or their parents were denied access to them. Erzsebet, who had always been good at leaving little implicating evidence, began to slip and witnesses emerged who had seen her beating and mistreating servants for the slightest misdeed or deviation from duty. Servants began to appear in public with bruises and evidence of torture. The population of the academy quickly disappeared.

Complaints from noble families flooded the King's Court. Gyorgy Thurzo, the Prime Minister of Hungary, was appointed by the King to investigate the rumors in February of 1610. He ordered two of his men to take statements of witnesses. Dozens of them were interviewed from March to July of 1610. Count Nicolaus Zrinyi and Gyorgy Drugeth de Homonnay could read the writing on the wall. They began secret negotiations with Gyorgy Thurzo to ensure their wives' reputations and property would remain intact. They negotiated to put the Countess in a convent or to imprison her for life without a public trial. Gyorgy was in a quandary. He had made a deathbed promise to Ferenc and was a personal friend of the family. On the other hand, he knew that Erzsebet had been funding the Voivods of Transylvania who were now advocating a rebellion against the King of Hungary and the Hapsburg royal family. There was also circumstantial evidence of her guilt. If Erzsebet died, Pal, her young son, would have wealth and the family connections to head this rebellion. Gyorgy was loyal to the Crown and the King had a strong interest in a formal conviction since it allowed the debts owed by the Crown to be legally erased and her property to be confiscated by the Crown. Erzsebet was not unmindful of the maneuvering going on around her. She made her last Will and Testament on September 3, 1610 to protect her property from the King and to ensure that Pal, her surviving son, would obtain his inheritance.

### **The Arrest and Trial of Erzsebet Bathory**

Erzsebet Bathory was formally arrested on December 29, 1610 by Palatine Gyorgy Thurzo, Count Nicolaus Zrinyi, Count Gyorgy Drugeth de Homonnay and their men-at-arms. They found the bodies of three girls. Two would die and another would be maimed for life. They found a fourth girl who was still being tortured. The trials were conducted in January of 1611. Count Gyorgy Thurzo and his party had seen the direct evidence of her guilt. The trials elicited horrifying testimony. Witnesses testified to the deaths of 175 to 200 girls over a 25 year time period between 1585 and 1610. These numbers were confirmed by servants, nobles, clergy and local townspeople. Erzsebet Bathory was directly implicated in the sadistic torture of her victims by burning them with melted wax or hot coins, flogging or beating them to death, tearing their flesh with claws or her own teeth, stabbing them, or torturing them by immersing them in ice water. During the proceedings, a young servant girl named Szuzanna testified that the Countess had killed 650 servants and that her mistress had recorded their names in a log or register which had been allegedly seen by the family Steward. The Steward was never called as a witness and the document was never produced as evidence. Erzsebet Bathory was never forced to testify. Despite the fact that the trials had relied upon evidence obtained by torture, not a single witness testified to the crimes that Erzsebet Bathory drank blood or bathed in blood in order to maintain her beauty. Ilona Jo and Dorottya were burned at the



stake. Janos Ficzko was beheaded and Erszi Majorova was burned alive as a witch. Katalin Beneczky was imprisoned and there is no record of her ultimate fate.

Erzsebet Bathory's life was spared, but she was sentenced to life imprisonment in her own castle. This verdict failed to satisfy the King who wanted the death penalty and insisted upon another trial. After legal wrangling behind the scenes, Parliament issued a formal statement that the proceedings had been conducted in a proper manner. The Crown was still not satisfied and reopened the case by fiat. The resulting report authored by Notary Andras of Keresztur encompassed the testimony of over 220 witnesses and was something that no one wanted to hear. It concluded that Ferenc brutalized his servants, taught his wife how to torture and knowingly covered her crimes. Respected nobles were accused of procuring girls and actively covering up her crimes or turning a blind eye to them. The King was horrified, but another tribunal rendered the same conclusion. If made public, these findings would turn most of the noble families of Hungary against him. A deal was brokered whereby all debts would be forgiven, the King would receive a certain portion of Bathory's land, and it would be as if Erzsebet Bathory never legally existed and her name would never be spoken again. The records were sealed and Erzsebet remained imprisoned in a tower of a castle for the rest of her life.

Erzsebet Bathory died on August 21, 1614 and her final resting place is unknown. Her daughter Anna died on August 13, 1615 and left no children. There is no evidence as to what became of Katalin. Palatine Gyorgy Thurzo died in December of 1615 and his wife would later die in poverty. Pal Nadasdy later married Judith Revay. Ferenc, their son, would be executed for treason by the Hapsburgs. The King of Hungary's attempts to erase Erzsebet Bathory's existence were unsuccessful and her crimes live on in infamy.

**Sources:** M.J. Trow, **Vlad the Impaler, In Search of the Real Dracula** (Sutton Publishing, 2003); Raymond T. McWally and Radu Florescu, **In Search of Dracula** (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994); Tony Thorne, **Countess Dracula** (Bloomsbury, 1997); Kimberly L. Craft, **Infamous Lady, the True Story of Countess Erzsebet Bathory** (CreateSpace, 2009).

