

Ethnography of Albanian mountain tribes during WWI in the works of Karel Sellner



Robert Dobra

ABSTRACT

Utilizing both published and archival materials, this paper covers the accounts of Karel Sellner from his stay in northern Albanian mountains during World War I. Primarily, it aims to explore Sellner's views regarding the local tribal society and to present his respective work, which is connected to both Albanian studies, ethnography and (to a lesser extent) Czech historiography, in regards to the engagement of Czech people in the Austro-Hungarian army during the last days of its existence. Since the author's original work was written exclusively in Czech, this article also emphasizes direct quotes on the topic from his books, personal correspondence and other archival materials.

KEYWORDS

Albania, kanun, tribal society, blood feud, ethnography, travelogue, World War 1

Amongst those, who historically brought insights into the life of Northern Albanian mountain tribes were several, who stumbled upon this vast treasury of customs and often romanticised tribal identities by a relative coincidence. In this aspect, Karel Sellner (October 23rd 1873 — February 24th 1955), to whom this paper is dedicated to, is no exception. Sellner was primarily a teacher, writer and educator, who's interests also extended into amateur archeology and most prominently the field of literature. Over the years of his activity, he published a broad portfolio of educative works mostly related to his home region of Mladá Boleslav situated in Central Bohemia, where he also collected local folk legends¹ and, more importantly for the purpose of this paper, also published two works regarding his experiences from Albania later in his life. The first of these two, *V tajemné zemi* ("In a mysterious land"), was a travelogue from his stay in northern Albanian mountains in 1916–1918, which was published in Prague in 1925 — it was Sellner's long-term literary affliction, along with the character of his task and the place where he was stationed, that allowed him to extend the usual scope of the accounts provided by most of his fellow soldiers stationed in Albania and bring a much wider set of information pertaining his experiences (especially in connection to the population living under the influence of the local customary law, *kanun*). The second work of his which pertains to this country, *Pohádky májových večerů* ("Fairytales of May evenings"), is a collection of Sellner's tales which also incorporates several notes regarding his other experiences from the forementioned period.² Curiously enough, these are not reproduced tales stemming

-
- 1 The summary of Karel Sellner's archival fond in the The Museum of Czech Literature Literary Archive. Available online (in Czech): <http://www.badatelna.eu/fond/2802/uvod/6104>
 - 2 Most prominently, Sellner thereby describes an Albanian Catholic school in the village of Zejmen in detail (Sellner 1925b).

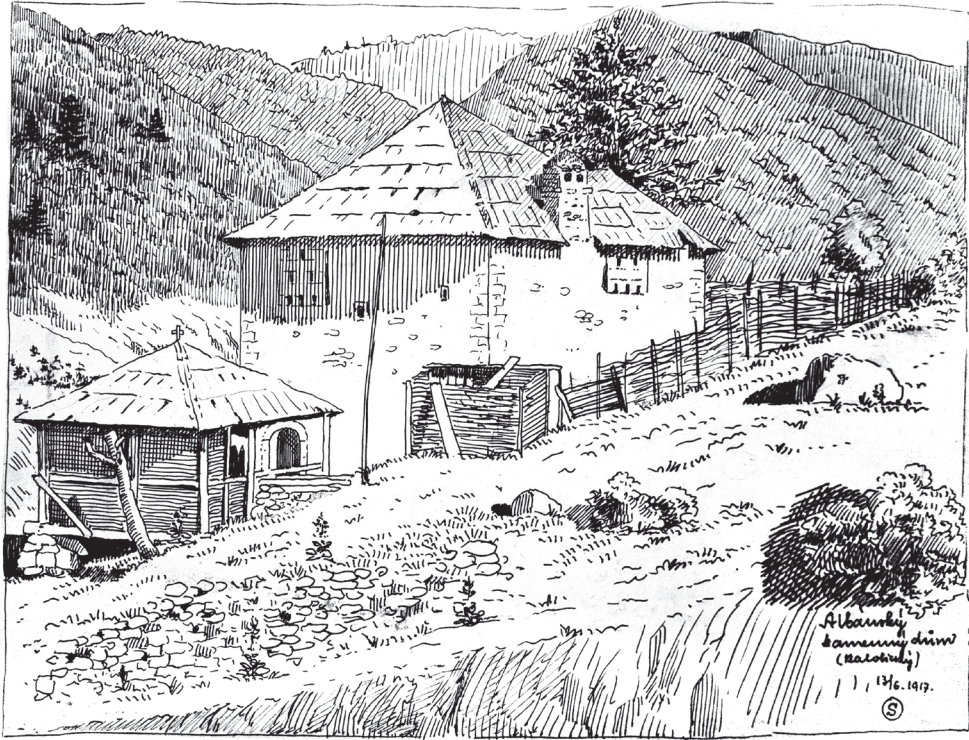


FIG. 1 One of the typical fortified towers (*kulla*) that Sellner depicted.

from the local oral tradition but his original works, inspired and based partly on actual northern Albanian folklore and customs and partly on his own experiences. Although Sellner's engagement in this matter could be seen as a one-time effort in the context of his own professional orientation, it is worth considering that he spent a total of almost a year and two months in the northern Albanian mountains, collecting a considerable amount of material, publishing the two forementioned books on the topic and also organizing lectures about Albania in Bohemia during the years following his return. Notably, his works on Albania remained largely unreflected so far — this is perhaps because the focus of a majority of Sellner's works was very different to this topic (also, the title of his most comprehensive work relating to Albania does not directly suggest to have any connection to the country, the Balkans or the given era).

Sellner's journey to the northern Albanian mountains began in July 1916, after being drafted to the Austro-Hungarian military and following a several months long stay in a officers' academy in the Hungarian city of Kecskemét. He first arrived to Albania in April 1917 to serve as a member of a military engineering corps, main task of his unit being to build a road connecting the southern border of today's Kosovo (by then also occupied by the Austro-Hungarian forces) and the Albanian town of Milot (in a direction almost identical to today's *Ruga e Kombit* highway). It was the rather slow-paced progress of the task and several changes of his place of stay that opened



the door for Sellner to widely interact with the indigenous population, that being mainly in the regions of Mirdita and Mat. Substantial part of Sellner's comrades, many of whom also served in technical roles, were also of Czech origin — leading to the author calling Northern Albanian mountains during the First World War a “*small Czech republic*” (Sellner, 1925: 29) — indeed, there are many available surviving accounts of Czech soldiers serving on the Albanian front of World War 1.³ However, in contrary to Sellner's work, most of them consist of personal correspondence and other literary works that in most cases reflect solely personal experiences pertaining to the war itself (Vinš, 2006). The large number of Czech soldiers, their works and their correspondence sent back to their homeland also served as the first wider chance for the Czechs to gain information about a country only very little known until then in Czech society (Hradečný, Hladký, Pikal, 2010). As Sellner states: „*(In Bohemia) Albania was, until the Austro-Hungarian occupation in 1916, even less known than the hinterlands of Africa, the Australian desert or the mysterious forests of Brasil*“⁴

Describing his journey to Albania in spring 1917, Sellner stated that: “*the train keeps filling up with new victims of war, and as far as I can tell from the conversations, they are teachers. I now understand the much needed participation of educators in the war. It is not easy to keep us under control back home. The old ones can be silenced and intimidated easily, but the new generation — the Czech one — is very dangerous to the idea of the Austrian state and the whole course of the conflict*“ (Sellner, 1925a: 7). While he perceived the reasons for his involuntarily departure as such, it should be noted that in general, military service in Albania was often not perceived as a punishment by Czech soldiers⁵ — rather than that, they seemingly appreciated that the conditions were not as tense as they were elsewhere on the Balkans front and some of them had even volunteered

-
- 3 Several hundreds to several thousands of Czech captives previously serving in the Austro-Hungarian military also perished during the ill-famed retreat of Serbian army towards the Adriatic sea at the end of 1915. Jan Laška, a soldier of Czech origin later to become a legionnaire in Italy and a diplomat, provided a striking account of the events in his book *Pochod hladu Albanií* (The March of Hunger Through Albania) published in 1920. Another such account of these events was also provided by Rudolf Procházka in his book *V srbském zajetí — o životě v Niši a na útěku Albanií 1914–1915* (In Serbian Captivity — about the life in Niš and escape to Albania 1914–1915).
- 4 Regarding his own perception of Albania before the war, Sellner mentions reading several romantic novels pertaining to the region from various authors and also news articles published in the Czech media regarding to the Balkan Wars. Other than that, he claims “previously knowing almost nothing at all” (Sellner 1925a: 22).
- 5 The number of Czechs on the Albanian front is a matter seldom reflected and might also spark another question, pertaining to how Austro-Hungarian military command supposedly did not trust the Czech element — to the extent of showing a tendency to station regular soldiers of Czech origin somewhere, where the course of war could not be directly influenced by their nationalist tendencies and brotherly feelings towards the Slavic enemy (that potentially being the Albanian and also Italian front). Nevertheless, the myth pertaining to this phenomenon, which tells of often deserting, sabotaging and cowardous Czech soldier in Austro-Hungarian service has already been largely proved to be largely misleading (Fučík, 2006).



to be stationed in the country (Vinš, 2006). As Sellner himself later states: „*One can live fairly well in Albania. The service is not perilous, but there is still danger. The mountain tribes are wild and still cannot cope with the Austrian occupation. . . . The boys take pleasure in the fact that they can stay out of things. They live the way they want to and they arrange for themselves as if they were at home*“.

The information that Sellner provides in his accounts from the year and two months spent in northern Albanian mountains is of a relatively wide scope, and pertains not only to local historical and political kind of information, but also both to certain kind of auto-biography (regarding the life of his and his comrades) and to a certain kind of a soldier's ethnography. While it may not be unusual that an individual participating in a conflict brings information pertaining to the culture and life of the local (indigenous) population, in the case of Albania during the World War I, this seems to be a rather rare occurrence, given that not many such sources were brought to light until this day.

Regarding the biographic information that Sellner provides, it is clearly influenced by author's authentic (in case of his 1925 works perhaps even post-war) sentiments and encompasses long-time interactions with his family and comrades, the tasks of his fellow soldiers, their interactions with the local population and generally their life during his stay in the mountains. Sellner's accounts also involve information regarding the material conditions in which the local population lived — he describes several Albanian households in detail and in general points out the striking poverty of many families that he met and the simple level of technologies used by the locals: „*(I am sending you a picture) of an Albanian cart: its wheels have been cut from a whole trunk. I have never seen such a cart before and also have not seen any regular wagons here in Albania, not even a wheelbarrow. The people carry everything on their backs, as do their children. Some local people are a sad sight to behold now before the harvest — they are skinny to the bone and the rags they wear barely cover their body. The poor people in these parts live a miserable life*“.⁶ Sellner's tasks also seldom involved travelling outside of Albania — apart from his return home in April and May of 1918, this also involved a journey to obtain additional manpower for carrying out the engineering tasks in the Albanian mountains, which comprised of Italian prisoners of war (in this case, they were brought in from a prisoner-of-war camp near the Hungarian village of Csót). Notably, Austro-Hungarian military also made use of local workers, who were recruited amongst regular local population.⁷

As was mentioned above and even more importantly, Sellner's work did not reach its boundaries by describing the life of his own and his peers — he also brought back (or rather sent back) a relatively rich amount of information, pertaining to his “soldier's” ethnography of the local population. Sellner, through his (in Czech context rather rare) direct experience with the tribal regions of northern Albania and their inhabitants thereby provides his insights regarding local customs, society, law, material culture and the reality of everyday life.⁸ Most prominently, this pertains to the

6 Karel Sellner's archival fond, The Museum of Czech Literature Literary Archive. No. 60/76 and 26/84, 1801–1968. Sellner's letter to Zdeňka Sellnerová, no. 95, July 28th 1917.

7 Ibid. — Sellner's letter to Zdeňka Sellnerová, no. 99, August 3rd 1917.

8 Apart from Czech, Sellner himself spoke German, Serbian and Hungarian (where the first

villages of Zejmen and Pllanë, which are situated on the outskirts of Mat and Mirdita regions and were then only recently exposed to more significant traffic and outside influences thanks to the main road headed from the city of Shkodër to Durrës (also built as a part of the Austro-Hungarian development efforts tied to the occupation). The importance of such information is in any case (not only Sellner's) intensified considering that our only reliable sources regarding the life of people inhabiting these regions during the World War I and before it come from travelogues and a very limited amount of professional or semi-professional works, notably from the likes of Edith Durham, Franz Nopsca, Karl Steinmetz and several others. Either way, travelogues and other such works, often also collected and published by engaged amateurs (some of whom later became reputable authorities on the topic) play the role of a significant source of information on how the local society and culture stood and how it was practiced. To a certain extent, they also help lay down historical context for studies pertaining to contemporary culture and society in the regions of Northern Albania, its roots and development. Regarding Sellner, if we condescend to this approach, the most valuable parts of his testimonies are probably those regarding variations of local customary law (as is the case of the other forementioned authors), other customs, which were (with a large degree of variability) practised in the region and family relations. Although the information provided by him by far do not constitute the richest addition to this fund, it still stands that every such work contributes to the aggregate mozaic and shows the reality of the time and places in much brighter colours, than a single written edition of *Kanuni i Lek Dukagjinit* could ever possibly do (which is being said without attempting to cast shadow on Gjeçovi's respectable work).⁹ This is even more pronounced by the fact that Sellner also visited the frontier parts of the mountains, which were enough periphery-situated, potentially "civilized" and not nearly as romanticised as the heartlands of the Dinaric Alps mountain range further north.

To a certain extent, ethnography carried out before the beginning of the Austro-Hungarian occupation also arguably left a mark on general approach of the occupants in Albania during the war and the stance towards local inhabitants, perhaps including Sellner himself.¹⁰ There were several well known and respected figures, who trav-

two languages were mostly used by him to acquire information directly in this case, either from the locals themselves, or local priests).

- 9 Refers to the single most quoted, codified version of the customary law of Lek Dukagjini, which was collected by an Albanian franciscan priest Shtjefën Gjeçovi and later, after his death published by his franciscan colleagues in Shkodër. The edition (the author or the editors respectively) often faced retrospective critique for modifying the laws in order for them to better line up with the Christian principles and norms of life (Nopsca, 1932; Doja, 2006). This single interpretation of the northern Albanian customary law also potentially creates an impression of unity, which it actually never reached in practice.
- 10 Before the war, the Austro-Hungarian High Command itself put out a booklet entitled *Tribal Structure, Norms, and Customs of the Albanians*, published in Prague in 1913 (Marchetti, 2010). It was extracted from a manuscript by Croatian missionary Lovro Mihačević, who himself had a direct experience with the northern Albanian regions under the influence of local customary law. Regarding sources in foreign languages, Sellner was openly aware only of German philologist and diplomat Johann Georg von Hahn, who conducted his travels more than



elled these parts before the war and published significant works in German, which carried important information about the specifics of the Albanian mountain tribes — be it the forementioned Johann Georg von Hahn, or (much later) Franz Nopsca, Karl Steinmetz, Kurt Hassert or Theodor Ippen, who also served as the Austro-Hungarian consul in Scutari (Shkodra) for several years. To this must also be added the long-standing Austro-Hungarian activity in northern Albania, which allowed the state apparatus to gain a better picture of the local conditions¹¹ (although the insight into local conditions hardly changed the colonial ambitions of Austro-Hungarian military and the general stance of the empire from the political standpoint, as for example Edith Durham vividly recalls in her works).

Often wandering out of the camps that were set up along the road, which was being gradually extended by his unit of engineers and workers, Sellner had countless chances to interact with the local population during his almost two years of stay. What he encountered was a wide variety of local customs — countless varieties of which were also previously (and afterwards) described by other authors visiting these regions. These regard not only to consanguineal family relations, but also rituals (a burial and a wedding), fictive kinship in the form of blood oaths (*vëllamëri*), the institute of godfather of hair (*kumbari flokësh*) and other ones, but also common social interactions, which are in context of Albanian ethnography usually reflected only marginally (for example those regarding tobacco and its prime role in social pleasantries) and other details regarding the style of life of the local inhabitants. In a similar way as Mrs. Durham previously did, Sellner also points out a strong affliction to fatalism and superstitiousness that struck the local population and could even prevent a blood feud under the right circumstances — a fairly unique occurrence (at least considering available accounts), given the mostly unshakable position of the customary law at that time and personal honor, to which was feuding irrevocably tied. Much information, including the following case told by a priest in the village of Zejmen, was also provided to him by the local franciscans, who made use of this affliction and their own influence combined to settle the feuds in certain cases: „ ... *Although, there are Albanians so sure-footed in their beliefs that not even sufferings of Hell bring them to forgiveness. If nothing else works, I heard that the priest excommunicates the person ceremonially, so that he can no longer visit the church and take part in services. That works sometimes — if not, the priest casts a terrible curse upon the individual: „may your relatives perish, may your rifle never fire again...”*. From a whole long chain of such strong

half a century before him, and also of information on Albania provided by Spiridon Gopčević in his 1914 book *Das Fürstentum Albanien, seine Vergangenheit, ethnographischen Verhältnisse, politische Lage und Aussichten für die Zukunft* (MCL LA, 1916–1925). In his letters and notes, Sellner openly refers to only one Czech source, that being a non-specified work by Czech writer Josef Vinař (that probably being his well known published work, *Národní zpěvy albánské*).

11 There were also other channels through which ethnographic information northern Albania came to Austria-Hungary in the times before Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 — these were not only the travellers and experts (linguists and ethnographers), some of whom are mentioned above, but also catholic clergy residing in the tribal regions and consulates in Shkodër, Durrës and Vlora (Marchetti, 2010).

words, the first ones are usually enough to force the Albanian to swear that he will forgive and to entrust the priest to begin the process leading to forgiving the feud. The priest then shows his crucifix again, he blesses the sinner, forgives him in the name of Christ and withdraws the curse” (Sellner 1925a: 347). Local clergy’s involvement in settling the feuds in general was not unusual however, as proved not only by Sellner, but also a variety of other authors referring to the given period and regions.

Sellner himself admitted his tendencies to romanticise and often slipped into evaluating the customs he encountered based on the values of his own culture — perhaps quite understandably, taking into account respectively his literary background and the largely ethnocentric discourse of his time. Throughout his works, he calls many of local customs outright “barbaric” — nevertheless, talking about the blood feuds (the most widely and famously reflected custom of the northern Albanian mountaineers, quite often seen by outsiders as the most “barbaric” of them all), he seems to see their role for what it undoubtedly was from the functional social perspective.¹² That is, a means of achieving certain social control and regulation — in his own words: “It had seemed to me that the blood feuds are a very inhumane practice of law, but later, from the stories told by the priest in Zojmeni (Zejmen), I learned that it is a custom tested by centuries and the only way to right the wrongs ... Back where we live, we have tribunals, paragraphs, strictly formulated penal law, authorities, who seek the guilty, cast him into a prison and then pass a judgement and punish him. There is no such thing in Albania. The blood feuds are horrendous, often wiping out whole families, but that is the very cruelty that keeps the passions of the Southerners in line. Everybody here is aware that if he kills, he thereby casts his own family into a terrible tragedy and sooner or later will lose his own life also” (Sellner, 1925a: 126). By the beginning of the Austro-Hungarian occupation, the occupants were seemingly well aware of the feuding — a general *besa*¹³ was proclaimed among the tribes in order to suppress the blood feuds for the time being (Marchetti, 2010) and local population was supposed to hand over all weapons. This however proved to be a deficient precaution, as various feuds still continued and private arsenal often remained in locals’ hands: „Today at night, loud cries and many shots woke us up. I almost thought the Albanians came down on us from the mountains, the whole camp below us was on their feet — in the end, we found out that the noises had been caused by ammunition hidden in a burning Albanian house nearby. Even though possession of any weapons and ammunition is strictly prohibited, it seems they actually have enough of both“.¹⁴ Sellner, being a teacher himself, was also greatly interested in local schools, which were administered by Franciscan priests and during this time also represented the only educational institutions that were active in the region. Regarding this mat-

12 Naturally, various other standpoints for interpreting blood feuds surfaced over the time — varying from a symbolic representation of substituting the formerly “given” blood (Boehm, 1984) to attributing religious qualities to it, with the blood revenge itself supposedly being “an offering to the soul of the dead man” (Durham, 1928: 162).

13 A temporary oath or “holy promise” of truce or alliance, which strongly relied on the principle of personal and family honor; also a potential step to feud reconciliation.

14 Karel Sellner’s archival fond, The Museum of Czech Literature Literary Archive. No. 60/76 and 26/84, 1801–1968. Sellner’s letter to Zdeňka Sellnerová, no. 122, September 8th 1917.



ter, Sellner reflected on the educative efforts of the local clergy and their attempts to unite the local tribes and to suppress various feuds in between them — as he noted from his conversation with franciscan priest Rochus Gurashi: “*Their goal was to awake their (Albanians’) national sentiment and to unite all the tribes so that they can live together in a common state that will surely emerge after the war. ... (He said that) the education cannot achieve a united character yet: it has to adapt to mentalities of individual tribes. That being said, one common idea must prevail, and that to settle the feuds in between them, to abandon barbaric relics of the past and to enforce the understanding that they all form a single nation*”. (Sellner 1925a: 362–363).

Majority of Sellner’s interactions with the local population were of a peaceful kind — as one would suppose when taking into account the firm laws of hospitality so colourfully described by other travellers visiting these parts.¹⁵ They were laws, that local population deeply respected in most cases — nevertheless, several times, it is mentioned by him that certain parts of the mountains are dangerous and not penetrable for a foreigner. However, Sellner and his comrades belonged to a very specific sort of visitors — the northern Albanian *malësorë* (mountaineers) already had a history of attempted foreign interventions behind them and the military presence of Austro-Hungarian soldiers was certainly not perceived as a sign of peaceful intentions by them (that along with their sheer numbers and the perplexities of the given period). Although the catholic tribes often related their hopes for an intervention to Austria-Hungary in the years prior to the Balkan wars, its inactivity and broken promises in the last years of this period also have naturally affected their stance towards the empire. On several accounts during Sellner’s stay, the soldiers or gendarmes patrolling or carrying out their tasks were attacked or even killed,¹⁶ usually by local groups of robbers or eventually by militia groups called *komitë*.¹⁷ In one of these cases, Sellner states the following: „*Four days ago, two of our soldiers with bayonets lead a group of Albanians somewhere from those mountains, where the wilder tribes live. Approximately half an hour before reaching our camp, they were attacked by a group of 17–20 other Albanians, who wanted to liberate the captured ones (who had their hands tied behind their backs and were also tied to our soldier on a chain). They started shooting, shot through one of our soldier’s cap, other one’s hand, and then a group of our people working nearby drove them away. Their district must now pay a fine of 25000 crowns in silver and 50 cattle*“.¹⁸ Following the cases of attacks and killings, the Austro-Hungarian military applied various penalties, varying

15 Rules of hospitality (both towards foreigners and in between the local population) and their exertion played a key role in the northern Albanian customary law and as such was one of the prime phenomena reflected in the works of authors visiting the region.

16 A large part of the cases mentioned by the author was tied to the tribes living in Lura region, which goes in line with Edith Durham’s experiences from this part of the mountains during her visit in 1908.

17 A term which usually refers to rebel bands that fought the Turkish authorities during the last days of Ottoman rule in the region. In Sellner’s intentions, the name describes bands fighting the armies occupying northern Albania during the First World War.

18 Karel Sellner’s archival fond, The Museum of Czech Literature Literary Archive. No. 60/76 and 26/84, 1801–1968. Sellner’s letter to Zdeňka Sellnerová, no. 140, September 30th 1917.

from fines to executions — the latter being often carried out after a soldier's life has been lost by the hand of a local inhabitant. In the context of extreme cases of punishments exerted towards the local population, Sellner also mentions the following: *“the Albanian is afraid of hanging. Being shot is not bad, but a rope!...”* (Sellner 1925a:164).¹⁹ Arguably, the death by hanging was generally considered dishonest in context of the population under the influence of the local customary law — being also per se something potentially greatly disturbing in a society, which is firmly built on a code of personal and family (tribal) honor. To this topic also pertains the Austro-Hungarian policy to which the soldiers were supposed to adhere during the occupation and which Sellner describes as follows: *“the Albanians had no reasons to complain regarding our occupation. The orders were strict and commanded that we approach the locals kindly, that we help them and our soldiers were not permitted to get hold of their property. ... Our behaviour was natural and open. Our soldier did not see the Albanian as an enemy, he would never hurt him without a reason and talked to him in a friendly manner. He was happy that the Albanian could understand a great deal of Czech words”* (Sellner 1925a: 51).²⁰ According to him, another factor was the particular role that the soldier or his unit played — during the times of his presence, the local people also often learned to differentiate between soldiers carrying out military tasks and those whose task was to build infrastructure. Reflecting on the role of the Austro-Hungarian engineering units before his departure from Albania, Sellner stated the following: *“I expressed the opinion that the war and the occupation will also have a positive impact on Albanians. The contact with Austro-Hungarian soldiers, especially Czechs, brought them a new perspective of thinking. Being in daily contact with us, they understood what an educated man can achieve, through trade they understood the great importance of education and by being disarmed forcibly, they understood that one can live even without fighting each other constantly and that the feuds can be settled peacefully. Through our farms and gardens, they saw what their fertile soil can produce when the men lend a helping hand too. What is left of our work will serve as a basis for further economic development of the country. They understood the importance of good roads and their maintenance and we showed them how quickly they can build and maintain a nice house. The Albanian already understands the gap between an illiterate and educated man and how advantageous it is to educate oneself.”* (Sellner 1925a: 363).

In regards to the ethnographic information provided by Sellner, it is also fitting to mention that over the course of years before the time of his visit, various authors perceived the identity and origin of local population in the Albanian mountains differently and also often attempted to explore and determine its roots and origin. While Karel Sellner proves to be no exception in this regard, his insights in this matter can hardly be considered comprehensive. Based on loanwords in Albanian taken from the southern Slavic languages, words similar to Czech ones, Slavic toponyms and certain

¹⁹ Also “They are afraid, because then, the soul cannot leave the body through the throat — it must escape through the unclean parts” (Sellner 1925a: 51).

²⁰ Nevertheless, there are accounts of Austro-Hungarian military acting against the general orders and retaliating in large scale on whole communities after individual attacks on military patrols, which involved searching the local villages for weapons, taking hostages and executions. (Marchetti, 2010)



customs and names common to these people, he resorts to calling the northern Albanians generally “albanized Slavs”.²¹ While other works of the time point out that such a claim may be largely true in case of the origin of several individual northern Albanian tribes (Durham, 1909) living in regions bordering areas with a Slavic majority, Sellner’s approach represents a rushed and generalised proclamation covering the northern Albanian population as a whole — while ignoring that neighbouring populations often share common customs, elements of the language or influence each other and intermarry, and that many are also shared between the various cultures in the Balkans and often stem from the same common Balkan (or even wider) roots.²² Nevertheless, this is being mentioned primarily to point out that this Sellner’s stance also became a reason for his sympathetic approach towards the local inhabitants, which can be followed throughout his accounts. If we take into account the author’s personal background, the stance only seems natural (Vinš, 2006) — the Slavic, “brotherly” cause was in the eyes of many Czech in the Austro-Hungarian Empire still seen a common ground, which could possibly lead to the dissolution of the empire (which was considered to be an oppressor and enemy of the national cause of Slavic nations belonging to it). Sellner sympathizes with the Serbs throughout the first book²³ and his letters — a sympathy also undoubtedly tied to their defeat, suffering of their troops earlier in the war and their active role in opposition towards the Austro-Hungarian empire. Either way, Sellner thereby struck the phenomenon of Slavic population historically penetrating the borders of today’s northern Albania, which often remains unreflected in both works of his time and the later and contemporary ones.²⁴

With all that being said, emic approach was not entirely unfamiliar to Sellner. This most clearly shows in his reflection of the way some mountaineers were seeing their own identity and their place in a wider geographic and cultural context (or rather ignoring the way it was seen from the outside or dictated by a nationalist discourse): “...to an Albanian man (living in the mountains), the geographical term of Albania means nothing. Of his own is the land, where he lives, where his house stands and his fields grow, he

21 „The northern Albanian tribes are albanized Serbs, some clans came here from Montenegro, while the southern Albanians are of Illyrian descent and are mixed with Greek, Turkish and Roman blood” (Sellner 1925a: 52).

22 A subject, that still often sparks conflicts and arouses passions in the region, especially during the era after the rise of nationalism in the Balkans. A vivid example of such a case can be found in the Albanian reaction regarding a recent Serbian application to inscribe singing to a musical instrument called *lahutë* (or *gusle* in Serbian) as an element of the UNESCO intangible heritage. While the application itself did not outrule Albanians as holders of the tradition, the relatively widespread Albanian sentiment and reaction labeled the act as a step to usurp the tradition by one single national tradition.

23 “December 1914. I am rubbing my hands. The Serbs beat us black and blue. I am in such high spirits that I can hardly write” (Sellner 1925a: 5).

24 Regarding works of Albanian authors, this is also largely due to the long-time standing of Albanian national ethnology and its tradition. It ultimately developed during the times of socialism and its goals were largely dictated by the needs of constructing a clearly Albanian origin, identity of national culture and folklore, which was also, to a large extent, supposed to differentiate itself from the other national ethnologic traditions of Albania’s neighbours (Doja, 2015).

only knows the territory of his kin and tribe, and what lies beyond his fis (tribe) is a hostile, or at least foreign land" (Sellner 1925a: 52). The fragmentation of groups considered from the outside perspective to be a part of the emerging Albanian nation and the delayed character and more difficult conditions for the development of Albanian nationalism (Fischer, 2015) in comparison with many other Balkan nations could be felt even more in distant and isolated regions, such as were some of the ones where Sellner stayed — years after the Albanian national movement achieved its first greater goals by proclaiming the independent Albanian state in 1912 and reaching a wider (albeit still not entirely sufficient) level of international recognition of the Albanian national claims. Considering the separation of individual tribes and communities which lived in mostly mountainous and dramatic Albanian landscape, the conclusion of a difficult situation regarding the complete national unification of Albanians in Albania proper came to be entirely relevant in the long term. To this further contributed the division of Albanian speaking population into several newly created states, which constitutes a topic standing on its own. To conclude this question, something else pertaining to the nationalist discourse of that time should be pointed out — Sellner generally sympathizes with the Albanian hopes for final independence, perhaps even more so, because he himself belonged to a nation, which was still in the process of gaining its own.

To conclude this paper, let us mention another noteworthy aspect of Sellner's legacy. It involves his correspondence and visual contributions, some of which is featured in his books and also present in archives²⁵ — namely several hundred letters sent from Albania mainly to his family, his notebooks and more than 100 sketches, mostly vernacular architecture, that he himself drawn while visiting the respective places. Amongst them are several fortified towers (*kulla*²⁶), typical water mills, seat of the lord of famed Mirdita tribe in Orosh, but probably even more importantly local churches²⁷ and wooden architecture, which in most cases (in contrast to many typical stone houses) did not survive until now. Sellner also depicted the houses built by him and his fellow soldiers. Several drawings also depict other artifacts such as tools, typical cradles, symbols and patterns featured on furniture, crosses, gravestones and other similar items. Sellner also brought back a selection of photographs and postcards from the given period. The collection in its entirety forms a relatively wealthy addition to similar visual witnesses provided by the likes of E. Durham and F. Nopcsa, and is also accompanied by several drawings of northern Albanian vernacular costumes by Rudolf Livora.

25 Sellner's works and correspondence were preserved in the The Museum of Czech Literature Literary Archive (MCL LA) in Prague.

26 A building of defensive character built from stone, usually with a rectangular floor plan, thick walls, small windows (loopholes) and consisting of two or more floors, with the upper ones being residential and the lower one serving as an entrance, storage area and stalls. It used to be built in several regions of the Balkans — most notably in what is today's Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and southern Serbia, where *kullas* were mostly associated with blood feuds and the defence of affected individuals and families.

27 In 1967, 2,169 religious buildings in Albania were ordered to be demolished or transformed into cinemas, warehouses, youth centers and building serving other purposes (see <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-186.html>)



LITERATURE

- Boehm, Christopher. 1984. *Blood revenge: the enactment and management of conflict in Montenegro and other tribal societies*. 2nd pbk. ed. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Doja, Albert. 2011. *Customary Laws, Folk Culture, and Social Lifeworlds: Albanian Studies in Critical Perspective*. Belgrade: Sluzbeni & Institute of Comparative Law, no. 2.
- Doja, Albert. 2015. *From the native point of view: An insider/outsider perspective on folkloric archaism and modern anthropology in Albania*. First published in *History of the Human Sciences*, Vol 28, Issue 4.
- Durham, Edith. 1909. *High Albania*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Durham, Edith. 1928. *Some tribal Origins, Customs and Laws of the Balkans*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Fischer, Berndt. 2005. *The Development of Albanian Nationalism*. Staff-edited summary of the EES discussion with Bernd Fischer, Professor and Chair, Department of History. Fort Wayne: Indiana University.
- Fučík, Josef. 2006. *Osmadvacátníci: spor o českého vojáka Velké války 1914–1918*. Prague: Mladá fronta, Arma & musae.
- Hradečný, P., Hladký, L., Pikal, K. 2010. *Česko-albánské vztahy*. In: Hladký, Ladislav; Blažek, David; Hrabcová, Jana; Hradečný, Pavel; Chrobák, Tomáš; Kouba, Miroslav; Kučera, Petr; Kuděla, Jiří; Ljuca, Adin; Penčev, Vladimír; Pikal, Kamil; Rychlík, Jan; Stehlík, Petr; Šisler, Filip; Šístek, František; Tejchman, Miroslav. *Vztahy Čechů s národy a zeměmi jihovýchodní Evropy*. Praha, Historický ústav, 367 p. Práce Historického ústavu AV ČR. Řada A. Monographia.
- Laška, Jan. 1920. *Pochod hladu Albanií (Z Niše do Valony)*. Praha: Pražská akciová tiskárna.
- Marchetti, Christian. 2010. *Austro-Hungarian Volkskunde at War: Scientists on Ethnographic Mission in World War I*. In: Johler, Reinhard, Marchetti, Christian, Scheer, Monique. *Doing Anthropology in Wartime and War Zones: World War I and the Cultural Sciences in Europe*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2010.
- MCL LA, 1916–1925: Karel Sellner's archival fond, The Museum of Czech Literature Literary Archive. No. 60/76 and 26/84, 1801–1968.
- Nopsca, Franz. 2013. *Fiset e malësisë së Shqipërisë veriore dhe e drejta zakonore e tyre* [The tribes of Northern Albanian mountains and their customary law]. Translated from German original *Albanien: die Bergstämme Nordalbaniens und ihr Gewohnheitsrecht*, 1932. Tiranë: ENEAS.
- Sellner, Karel. 1925a. *V tajemné zemi*. Praha: Kolokol.
- Sellner, Karel. 1925b. *Pohádky májových večerů*. Praha: Kolokol.
- Vinš, Přemysl. 2006. *Obraz Albánců v české společnosti v druhé polovině 19. století a na začátku 20. století* [online]. 2006 [cit. 2018-12-09]. Available in Czech at <https://is.cuni.cz/webapps/zzp/detail/54372>.

Robert Dobra is an albanologist and a student at the Department of Ethnology, Faculty of Arts at the Charles University in Prague. His interests include the legacy of unwritten customary law in contemporary Albanian society and culture, phenomena of mobility, cultural identity and hospitality (primarily in regards to mountainous regions of Albania) and also historical works, ethnography and travelogues regarding the northern Albanian tribal society.