

An Investigative Expedition (1909–1910)

By Jaroslav Hašek

Not long before the Monarch was due to make a tour of the occupied territories, Officer Vojovic of the Political Section of the Bosnian Provincial Police Department was sent to spy out the attitude of the Mayor of Šibak, a town on the route from Bosensky Brod to Mostar, who was thought to be opposed to the government.

Having dressed himself as a peasant, Vojovic inquired where Mayor Božetic was in the habit of drinking his wine, and made his way there.

He seated himself opposite Božetic and when he had drunk a half-liter of wine, he started a conversation by asking the Mayor for a little tobacco.

'They say that the Emperor Franz Joseph will be traveling to Hercegovina,' he said cautiously.

'That's right,' said Mayor Božetic, 'Bey Ismailic was talking about it when we were having coffee at Govariv, the Turk's place.'

'God keep him safe and well,' said Vojovic,

'God preserve him,' observed Božetic, 'they say he's gone grey now, our Tsar.'

'True, he's gone grey,' said Vojovic. 'Before the war we had ... why, we still have brothers in Serbia.'

'Oh no, you're wrong there. I haven't got any brothers in Serbia. Jovanovic, the saddler in Šibak: he's the one who's got brothers in Serbia. One of them's in Kragujevac; he's a saddler as well. And the other's in Belgrade, he makes sweets.'

Vojovic bit his lip. 'No, I meant blood-brothers, men of a common tongue ...'

Božetic waved a hand: 'No, I tell you again, I haven't a single brother in the whole kingdom of Serbia. All I've got over there is a cousin on my aunt-in-law's side. Sliva Miletic, he's called, a lad with a squint in one eye who works in a hotel in Belgrade that's run by a German.'

Vojovic was silent for a while. 'But,' he said, 'they do say that we in Bosnia and Hercegovina are one heart, one soul and one tongue with the Serbs.'

'What do you mean, one tongue?' replied Božetic. 'The Serbs don't say "co" and "ea", but "sta" or "sto" and then instead of "d", they have "dz". Stupid idiot! Our brothers are the Germans. They've built us a railway and brought in goats.'

Vojovic refused to give up hope. 'They've brought in taxes as well.' 'Taxes? So what, you thickhead? I'm glad to pay them, as long as I can live under an efficient administration,' said Božetic. 'And if

the time comes that I've nothing left, I'll look down at my hands and think that God will still grant me just enough strength to go out and earn enough to pay my taxes. And if I have to die of hunger, I'll die happy if only I know that I've paid my taxes. A man who doesn't pay his taxes is a good-for-nothing.'

Vojovic sighed. 'They say that the government is oppressing the people.'

'That's the first I've heard of it. It can't be true. The Germans are our brothers; they wouldn't oppress us. They've set up German schools for us, to teach us to pray for them in German. And when you're sitting there nice and cosy in one of those schools, what kind of oppression is that? Who told you the government is oppressing the people, dimwit?'

Vojovic cleared his throat in bewilderment. 'They take your sons away for the army,' he said, in the faint hope that he might yet get something out of Božetic.

'You're a proper fool,' said Mayor Božetic. 'How can they take my sons away for the army when all I've got is a daughter, who's married and lives in Mostar? And she hasn't any sons either, you blockhead!'

The next day, Officer Vojovic went dejectedly back to Sarajevo and reported the results of his investigative expedition. 'He hasn't any brothers in Serbia; only Jovanovic, the saddler in Šibak, has brothers in Serbia. One is a saddler in Kragujevac and the other is in Belgrade ... And he goes on all the time about how glad he is to be living under an efficient administration.'

'Did he really say: "an efficient administration"?' asked the Chief Commissioner.

'Yes, Excellency,' replied Vojovic, 'he said word for word: "I'm glad I can live under an efficient administration." ,

'In that case,' said the Chief Commissioner, 'he's been making a fool of you.'

And Officer Vojovic was discharged with ignominy from the Reports Department.