

## AUGUST VON SPIESS - UNDER THE SIGN OF THE DESTINY

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**Abstract.** August von Spiess was born on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August 1864. He spent his childhood on his mother's estate in the Fiume region, Poland. The mother inspired him with the first feelings of love for nature. He attended junior school in several garrisons, following, as all his family, his father's displacements as an active military officer. Irrespective of the place, the child August preferred to wander in nature, instead of acquiring school knowledge. At the age of eleven he was enrolled in the Military School in Saint Poelten. After leaving the school, he graduated the Theresianum Military Academy in Vienna and was given the rank of second lieutenant. A schoolmate described Transylvania to him as a dream world in terms of relief and abundance of fauna. From this moment on, he did his best to come to Transylvania. He succeeded in being appointed to a regiment in Orastie and then in Sibiu. Here he made it a duty to improve himself in the art of hunting. After the First World War, under favourable circumstances, he was named by the Romanian king Ferdinand I, on the first of July 1921, in the position of manager of the royal hunting. In this position he developed a fruitful activity to organize royal hunting parties, to protect the fauna and also to build roads, huts, shelters and refuges. He proved his literary talent by writing articles inspired by the world of cynegetics and also writing specialized works, which are authentic monographs of the most known hunting fields. During his lifelong efforts, he succeeded to collect a large number of trophies from the hunting areas in Romania and also in the Central and Eastern Europe. His collection of trophies and hunting guns comes to one thousand pieces and this is the base of the Hunting Museum in Sibiu, denominated after his name: August von Spiess.

**Keywords:** biography, naturalist, hunting master, trophies, August von Spiess.

**Rezumat. Sub semnul destinului-August von Spiess.** Cel ce avea să devină col. A von Spiess s-a născut în ziua de 6 august 1864. Prima copilărie și-o petrece pe proprietatea mamei, în regiunea Fiume, Polonia. Mama, îi insuflă copilului cele dintâi sentimente privind natura. Cursul școlii primare îl parcurge în mai multe garnizoane, urmând, cu întreaga familie, mutările tatălui, ca ofițer activ. Peste tot, copilul August se dovedește mai aplecat pentru hoinărelele din natură, decât pentru asimilarea cunoștințelor școlare. La unsprezece ani este înscris la "Școala Militară" din Sant Pölten, iar după absolvire trece la Academia Militară Tereziană din Viena de unde iese cu gradul de sublocotenent. Un coleg îi descrie Transilvania ca un tărâm de basm sub raportul reliefului și a bogăției faunei. De aici înainte, depune toate strădaniile pentru a ajunge în Transilvania. Reușește să fie numit la un regiment din Orăștie și apoi la un regiment din Sibiu. Aici dezvoltă un larg program de perfecționare în arta cinegetică. După prima conflagrație mondială, prin împrejurări favorabile, este numit de către M. S. Regele Ferdinand I, pe data de 1 iulie 1921, în funcția de director al vânătorilor regale. În această funcție desfășoară o rodnică activitate pentru organizarea vânătorilor regale, pentru protejarea faunei, pentru construirea de drumuri, cabane, adăposturi și refugii. Își demonstrează talentul literar prin articole inspirate din lumea cinegetică și cărți de specialitate, adevărate monografii ale celor mai cunoscute terenuri de vânătoare. Prin strădaniile de o viață reușește să strângă un mare număr de trofee din terenurile de vânătoare din România și din Europa Centrală și de Est. Colecția sa de trofee și arme de vânătoare ajunge la o mie de exemplare și formează baza muzeului din Sibiu care îi poartă numele.

**Cuvinte cheie:** biografie, naturalist, trofee, maestru de vânătoare August von Spiess.

### INTRODUCTION

The Natural History Museum in Sibiu has a very rich patrimony that was studied by a large number of specialists; it consists in botanical collections (DRĂGULESCU et al., 2015), ornithological collections (PRIPON, 2015), mineralogical and palaeontological collections (CIOBANU, 2003; CODREA & CIOBANU, 2003) and also in the famous entomological collections studied in time by many entomologists (ANTONIE, 2015, 2016; CUPEZAN et al., 2015; IENIȘTEA, 1970; MOISE 2011a, b, c).

The present paper refers to the collections of the trophies and hunting guns, a part of the Brukenthal National Museum collections. The custodian of these collections is the Hunting, Trophies and Hunting Guns Museum "August von Spiess". This paper is an homage to its founder, August Roland von Spiess von Braccioforte, a noteworthy person, a naturalist, a writer, a great personality among the old days' famous hunters.

### THE LIFE OF THE COLONEL AUGUST VON SPIESS

August von Spiess was born on August the 6<sup>th</sup>, 1864 in Przemysl, a locality in the Austrian province Galitia, at present Przemysl in Poland.

The Parces traced his destiny under the divine protection of the goddess Artemisa. He fulfilled his destiny as August Roland von Spiess von Braccioforte zu Portner und Hoeflein and later, after he was ennobled, as colonel August von Spiess.

The colonel himself explained his great love for nature as a combination of two factors: his genetic inheritance and his education. He had plenty of both of them. His mother owned an estate at the Adriatic seashore, near Fiume. She taught him to love the greatness of the nature and inspired him with passion for observation and for study of the little creatures like crickets, butterflies, scorpions, cicadas, etc. As concerns his education, his father, as a military officer in

the Austrian Imperial Army, did his utmost to initiate his son in the secrets of the wild nature and particularly in those of hunting.

Until the age of ten he spent his childhood in this paradise. A wide panorama that looked out on the mountains but also on the Adriatic Sea, was like a great amphitheater. It influenced his natural instinct, which was enriched by initiatic elements of education that will be the base for his personality. His father stimulated his inclination towards nature. He gave him a halberd as a present and trained him to use it for hunting some interesting pieces from the local fauna.

After ten years of wandering in this mirific world, his father was transferred from Fiume to the Agram garrison and soon after that to another one, the Rudolfswerth-Krein garrison in Slovenia. The family followed him, and so, the little August passed from one school to another, with different languages of teaching, not having the possibility to absorb the knowledge at the class of his level. By lucky coincidence, the little schoolboy had a classmate with the same habits and they wandered together around the garrison, playing with the nests of the little birds, fishing and capturing crabs, having a life in accordance with his wishes, namely having "an absolute freedom in the nature" (SPIESS, 1931a).

Such a life had two facets: the favourable one, that intensified his sense for observation that will influence his future features of hunter and the other one, less favourable, that brought about an insufficient learning and even a school delay concerning his knowledge. In order to solve this problem, the family decided: "the boy must be sent to a military school" (SPIESS, 1931a).

At the age of eleven, he was enrolled for the Military School in Sant Poelten. This was very unpleasant for the child August who was crying with tears of sadness. His father, holding the rank of a major now, was transferred to the Tarnopol garrison in Galitia.

Little August spent his holidays wandering around the city, having also a small shot hunting rifle, as a present from his father. His experience and the hunting knowledge received from his father were decisive for the young cadet. His father was moved again to the Lemberg garrison in Bohemia; Spiess junior, after finishing the military school, was enrolled and graduated the "Theresianum Military Academy" in Vienna. As a young second lieutenant he was commissioned in the same Lemberg garrison. By now, a stage of Spiess' life came to an end and it began another one, which allowed him to be closer to his dreams of being closer to nature.

With his Lancaster rifle, he took part in the autumn and winter huntings around Lemberg. He was very impressed about stories heard from a Transylvanian friend, who described Transylvania as a wonderful natural area, as a fabulous realm.

Under the influence of this friend, the desire to move to a garrison in Transylvania, the region that was in his imagination like an El Dorado for hunting, germinated in his mind. His next steps led him closer to the fulfilment of his destiny. In August 1885 he was sent to the Orăștie garrison of the regiment 64 infantry. He improved his skills in hunting, taking part in numerous hunting outings on the areas near the Mureș river. But his mind was set on hunting large animals in the Carpathian Mountains, with their great crests and peaks, with endless forests and a legendary fauna.

The destiny helped him meet the imperial military officer, the colonel Berger of the garrison of Sibiu, an enthusiastic and perfect hunter. Their long friendship came to an end only when one of them passed away. He took a leave of absence from his unit's commander and one day, with his Tyroler rifle up on his back, went to Sibiu by his bicycle with one big wheel, in order to take part, together with his friend, to a hunting party in the mountains.

He took constant steps to be transferred to Sibiu and finally he was removed to the Sibiu garrison – 31<sup>st</sup> Regiment, on the first of May 1889. At the end of his military career, he held the rank of colonel and the commanding officer of the Regiment 2 Infantry in Sibiu.

In his memories book about the adventure in Africa, the colonel August von Spiess confessed that: "My destiny brought me to Transylvania where I was welcomed by the hospitable inhabitants and I found here, among the numerous hunters, friendly and paternal advisers. I was interested particularly in the inhabitants of Romanian nationality, natural human beings for which the mountains had no secrets; when I learnt their harmonious language, they accepted me and they took me to their huntings and expeditions, as a schoolboy eager to learn. I spent many wonderful hunting moments in the company of those old mountain hunters. In their endless forests and in their high mountains I hunted a lot of wild beasts. So, I was able to appreciate their matchless hunting sense, their ability for orientation in the field and in their natural vocation for hunting and fishing" (SPIESS, 1942).

That was the time named "La Belle Epoque" and the young captain was determined to use all opportunities which appeared, to cultivate friendships and relationships all over the Central Europe. He graduated a school to improve his skills in target shooting and he was known as a sharp shooter.

Having so many talents, he made acquaintance with the manager of the hunting fields of the Imperial Court E.S., the Earl Thun, who offered him the favour to visit the hunting fields, the hunting park Lainz and also the administration bureaus of the hunting fields of the Imperial Court in Asper Lobau.

During his participation in the hunting parties in Neuberg and Muerzsteg he met the most important personalities in the world of hunting of the Habsburg Empire.

On a local-wide scale, together with his friend Berger, took the concession for hunting of five mountains in the Carpathians where they organized huntings of bears, wolfs, stags, foxes, black goats and birds.

He collected a large number of trophies, intending to found a hunting museum, which would keep his memory after his physical disappearance. His friendship with Berger went on. Berger was a witness at the Spiess' wedding, he

was also the godfather of his children. Their friendship ended only after thirty years, when, in a tragic hunting accident, colonel Berger suffered a surgical operation that was fatal for him.

In his memoirs, August von Spiess related about a hunting party in the mountains in 1890, when a violent storm took place, “a cloud burst” that produced large floods and damages, among them being also the fall of the salt mines in Ocna Sibiului, which were transformed in lakes. These are the salt lakes that are being used now for different treatments, mainly against rheumatism (SPIESS, 1931b).

At the end of the first World War, the Habsburg Empire collapsed and the way of life changed, the relationships disappeared and also the opportunities for the officers of the Sibiu garrison. The Association of the Hunters in Sibiu continued to exist, in spite of all difficulties, with Spiess as a president. He related that at that time hunting was not organized and was only an additional way to earn one’s living.

His destiny interfered again in his life and directed him towards the Parces’ bewitched words. Among the provisional state structures was also “The Troops Commandment in Transylvania” that in 1918 chose to establish its headquarters in Sibiu. The commander of these troops was appointed the general Arthur Văitoianu, a good connoisseur of the hunting art and a passionate hunter. The result of the likeness between of the two hunters followed in a natural logic. These two persons understood each other perfectly as concerns the hunting. Văitoianu found in the collocutor Spiess a hunting master, a good organizer and a good militant for the nature protection. But the general Văitoianu didn’t remain for a long time in Sibiu. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of September 1918 a new government was established in Bucharest and the general Arthur Văitoianu was appointed prime minister (GIURESCU, 1971).

It seemed that the key thread of his good destiny would be interrupted. But, on the contrary. The general Văitoianu related to M. S. the King Ferdinand I about August von Spiess and his qualities. The King was convinced and after a short time, on the first of July 1921, the colonel August von Spiess was appointed as Master of the Royal Hunting, holding this position until 1939.

August von Spiess related in his work “55 years of hunting”: “For ten years I had under my responsibility twenty one royal hunting fields, from the crests of the Carpathian Mountains to the Black Sea”, among them the Gurghiu area with 47.000 ha., Broșteni with 48.000 ha., the Danube Delta with 250.000 ha., etc. In these areas no one could hunt, except H. M. the King and his high guests (SPIESS, 1931c).

In his new position, August von Spiess started the work with a total abnegation and great ability. He initiated the construction of access roads, hunting huts, chalets, shelters, refuges; particularly he elaborated and put into practice the conceptions and theories concerning the protection of the nature and of the cynegetic fund all over the country. King Ferdinand I appreciated and upheld his work. The empathy between them was evident and August von Spiess accompanied the King in every hunting party.

His native and educational qualities, his competence and his merits, promoted him as an honorary member of many cynegetic societies in Romania and abroad. He was a member of the Commission for Nature Protection and for the National Park.

He accomplished his tasks with the same loyalty also during the rule of the King Carol II.

At the age of 72, his lifelong dream came true. At that time, a hunter was considered fully fulfilled only after hunting in Africa (a kind of: “et in Arcadia Ego!”). He took part in 1936 to a hunting in Kenya and in 1938 in Tanganyika, where he collected many valuable African trophies.

### THE ACTIVITY AS A NATURALIST AND A WRITER

The personality of colonel August von Spiess expressed itself in an admirable way also in the sphere of writing. His innovative ideas were reported in the publications of that time, mainly in the Hunting Review (“Revista Vânătorilor”), a specialized review of the Hunters Union of Romania.

His books are certain monographs of the hunting fields, dealing with the climate, relief and mainly the species of the local fauna. The books were written mainly in the German language; they were published at the publishing houses in Berlin, Munich and Sibiu. Besides his scientific rigorous descriptions of the fauna species, colonel August von Spiess displayed also an indisputable literary talent. In his work of memoirs “55 years of hunting” he recounts about his evolution as a hunter and also about the dearest and the most significant recollections of his hunting parties. His style is rich in descriptions of landscapes and full of sentiments of total adhesion to the beauties of the nature: “Slowly, little by little, the full moon disk is rising over the sharp crags of Negoii, astounding, overflowing its silvery light over the whole realm” (SPIESS, 1931b).

His hunting expeditions are presented purely and simply as mythological expeditions where the proportions, the strictly technical elements are interwoven harmoniously with the human sentiments and also with the diversity of behavior of the hunters, forced frequently to take rapid decisions.

In his book “The black goats in the Retezat Mountains” (“Caprele negre din Masivul Retezat”) he reported - among other things - about two famous hunting expeditions performed in the hunting field of the Retezat Mountains, which belonged to the Earl Kenderffy (Hungarian modification of the Romanian name for Căndeia). This field, with a surface of 27.620 acres in the Retezat Mountains was taken in concession by the Romanian State according to the order of the King Ferdinand I in 1921 and was destined to royal hunting parties (SPIESS, 2005).

The narration of one hunting party which took place in 1882 is a proof of his literary talent, that utilized picturesque details interwoven with objective information, that made a description particularly interesting. That year, the Baron Tomya, as organizer, invited Rudolf, the heir prince of the Habsburg Crown, to take part at the hunting. Rudolf, together with his wife, ministers and high dignitaries of the Imperial Court, hunted black goats and bears in one week's time.

The baron Tomya, the master of that hunting party, was dressed in a coat of wolf skin that Prince Rudolph liked so much that he immediately ordered a few skins of wolf. A craftsman from Hateg manufactured a coat identical with Tomya's coat. The prince Rudolf, strongly impressed by that wolfskin coat, asked the painter of the Royal Court who came especially from Vienna - to paint Tomya dressed in the famous coat. The painting, masterly executed and framed, was offered as a present to the Emperor.

As a reward, "the man with the wolfskin coat" was appointed as manager of the whole hunting field. The archduke Rudolf had also other similar initiatives, but they were abandoned after the tragedy of Mayerling.

Another episode, worthy of a man of letters' pen, was the great hunting party in 1923 of H. M. the King Ferdinand. Now, colonel August von Spiess was member of the organizing staff of the hunting. That hunting took place on the area taken in concession from the earl Kenderffy in year 1921, when the Retezat Mountains become the hunting royal fund, that later will be a part of the Retezat Park, the first National Park in Romania. The success of that hunting was proven by the numerous trophies won. The description of this hunting has plenty of enchantment and suspense. At that hunting took part, besides the notabilities of the Royal Court, His Royal Highness Carol and also the prince George, the heir of the Greek throne and the future King of Greece. The narration of the colonel August von Spiess does not confine itself to the facts that happened in that hunting area, but also to the King's visits in the cities, villages and historical monuments of Hunedoara county.

The King visited Hațeg, Sarmisegetuza Ulpia Traiana, the church of Densuși, Hunedoara, etc. Everywhere the King was welcomed with ovations. Colonel August von Spiess was enthusiastic by all he saw: "there are no many regions in the Central Europe like Hunedoara county and particularly Hațeg district, where every place, every valley, every cave and almost every mountain could present vestiges and monuments from the remote past" (SPIESS, 2005).

His book "The black goats from the Retezat Mountain", had the following dedication: "with veneration, to the brilliant hunter H. M. the King Carol II of Romania". This book was edited in Romanian language only in 2005, at the publishing house "Hora" in Sibiu, by the efforts of Walter Frank, who made the translation from German language and of a granddaughter of August von Spiess, Helga Stein, who lives in Dortmund, Germany. In the "Introduction", Helga Stein affirms that this book is "a valuable document about the history of hunting in Romania". The book is abundant in information, first of all about hunting, but also about geographical information about Hunedoara county, climate elements, art monuments and mainly historical, ethnographical and archaeological information. The author used a foreign bibliography of the most known authority in the matter.

Among the hunting works of reference written by August von Spiess, one could emphasize the following: "Gurghiu - a history of Gurghiu", a monograph, at the publishing house Krafft and Drotleff, Sibiu, "The Carpathian Stags" (Karpathenhirsch), the publishing house Paul Parey, Berlin, 1925, "The hunting reserves in the Retezat Mountain", "Under the magic of Carpathians" (In Zauber der Karpathen), the publishing house Paul Parey, Berlin, 1933, "The four seasons in the bird paradise in Mânastirea", "Seventeen years in the service of the Royal Hunting House of Romania" (Siebzehn Jahre in rumanischen Hofjagddienst), the publishing house F. K. Maye, Munchen, 1940, "From Ardeal to Kilimandjaro - Hunter in Africa the publishing house "The Royal Foundation for Literature and Art", 1942, "Fifty five years of hunting" (the memoirs of colonel August von Spiess, the manager of the royal hunting). This work appeared in Romanian language and it was printed as a "serial story" in the "Hunter Review" in 1931.

August von Spiess was present in the specialized reviews, having an intense contribution with "Revista Vânătorilor" (The Hunter Review), "Carpații" (The Carpathians), "Wild und Hund", "Der Deutscher Jaeger", "Karpathen-Weidwerk", etc.

As a result of his prestige in the area of the Central Europe, he was asked to co-operate in the staff of specialists that elaborated the famous hunting handbook: "Die Hohe Jagd" printed in Berlin in the year 1905. August von Spiess elaborated the chapters about bear and lynx. Also, as a proof of his appreciation, he was elected as an honorary member of the jury at the International Hunting Exhibition in Leipzig, 1930.

In a retrospective look marked by nostalgia and the feeling of ephemeral, the colonel August von Spiess closed his historical adventures in the hunting fields with the following words: "The copper nails on the butt of my rifles are the distinctions of a lifelong tenacious hunter. These honor signs were collected by hunter since he was a child, up to an older age, in the great area between the Alps of the Central Europe, the Black Sea, the Russian steppes and forests, in the legendary Bialovies, the splendid hunting fields of Germany to Bulgaria, Romania and Dobruđa" (SPIESS, 1931d).

The Hunters' Review nr.12/1937 praised him: "We know Mr. Colonel August von Spiess from his multiple works offered to the cynegetic literature, but only in his work "The Carpathian Stags" he revealed the secrets of his heart. We thank wholeheartedly to the manager of the royal hunting and we assure him that no one of the Romanian writers found such accents that covered in a fine texture, associated with such an affectionate feeling, the crests of our old mountains" (SOLITARUL, 1937).

What made the memory of colonel August von Spiess unforgettable is, undoubtedly, his collection of the trophies and hunting guns that are in the patrimony of the Museum which bear his name. This valuable collection is

formed of 1000 pieces of trophies, mainly from Carpathian Mountains and from Africa. His collection was donated in 1963 to the Romanian State by his daughters, together with their house in Sibiu, that now shelters the Museum. This house where lived the colonel August von Spiess's family, is a building in Romanian style and it forms a distinct, agreeable spot in the context of the all-around buildings. The Museum was opened for the public in 1966, in accordance with the conditions stipulated in the donation act. The name of the Museum is: "The Museum of Hunting, Trophies and Hunting Guns - August von Spiess", in Sibiu.

At present, the Museum has a cynegetic patrimony of 1577 pieces that results from the collection of August von Spiess, plus the collection of the forestry expert Emil Witing and the collection of the Transsylvanian Society for Natural Sciences (Siebenbürgischer Verein für Naturwissenschaften zu Hermannstadt).

In addition to the hunting trophies, the Museum lodges also a large collection of hunting guns, hunting accessories and a splendid photographic original material. The circuit in Museum is conceived in such a way so that the visitors could make an idea about the hunting art, beginning with the Stone Age.

The museum consist in five showrooms, each of them with the pieces, well arranged in order to get an extensive general impression; among them, the third showroom is dedicated to the memory of the colonel August von Spiess and includes the photographs with explanatories texts, his hunting rifle, the most valuable personal trophies, the books written by him, and also the reviews which published his articles. On the whole, this third showroom is a supreme homage to the man, the hunter and the collector, the colonel August von Spiess.

The colonel August von Spiess passed away in 1953 at the age of 89 and his last resting place is the Municipal Graveyard in Sibiu.

## CONCLUSIONS

Colonel August von Spiess's whole existence seemed to be under the sign of a favourable destiny, that influenced the progress of the events in his life, that gave him a valuable way in life and also conferred to his personality an unforgettable posthumous remembrance.

His mother inculcated him the love for nature and the interest to knowledge. His father explained to him the complicated secrets of hunting.

His father's transfers to different garrisons helped August as a child to know the great diversity of the nature, to meet friends with the same aspirations

At the "Theresianum Military Academy" in Wien, a schoolmate described him the province of Transylvania as a fabulous region in terms of nature, relief and fauna. In his mind appeared the thought which induced him the desire to meet that magic realm.

As a second lieutenant, he was appointed to a regiment in Orăștie and then in Sibiu. Here he had an intense hunting activity in accordance with his aspirations. He made his military career as a colonel, commandant of the Regiment.

At the end of the First World War he was mistrustful about his future. But his good destiny intervened again and made it possible to meet the commander of the Romanian Troops in Transylvania, the general Arthur Văitoianu. At his proposal in 1921, King Ferdinand I emitted a Royal Decree for appointment of the colonel August von Spiess in the position of the Manager of the Royal Hunting.

From this moment, the destiny of the colonel August von Spiess evolved in a straight line. His position permitted himself to prove not only his loyalty to Romanian Crown but also his mastership in hunting.

All his organizational accomplishments, the elaboration of specialized works, of monographs of the hunting fields, the collection of the trophies and the hunting guns represented the proof that the colonel August von Spiess did his best to recompense the fulfilments of his special destiny.

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