

The Story of European Precious Opal from Dubník

Peter Semrád



TO TONY SMALLWOOD

WITH BEST WISHES AND

HAPPY READING

Handwritten signature of Peter Semrád.

4.2.2014 Alkmaar, NL

IRANI

Foreword

Welcome to the opal mines in Dubník!

They are unique in Europe, as well as in the world. Once you visit them an immense spirit of the place will take control of your mind and will not allow you to forget it, where colourful jewels – precious opals – had been mined for centuries. The capricious ways of nature and the tenacious desire of humans combined in the past to create a treasury full of beautiful natural and historical value. It would be a pity if there was no opportunity to explore its fabulous interior. Well, throw all your worries away. This book will make you familiar with it.

If you really want to become personally acquainted with the historical locality of the long-ago mined deposits of precious opal in Europe, you have to strike out for Eastern Slovakia, and once there – either from Košice via Červenica (old Hungarian; Vörösvágás), or from Prešov via Zlatá Baňa (old Hungarian; Aranybánya), possibly from Vranov nad Topľou via Zámutov (old Hungarian; Opálhegy) – directly to the heart of the northern part of the majestic Slanské vrchy Mountains. However, it is only if you reach the more or less defunct mining settlement of Dubník (old Hungarian; Opálbánya), located at the geometric centre of an imaginary geographical triangle defined by the villages of Červenica, Zlatá Baňa and Zámutov, can you be sure that you are in the very place. It is just here where Mother Nature found ideal conditions and waved her magic wand in order to enrich the grey massifs with their colourful opal veins. Henceforth with their glamour they enthralled the human mind and evoked a dream of fortune and eternal glory which initiated the process of establishing opal mining. The region where European precious opal was mined was not a prominent or a wealthy one with a ready market for such treasure and thus all the mined gems were very quickly sent around the whole world. It was only at various commercial places like fairs and shops where discussions and admiration went on about how such a stone full of colours might have been born.

Unfortunately the origins of opal mining in the locality are not very clear. However, one thing is certain, the first traders of the precious opals from Dubník called them neither European nor Slovak. Such a beautiful and high-quality jewel was only considered to have originated somewhere in the Far East, and not in the Western World ie in Europe. Therefore if some specimens appeared in times gone by they were immediately categorised as Oriental; mostly from India, or more generally from East Asia, not from their real home in Dubník. Of course 'Slovak' was not applicable at that time either. Even after revealing the intentional commercial falsehood of their Oriental origin, their actual birth place belonged administratively to the Kingdom of Hungary. No wonder then that Slovak precious opal dominated international jewel markets in the past with the label 'Hungarian precious opal' (old Hungarian; 'Magyar nemes opál'). On each occasion it was shown exclusively as a home-produced gem, having its origin in Upper Hungary (old Hungarian; Felső-Magyarország, or Felföld, possibly Felvidék) in Šariš County (old Hungarian; Sáros Megye) very close to Červenica (old Hungarian; Vörösvágás) village.

*In the course of the 19th century, when opal mining in Dubník reached the golden era, there appears to have been sporadic attempts aimed at underlining the opal's Slovak heritage. It was namely the Slovak publicist and evangelical clergyman Daniel Gabriel Lichard (*1812–†1882), who named precious opal from Dubník as 'Slovak noble opal' (Slovak; 'Slovenský šľachetný opál'). In a kind of literary opposition we can see the personalities of earth science from Budapest, namely József Szabó (*1822–†1894), Sándor Schmidt (*1855–†1904) and Ferenc Schafarzik (*1854–†1927), try to promote precious opal from Dubník as a Hungarian gem. Such emotions with nationalist undertones were resolved only when World War I was over because afterwards the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was abolished and the opal mines in Dubník became the property of the newly created Czechoslovakia.*

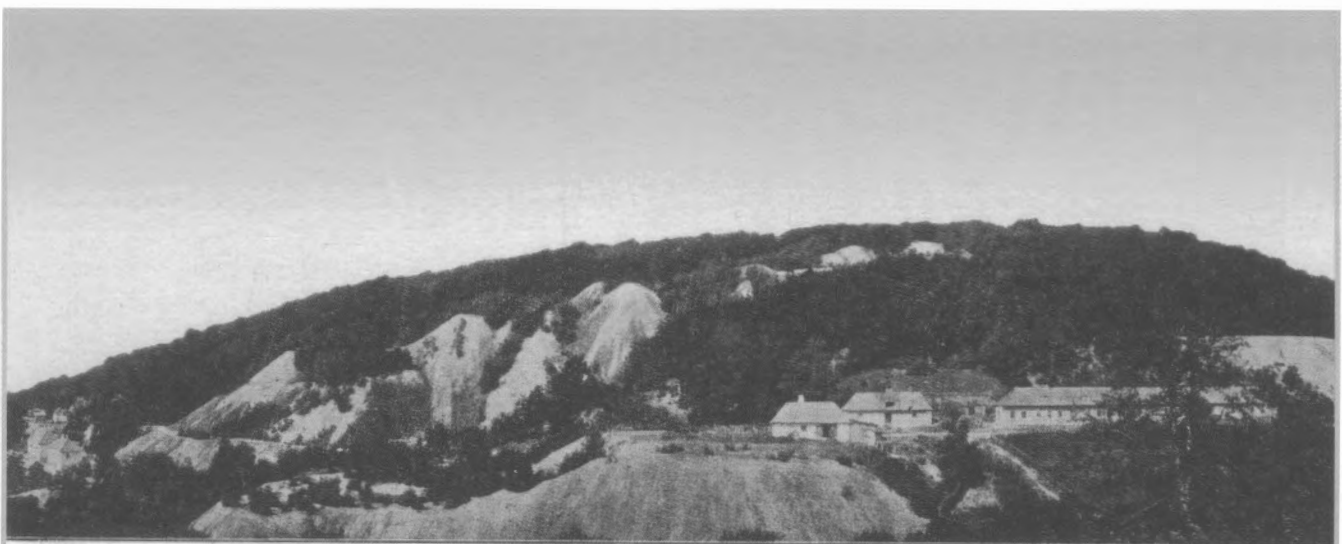
Unfortunately four years after the event the miner's tools in the area fell silent. Experts who studied the pros and cons of the possibility to go on with mining came to the conclusion that the growing competition from newly discovered opal deposits in Australia, with their relatively easily accessible resources, would not allow the historical and mostly depleted Dubník locality to continue profitably.

Currently opal is not mined in Dubník but we have to be reminded that there have been, and still exist, certain intentions to re-open a small scale exploitation. Furthermore we do not want to, nor should argue anymore, whether precious opal from Dubník is a Hungarian or a Slovak jewel. This period was over long ago. We have witnessed the unification of Europe, and therefore the opal can only be European. Besides that the old abandoned mines are a convincing testimony to the hard work of our ancestors and during the winter time also the home for hibernating bat species so constitute both a common natural and historical treasury. The subject has apparently supra-national dimensions. We would especially like to emphasise that the raw and polished opals whether loose or mounted jewels from Dubník can be found in many museum collections scattered across Europe, possibly the world. It is obvious that the nationalist perception of the issue is wrong. The same applies to professional

perceptions. Mineralogists and geologists should not be allowed to dig and to drill rashly again in the old heaps and mines for a couple of colourful opal specimens. Moreover chiropterologists should not completely prevent the public from entering the mines citing the bats' hibernation which is only seasonal. And finally, curators in museums should not be allowed to hide all mineralogical opal specimens or jewels with precious opal due to their subjective opinion that they are not attractive enough.

Without doubt an actual visit to the locality and the relevant museums would be much more challenging and exciting than turning the pages of this book. Unfortunately we can only offer you this virtual trip. Of course, it does not necessarily imply that you cannot go to see the relevant places whenever you want. In fact we definitely encourage you to do so, but, in order to avoid some disappointment you should also know that not all the places or objects presented here are easily accessible for many reasons we are not going to specify. Anyway if you fail on your trip to see something that you really wanted to see, do not be sad. As long as you have this book you are not going to miss anything that we considered to be important to the subject. Now we will finally wish you much pleasure with this work.

Enjoy and 'Good Luck'!



Felső József-táró

Paulina-táró

Apollónia-táró

Károly-táró

Predbánya

Libanka Hill with its mining works dedicated to precious opal. Source: Schafarzik 1913