

THE ROLE OF JOHN JISKRA IN THE HISTORY OF SLOVAKIA

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From the 1440s, John Jiskra of Brandýs, who originated from the Moravian branch of the Czech nobility, became the main support in the Kingdom of Hungary of Albrecht Habsburg's widow, Elizabeth, and her six months old son Ladislás born after his father's death. Jiskra was bound for years to the Habsburg struggles for the Hungarian crown which took place chiefly in Slovakia. He was a skilful commander, diplomat, and politician. He reached the rank of a Hungarian magnate and was also able to defend his own rights. He remained true to his military service duties which had been predetermined from his youth till his death.

Contemplations on unique personalities in the history of humankind are usually influenced by the particular atmosphere of the period in which they originated. John Jiskra from Brandýs was not an exception. He was able to maintain control for many years in the 15th century over almost all of what is today Slovakia, although with brief interruptions.

The surviving sources tell us little about the birth of John Jiskra, his youth and life up to his arrival in Slovakia. Jiskra's ancestors were members of the gentry. The brothers Henry and Vintíř from Prostiboř in the Plzeň district came to the wooded north-east Bohemia with a wave of colonization in the second half of the 13th century. They founded a new lordship on the hill above the river of Tichá Orlice with the castle of Brandýs. The shield of John Jiskra, from which his seal used for sealing documents was developed, with crossed four pointed antlers of a stag, quite clearly points to derivation from the coat of arms of Henry of Brandýs, which had two stag's antlers with four points on the shield.

The increasing ambitions of the lords of Brandýs were limited by their weak economic base on the right bank of the river Tichá Orlice, so they split into two branches, Czech and Moravian. In 1274 Henry and Vintíř obtained from the Bishopric of Olomouc, land near Přerov in northern Moravia, associated with vassalage. In the 14th century, an extensive property enticed Vintíř's sons, Milota and Beneš of Brandýs to enter vassalage and a service relationship to the powerful lords of Kravaře. After the decline of their family there was nothing else they could do. Evidently as a consequence of the adventurous life of Ulric of Brandýs, the lords of

Boskovice obtained in 1340 the family castle of Brandýs. Alšík of Brandýs, Milota's son, belonged to part of the family in 1372. It is not known whether Alšík had children, but we know he was married since he made a donation to a monastery in Fulnek together with his wife, Agnes, in 1391. Alšík is assumed to be the father of John Jiskra, whose birth dates back to 1400. However it is impossible to exclude the son of Beneš, and lastly John of Brandýs, nicknamed Lysek in 1406. He was also originally a vassal of the Bishop of Olomouc. It is very improbable that Jiskra's youth was not marked by the influences and surroundings he encountered during his period of life in the Bishopric of Olomouc, and which undoubtedly marked the strength of his religious convictions. He did not learn the military craft only on the soil of his native country, but probably also in Italy and possibly Poland. He is said to have served in sea battles on the side of the Venetians. He certainly appropriated the military art of John Žižka of Trocnov and the Hussites, which contributed many elements to military tactics and strategy in Central Europe. He may have fought under Žižka's able successor, Prokop the Bald, originally a priest.

Under the title of Všechovice, Jiskra participated on 21st November 1431 in the act of establishing new land registers, since the old ones were destroyed by fire during the siege of Opava. Všechovice near Kelč in Moravia still belonged to Jiskra in 1464. In 1444, he ceded another property of appropriate value, Nahošovice in Dřevohosticko to Pašek of Zásmuky. Jiskra obtained Uherský Ostroh in Moravia as a reward from Ladislas, King of Hungary and Bohemia, who also had the title of Austrian Margrave. Before serving the surviving family of the monarch Albrecht of Habsburg, John Jiskra may have served in the mercenary forces of Albrecht's father in law, Sigismund of Luxemburg Holy Roman Emperor, King of Bohemia and Hungary and younger son of Charles IV. However a document of King Sigismund, issued in Prague on 26th March 1437, by which the monarch turned to the city of Sopron in the matter of financing 12 ships prepared in Vienna and other places, sailing on the Danube from Bratislava to Belgrade, does not directly mention Jiskra by name. Only the rank of the commander – Captain of the Taborites is mentioned, and it remains uncertain that this would refer only and exclusively to Jiskra.

The first mention of Jiskra in Slovakia dates from 22nd August 1440, when he was captured together with a small group of armed men before Svätý (Hronský) Beňadik on the Hron, the fortified seat of an influential and powerful Benedictine abbey. Jiskra as the main support in Hungary of the royal widow of Albrecht of Habsburg, Elizabeth and her six months old son Ladislas born after his father's death, and the leader of a force of about 5,000 mercenaries, composed of former Hussite warriors recruited in Bohemia, fell into the hands of King Władysław Jagiello of Poland, who had been recognized as King of Hungary by the Parliament in Buda. However the main activity of Jiskra in Slovakia could have begun later. Then he was freed from imprisonment in one of the castles of Pongrác of Sv. Mikuláš, under whose command he may have fought against the Turks when still in the service of Sigismund of Luxemburg.

The wish of Albrecht of Habsburg, who succumbed to dysentery on 27th October 1439, was that Austria, Bohemia and Hungary should remain connected by a personal union, that is by the person of the monarch, who should be his expected but still unborn son, as determined in his will five days before his death. As a result of fear of anti-German feelings in Hungary and especially in Buda, he would have his seat in Bratislava. They had already reproached Albrecht for spending little time in the country. The constant fear of the Islamic conquerors influenced the struggle for the throne of Hungary, which was marked by longer term armed encounters. At the same time many in Hungary saw in union with the fragmented Germany Empire no solution to the Turkish threat, and placed all their hope in the house of Jagiello. The group which regarded King Władysław III of Poland as the most advantageous candidate for the Hungarian throne, especially included the highest circles of the Hungarian aristocracy, the state and county dignitaries. At their front stood the great magnates: the Palatine Lawrence Hedervári, John Hunyady, the lords of Rozhanovce, Perín and Pavlovice, Csákys and Bubeks. These expected salvation from the Turks from the military aid of the greatest power in Eastern Europe at the time: the Greater Lithuanian monarchy. The pregnant Elizabeth, desperately hoping for the birth of a male heir, and convinced that she could rule by herself, was mainly supported by her nephews Ulrich of Zilly and Ladislas of Gorjani with their friends and supporters. She also had the support of the German King, Frederick III, who provided Elizabeth with finance, with which she could employ John Jiskra.

Jiskra connected for many years with the Habsburg struggle in Hungary, matured into an extraordinarily able military commander, diplomat and politician. In this he received not a little help from his character traits, which were well known to his contemporary, the Italian humanist Enea Silvio Piccolomini, later Pope Pius II (1458-1464) working in the diplomatic services of the Emperor and also the Pope in Bohemia and Hungary. In his book "About Famous Men", Piccolomini mentioned Jiskra as a man of medium height, dark and unshaven, not lacking in humour, and not craving money. Like every good military commander, Jiskra was dedicated to his calling with body and soul, gladly sitting at the same table as the soldiers. He gave ungrudgingly, even if he had very little. At the same time he loved pomp and splendour. On ordinary days he took everything lightly, but in difficult moments, he became a mature diplomat. In selecting means to achieve an aim, his conscience did not trouble him very much, but he served faithfully. Bishop Simon of Eger, the most consistent supporter of the Polish dynasty, could also be convinced of this. The arrangement of the marriage to Jiskra of the daughter of his younger brother, George of Rozhanovce Count of the County of Bratislava, did not fulfil the bishop's expectations. Jiskra did not betray Queen Elizabeth. However events were complicated. The true reasons for Jiskra to defend a large part of Slovakia for the under-age Ladislas, disappeared with the death of Queen Elizabeth on 17th December 1442 at Győr. Jiskra's further activity in Slovakia became more legal as he turned to Frederick III. Jiskra could continue to defend Ladislas, while he was educated in the court at Vienna.

During preparations for a great expedition against the Turks, it was considered most important to at least temporarily stop the war with Jiskra in Hungary. The very adroit policy of the Papal Legate, Juliano Cesarini achieved a relaxation in tension. Jiskra prolonged the negotiations as much as he could. He knew very well what the negotiations were about. Neither side remained inactive. Around 15th August 1443, Jiskra occupied the castle of Spišský Hrad, to which the captain of the castle, Peter Bask, by an irony of fate had transferred the archive of Spišská Kapitula, a short time before. Spišská Kapitula was one of the “*loca credibilia*”, producing and preserving the most valuable legal documents concerned with public affairs and property, that is it carried out the work done in other countries by public notaries. This greatly strengthened Jiskra’s power in Spiš. Jiskra who had succeeded in mastering almost everything, which was entrusted to him, entered into negotiations more willingly. During the negotiations with the Bishop of Eger, who represented Władysław III, Jiskra was really recognized as the equal of the Hungarian magnates, which was not acceptable to many. The bishop negotiated with Jiskra as if he were the equal of a king. A meeting between Jiskra and Władysław in Esztergom or Buda was intended to bring the final peace. As a preliminary, a peace of about a year, which brought Jiskra all the conquests he had achieved, was concluded on 1st September 1443 at Spišská Nová Ves.

The euphoria of the successful anti-Turkish campaign from July 1443 to January 1444, to which John Hunyady contributed much by applying elements of Hussite military technique, military wagons and heavy cavalry forming a firm military centre, led to a decision to continue the anti-Turkish expedition into the summer of 1444. However the reliability of the rear was already disturbed by political disagreements, which began before the Parliament summoned to Buda in April. The pro-Jagiellonian majority allowed the imprisonment of the regularly invited Ponrác of Sv. Mikuláš, and ordered the massacre of part of his retinue. Something similar threatened Jiskra, but either King Władysław helped in an attempt to win John Jiskra over, or Jiskra escaped by himself. Therefore it was difficult to hope for Jiskra’s participation in the Turkish expedition. Indeed how would magnates protect themselves, seeing that they behaved in the country like little kings? It is possible to guess that the non-participation of the Rozhanovce apart from Bishop Simon, in the crushing Battle of Varna with the Turks, was caused by the fact that somebody had to remain at home as a counterweight to Jiskra. The tragedy near Varna on 10th November 1444, when not one European royal court showed much interest in the successful course of the expedition, and about which eye witnesses maintained that King Władysław was not killed significantly affected political development in the country. Cardinal Cesarini and Bishop Simon perished. John Hunyady, escaping through Wallachia, was captured by Prince Vlad Dracul, formerly an ally of Hungary. Rumours about the wandering of the repentant pilgrim Władysław, then called “*Warneńczyk*”, for breaking the peace previously concluded with the sultan at Szeged, circulated around Europe for a long time. Władysław was thought to have

been wounded, and the fact that the sultan had Władysław's body found, exhibited his head and burial, did not change this.

In Hungary the way to feudal anarchy was opened. The violation of property rights, the pilfering of royal, urban and rural taxes, occurred daily. Fairs and markets were limited, tolls and "thirtieths" were collected arbitrarily. Everything was repeatedly subjected to plundering and burning by mercenaries, without regard for who they served. A firm ruling power, a king was lacking. Puzzling rumours circulated about Władysław, and Ladislas was only four years old. The assembled Hungarian Parliament, not convinced of the death of King Władysław, postponed recognition of Ladislas Posthumus as king until 30th May 1445. Frederick III was asked to hand over Ladislas Posthumus, son of the unfortunate Queen Elizabeth and to return the Hungarian crown. The crown, which was known as Saint Stephen's, and which was misappropriated from Visegrád to Komárno, as early as February 1440, on the initiative of Queen Elizabeth, by her assistant, Helena Kottaner. In this period, the queen found sympathy with Frederick III, who gained guardianship over the little Ladislas and kept him in Austria. Elizabeth then placed the child, together with the Hungarian crown, under Frederick's protection. On 15th May 1440, he had Ladislas crowned at Székesfehérvár by Cardinal Dionysius of Seč.

The mission of John Jiskra to Frederick III was unsuccessful. Ladislas and the crown remained with Frederick III. There is said to have been a meeting between Jiskra and the five years old Ladislas. It is said that they presented Jiskra to Ladislas as his best soldier and supporter. The naive child with sincere intentions reached into a purse and selected some coins for Jiskra, who had them set in gold and kept them for the rest of his life as the greatest treasure. The event is interpreted differently, either as Jiskra showing his faithfulness to the little king, or as Jiskra's hypocrisy. However the parliament also did not deny that Jiskra made the greatest contribution to the recognition of Ladislas as King of Hungary. The election of the chief captains confirmed this. Seven of them were appointed to administer the country, since the king was a minor. Ladislas' court party was formed by John Jiskra, Pongrác of Sv. Mikuláš and Emerich Bubek, the greater part of whose property was in Gemer. It can be said that Slovakia was under their rule. The other captains formed the national or Hunyady party: John Hunyady, George of Rozhánovce Count of the County of Bratislava, Nicholas Ujlaky and Michael Országh. The chaos in the country was not ended. Each captain considered himself an absolute ruler.

In 1445, the Hungarian Parliament was faced with a difficult decision. By recognizing the hereditary claims of Ladislas it would confirm the legitimacy of John Jiskra. By electing Ladislas to the throne, Jiskra would become an intruder damaging the country, and the towns and the Habsburgs could not agree with this. The parliament expressed bewilderment and indecisiveness by inclining to King Ladislas, and on 6th June 1446, entrusting the administration of the country during his minority, to the Duke of Transylvania, John Hunyady, with the title of governor.

Hunyady did not need long to think about how to get rid of the Habsburgs and Jiskra, and place himself or his family on the Hungarian throne. However to free himself from the presence of Jiskra was not so easy. Jiskra had been given property by Queen Elizabeth, so that as a land owner he was an inhabitant of Hungary with the associated rights. John Hunyady, the richest magnate in the country, did not have enough strength to get rid of Jiskra. On 13th September 1446, in negotiations with the magnates and prelates at Buda, Jiskra could demand a complete guarantee of the rights of citizenship, with all the privileges, dignities and advantages, equal to the rights of a person born in Hungary.

Jiskra could not change the plans or the distrust of the insincere Hungarian oligarchy or scrupulous respect for Hungarian laws. The March Parliament of 1447, at which the functions of the chief captains were abolished, changed nothing. Hunyady was annoyed that Jiskra did not stop using the title of supreme captain of King Ladislas, which was granted to Jiskra at the beginning of 1444, on the authority of the Emperor Frederick III. The ravaging of the Komorowski brothers from a Polish aristocratic family and Pongrác of Sv. Mikuláš, instigated by John Hunyady, also failed to have an impact on Jiskra. The second marriage of John Jiskra after he was widowed in 1447, with the daughter of John Hunyady in 1449, was not a success. Mutual distrust prevented Jiskra participating in the great expedition against Sultan Murad II, which ended with a great defeat on 18th October 1448 on Kosovo Polje in Serbia, between Priština and Lab.

The ravaging of Spiš was unhappily endured by the Poles, to whom Sigismund of Luxemburg had leased thirteen towns on 18th November 1412. The King of Poland demanded a pacification of the situation. Jiskra sought peace with the ravagers, and a meeting with the Bishop of Cracow. The Polish nobility placed its hope in Jiskra. The meeting with the Bishop of Cracow did not occur, because one of the Komorowski brothers went over to Jiskra in the first half of 1449, and on 4th May a treaty of permanent peace with the most powerful feudal lords and towns was concluded. In June 1449, the Parliament in Pest concerned itself with Jiskra's position in Slovakia.

A demand for intervention against the Czechs accused of spreading Hussite ideas, especially in the parishes of Spiš and Šariš, was sent to Pope Nicholas V. Jiskra, who in the Treaty of Kremnica, had particularly emphasized true Christian, permanent peace, his faith and honour, could not remain inactive. Hunyady was forced to pretend a more permanent settlement with Jiskra, and to strengthen it with the offer of a marriage between Jiskra and his sister.

Before the summer of 1450, Jiskra occupied the Premonstratensian monastery at Šahy, from where he demanded manpower, military material and weapons from the towns. Discontent nurtured by irregular pay grew among Jiskra's mercenaries. Jiskra stopped trusting the towns, to which the appeals of Hunyady were directed. Fearing the loss of the towns and the weakening of military garrisons he withdrew to northern Slovakia. In the middle of August 1451, John Hunyady did not attack

Jiskra, who was not accompanied by a large army, but began to besiege the fortified Cistercian or Benedictine monastery of St. Stephen, which was defended by a garrison of 500 of Jiskra's men. Breaking the defences of this smaller fortress would damage the defence system of Jiskra's domains, since the Lučenec Basin opened the way to the Central Slovak mining towns and the castle of Zvolen, Jiskra's frequent seat. From Zvolen, which lay roughly in the centre of Jiskra's lordship, the territory of Slovakia which he administered could most easily be controlled. Meanwhile, Jiskra had succeeded in settling matters in northern Slovakia, and assembling about 4,000 battle hardened and well armed cavalry and infantry men, with whom he rapidly proceeded to Lučenec, where he appeared on 6th September 1451. At Lučenec, Jiskra crushed the 10 to 12 thousand man army of the governor, but the truth is that the most perfectly trained and tested of Hunyady's units remained in the south of the country. At the decisive turning point of many years of struggle, Jiskra made an irreparable mistake. He did not pursue the fleeing Hungarian army, and he did not capture John Hunyady. Hunyady's army stopped, regrouped and summoned elite mercenaries from the south.

Jiskra's enclave and army brought the towns extreme economic exhaustion. The continual fighting did not bring the towns prosperity or any other advantages. At the same time, they were Jiskra's most important material and political support, which however weakened him further. The situation helped Hunyady, who commenced a powerful effort for the definitive destruction of Jiskra's power. The inundation by Hunyady's armies destroyed the best of Jiskra's hetmen, who included Martin Valgatha. The excessively vigorous ambitions of the governor John Hunyady could not be acceptable to various people, and so these opponents of the governor temporarily adopted a more moderate position towards Jiskra. This was already shown in February 1452, when a conference to which Jiskra was not invited began in Bratislava and continued in Vienna. At the same time, the release of the young Ladislas Posthumus from the guardianship of Frederick III, so that he could take care of the government of Hungary, was again discussed.

When Košice, Bardejov and Levoča, Jiskra's supporting pillar in Spiš, fell away from Jiskra, the administrator of the Kingdom of Bohemia, George of Poděbrady attempted to concern himself with their return. George took an unusual initiative in the negotiations about the succession of Ladislas Posthumus in Bohemia and achieved greater success than the powerful Ulric of Rožmberk, who considered George as a self-appointed ruler in the Czech lands. The immaturity of Ladislas could have enabled George to rule in his place for only a few years. There could have been a reconciliation of the Callixtine administrator with the Catholics, who would have a counterweight against George in a ruler of the same confession.

In Vienna, Frederick III, then already Holy Roman Emperor, could not resist the pressure of Ulrich of Zilly, and on 4th September 1452 he handed over Ladislas Posthumus, but not the Hungarian crown. Ladislas Posthumus or Ladislas V was recognized as sovereign in Hungary without a new coronation, since he had already

been crowned at a younger age. John Hunyady, who henceforth held all the royal castles and incomes, gave up the governorship at the beginning of January in Vienna, and now held the title of captain of the kingdom. He was granted property in Transylvania, and on 1st February 1453 Ladislas Posthumus gave Hunyady the title Count of Bistrița. Hunyady could participate in the newly established, large and secret royal chancellery. The hatred of Hunyady and his supporters, temporarily associated with the supporters of Ulrich of Zilly was able to influence the young king, and the issuing of a decree on 29th January 1453 by the Parliament in Bratislava. The decree suppressed all the donations granted by the Queen Mother, Elizabeth. By the suppression of the grants of Queen Elizabeth, Jiskra was deprived of the dignity of chief captain, his privileges and properties in Hungary. After more than a decade of defending the hereditary rights of Ladislas Posthumus, intrigues were able to represent Jiskra to the young king as a person who wanted to usurp power, since he did not bring about the king's release from the hands of Frederick III. However Jiskra could not proceed against the Emperor, indeed it was precisely from the Emperor that Jiskra had received consent and authorization to defend Ladislas Posthumus after the death of Queen Elizabeth.

The formulation of the legal articles exempted Jiskra's opponents and consequently the wording of the enacted proposal was most aimed at him, although on a general level. A legal contradiction remained concerning Jiskra's hereditary properties, which Jiskra did not receive from the queen, but which John Hunyady had to guarantee according to the treaties concluded with Jiskra in the previous years. It was possible to doubt the validity of these treaties, although the same Parliament approved the decisions of Hunyady, which he took while acting as the legal representative of the kingdom. Jiskra, who was deprived of all rights, left the country and found shelter with Frederick III. Jiskra was present at the coronation of Ladislas Posthumus as King of Bohemia on 28th October 1453 in Prague. He was very soon summoned by King Ladislas, back to Hungary, where he could not suppress the "brátríci" (later Hussite soldiers), to whom a large number of Jiskra's troops had gone over after his forced departure.

The King returned to Jiskra, the administration of the Spiš, Šariš and the mining towns, only so that Jiskra would stop the rise of the "brátrík" groups. The beginnings of such groups are most frequently placed in the fourth decade of the 15th century, when not only in Slovakia, but also in Poland and Austria, the situation arose after the defeat of the Hussite armies at Lipany in 1434, that many soldiers, accustomed to an exclusively military way of life, could not find employment in mercenary armies. They could not live in a different way, and so they formed field camps for their own protection, and began to call themselves "brátríci". They evoked concern in the highest circles of Central Europe, where fear was again growing of Ottoman aggression, after the fall of Constantinople, the last bastion of resistance and power of the Byzantine Emperors, on 29th May 1453 when it was captured and occupied by the armies of Sultan Mehmed II, son of Murad II.

In July 1453, Pope Nicholas V learnt from Piccolomini, that according to him, the mass flow of simple people to the “bratríci” was conditioned by high pay. According to Piccolomini, every horseman received a ducat a week, an infantry man half. When dividing loot, the commanders did not receive more than ordinary soldiers. Anyone who came on the last day received the same share as someone who served for the whole month. Jiskra’s past position already was not recovered, but marriage with Maria, daughter of the Serb Prince George Branković and widow of Murad II, was considered. After Jiskra’s return, the “bratrík” groups mostly made up of his former soldiers, went over to him, but were successful only against smaller and more demoralized groups of “bratríci”. The situation in which Jiskra found himself and with which he agreed, could not be unmarked by the recent painful disappointment, which he had experienced. He must have known that he was more or less only used, but he clearly had no other starting point and he did not seek one. Apart from this, the struggle for supreme power in the country was not interrupted after the election of Ladislas Posthumus. In the uncertain situation, the “bratríci” were able to reach their zenith in 1458, when their number reached 20, 000 men, and they had about 36 field camps and castles, of which only an insignificant proportion lay outside the territory of Slovakia. They rarely built new castles, but mostly reconstructed fortified places including monasteries. At most they built strongholds such as on the Zadná Hura Hill at Chmelov.

Jiskra wanted to make agreements with people he formerly, or not so long ago commanded. However the agreements did not last very long. At first he declared the most feared “bratrík” commander, Axamit, to be an enemy of the country, a ravisher, but he preferred to agree with him. Axamit came from Liděrovice near Tábor in south Bohemia, and belonged to a minor noble family. While Jiskra was strengthening his power in central and eastern Slovakia, John Hunyady died of plague at Zemun, after his greatest victory over the huge army of Sultan Mehmed II. The older son of John Hunyady, Ladislas, who aspired to his father’s position, killed Ulrich of Zilly after a brief quarrel before an evening banquet in Buda Castle on 14th March 1457. In the presence of Jiskra, Ladislas was charged with treason to the king, and imprisoned together with his younger brother Matthias, Bishop John Vitéz of Oradea and others. After two days he was beheaded.

King Ladislas Posthumus confiscated the properties of Ladislas Hunyady, and from gratitude granted them to his supporters. It is not known how deeply, Jiskra was involved in matters: perhaps not very, but he carried out the king’s wishes. In contrast to others, he allegedly did not accept the offered reward. The insulted Hunyady family did not remain inactive. The grieving mother of Ladislav Hunyady, Elizabeth Szilágyi, with her brother in law, Michael Szilágyi started the struggle. Jiskra, summoned by King Ladislas to Buda, where he was to guard Matthias Hunyady, was given the rank of chief captain, as was Nicholas Ujlaky. Jiskra did not achieve success in his northern command, and neither did Nicholas Ujlaky in the south. Young King Ladislas, with only one parent and then a complete orphan,

who was actually misused for the aims of others, constantly influenced from all sides, once more could not follow a more balanced policy towards Jiskra. Then, when Elizabeth Szilágyi was able to strengthen her army from the ranks of the “brátríci” of Spiš and Šariš, King Ladislas fled from Buda to Vienna, with the imprisoned Matthias Hunyady.

The unexpected death of the seventeen years old King Ladislas on 23rd November 1457 in Prague, where he was to marry Magdalen, daughter of the King of France, brought about a new situation. The basis of Jiskra’s activity in Slovakia lost its justification. Jiskra again found support in George of Poděbrady, with whom Ladislas Posthumus had left Matthias Hunyady in internment. George aiming at the vacant Czech throne, soon engaged his daughter Catherine to the possible claimant to the throne of Hungary. Matthias made peace with Jiskra. King Casimir IV of Poland and the Emperor Frederick III also declared their interest in the Hungarian throne. Some of the Hungarian magnates, including Ladislas of Gorjani and Nicholas Ujlaky also aimed at it. Michael Szilágyi with an army of 15,000 men and loyal middle nobility, who spent hours waiting on the frozen Danube, vigorously resolved all this.

At first Jiskra chose a waiting position. He did not arrive on the Moravian-Hungarian border on 9th February 1458, where the marriage of Matthias with the daughter of George of Poděbrady was confirmed. On the 14th February, Matthias went to Buda, where he was enthroned as King of Hungary in the church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (the Matthias Church), but without the Hungarian crown, which Frederick III still had. Jiskra knew that while he had nothing secured by agreement, he could not get very involved. Jiskra still controlled part of central and eastern Slovakia, but he could not pay his mercenaries. Probably as a result of Frederick III considering the election of Matthias invalid, Jiskra went to Poland in March 1458. The Cracow canon and historian of this period, John Długosz, wrote in his work “History of Poland” that Jiskra offered the Hungarian crown to the King of Poland, who was married to Elizabeth, sister of Ladislas Posthumus. The Polish King did not trust the Hungarians, who he blamed for poisoning Ladislas Posthumus, and he rejected Jiskra. Jiskra went to fight for the Teutonic Knights. Jiskra’s efforts in Poland damaged the long term friendly inclination of George of Poděbrady towards him. Jiskra’s offer to the King of Poland brought the danger that the application of hereditary rights, through the relationship with the Habsburgs, could also relate to Bohemia. Matthias was clear about why Jiskra had gone to Poland, and immediately appointed Sebastian of Rozhanovce instead of Jiskra, as chief captain in Upper Hungary, that is Slovakia, and entrusted him with the struggle against the “brátríci” and other armed groups.

The attack on the “brátríci” – in the battle near Blatný Potok on 21st May 1458, Axamit fell with about 600 “brátríci”, stopped for a conspiracy against Matthias. He also uncompromisingly took action against his own grandfather. The surprised conspirators, who feared the king’s revenge, elected Frederick III King of Hungary

on 17th February 1459. Frederick accepted his election and could be crowned with the true Hungarian crown in the presence of Hungarian magnates. Confusion broke out in Hungary. For Matthias the liberation started, when the King of Poland abandoned his prepared invasion of Hungary.

At the beginning of 1460, when he returned from Poland, Jiskra, unsuccessfully endeavoured to achieve a reconciliation with King Matthias Corvinus (so-called according to the raven, Latin *corvus*, on his shield). Therefore, Jiskra wanted to gain more decisive support from Frederick III, so on 10th March 1461 he declared Frederick the only true King of Hungary. Concerning the “bratríci”, Jiskra was respected by some “bratrík” hetmen and groups, but many of them acted independently. Exhaustion of the state treasury weakened the effectiveness of the attacks of Matthias Corvinus against Jiskra. Therefore, Matthias Corvinus could only welcome the mission of George of Poděbrady (elected King of Bohemia 2nd March 1458, crowned 7th May), which aimed to mediate a more adequate reconciliation between Matthias Corvinus and Jiskra.

The negotiations at Trenčín, between representatives of George of Poděbrady and Matthias on 25th January 1462, brought Jiskra a great disappointment. The King of Bohemia had confidence in the marriage of his daughter Catherine to Corvinus, and Jiskra was to be paid a certain amount of money. In addition, there was no place for him and his soldiers in the country. Jiskra did not give up. Bitter battles started in Spiš and Šariš, as Jiskra's men and the “bratríci” fought for their survival, bringing reinforcements from Poland. The most extensive chronicle of 15th century Hungary, compiled in the second half of the 1470s and the 1480s by John, from a Turiec family, records that the Czechs, Poles and Slovaks committed violence in Upper Hungary.

In March 1462, the core of Jiskra's army was grouped in Liptov, Turiec and Zvolen. Jiskra prepared a new invasion of Spiš, where his supporters now held little, apart from Kežmarok and some settlements in the Gelnica valley. The invasion of Spiš did not bring the necessary effect. The opinion of the inhabitants was not very favourable to Jiskra or to the “bratríci”. The people of Levoča captured sixty “bratríci” and hung them without mercy. The remaining territory in Spiš fell into the hands of King Matthias by exchange after a surprising change in the position of Frederick III, brought about by the persistent diplomacy of King Matthias' loyal Bishop of Oradea, John Vitéz, and the Papal Legate, Hieronymus Landus. The attacks of the Austrian Archduke Albrecht VI on Frederick must have been effective since Frederick called for the help of Jiskra. Finally after a long time, on 3rd April 1462, Frederick III offered to return the Hungarian crown for 80,000 ducats and the town of Sopron. He began to recognize Matthias Corvinus as King of Hungary, but he did not forget Jiskra. He had agreed long before to include Jiskra in his own reconciliation with Matthias.

At the end of April and beginning of May 1462, John Jiskra handed over all the castles he had under his control. After his return from Frederick III in Austria, Jiskra

vainly attempted to rally his military forces, which had suffered a series of defeats in his absence. The court historian and Italian humanist, Antonio Bonfini, wrote in his work “On the History of Hungary” that Jiskra sent Matthias a letter, in which he wrote that from the beginning he had fought against the Hungarians because of loyalty to the heir to the throne. He widened his power in the country because the King of Poland invaded it, and so he also soon joined with bands of plunderers. He had to overlook much, so that they would obey him. This was the only way he could defeat the Poles, Matthias’ father who was also betrayed by his own supporters, and keep the territory he had conquered. Since King Ladislas was already dead, and God had raised Matthias from the dungeon to the King’s throne, he would not be reasonable or human not to give up his lands.

Whether Jiskra wrote the letter or not, it is certain that Matthias accepted Jiskra into his service. He granted Jiskra the castle of Solymos in the County of Arad and the castle of Lippa in the County of Timișoara, and 25,000 ducats. Jiskra was raised to the rank of baron, and received Judith, daughter of the palatine, Országh, as his wife. After this the sources about Jiskra are very limited. The letters of Corvinus and John Vitéz from Zredna, before 16th February 1465 elected by the Chapter of Esztergom to the vacant archbishopric of Esztergom, frequently mention the pledge and wish of John Jiskra to fight the Turks. Jiskra’s properties were in the south of the country, so he had to stay there most of the time. He may have passed through Slovakia in 1465, when the king went to Banská Bystrica via Zvolen. In December 1467, he fought in the king’s army against Stephen III the Great Voivode of Moldavia. In January 1467, Jiskra negotiated with Sultan Mehmed II of Turkey about a three year peace. In May, he reported to Matthias at Třebíčov in Moravia about his visit to the sultan. On 22nd October 1468, before the chapter in Arad, Jiskra advanced property to the former hetman from Šariš, Matthias Pan of Kněžice, his wife Barbara and daughter Catherine. A royal document from 6th February 1471, in which Jiskra was mentioned as deceased, confirmed the holding of the property of Borzlik with 30 villages for 1,000 ducats by Matthias of Kněžice.

It is well known that in Jiskra’s time, no war was fought in Central or Eastern Europe, without the participation of Czech soldiers in larger or smaller numbers. Some of them had the opportunity to acquire property and high titles abroad. Many of them attempted to gain independent lordships. The names and deeds of these condotieri brought them honour and shame, evoking fear and hatred in countries other than that from which they came.

The territory controlled by Jiskra in Slovakia, in the time of his greatest success extending from the Moravia to Košice, and in the County of Zemplín to Tokay, can be specified in more detail. Jiskra held the centre of the County of Nitra, the central and northern parts of Tekov, the whole Counties of Zvolen and Gemer, the northern part of Novohrad, the centre of the County of Borsod, the Košice area with Abov and Turňa, Šariš and part of Zemplín. In the east its boundary was the basin of the Laborec as far as Humenné, from there it went below the Slanské Vrchy to Košice

and to Moldava nad Bodvou. Below the Slovak Karst it continued to Putnok in the County of Borsod, and from there along the rivers Slaná and Rimava to Jesenské and Lučenec. Then the boundary went to Šahy, Levice, Starý Tekov, Nitra, and the upper course of the river Nitra up to Topoľčany. It continued below Vtáčnik to Sv. Kríž (Žiar) nad Hronom, beneath High Fatra Mts and under the protection of the Low Tatras to Kráľova Hôla. Below Spišská Nová Ves, the boundary continued along the Hornád to Branisko and Levoča. From the Levoča area, the boundary went on to Kežmarok, and along the River Poprad, back to the starting point on the Laborec. However Jiskra did not control the whole of this territory. He did not control the Abbey of Svatý Beňadik and monasteries in general, but on the other hand his influence also extended beyond the boundaries of this territory.

The places of issue of the documents from Jiskra's office show that Jiskra's most frequent places of residence were Košice, where he probably had a luxury home, and the castles of Šariš and Zvolen. Jiskra's office travelling with him from place to place was well developed and mainly concerned with administrative and economic matters. The documents and charters were mostly written on paper and closed with a seal. The surviving documents are most frequently in German, followed by Latin and Czech. They record that Jiskra received a new royal tax of 900 ducats, paid by Košice. Prešov and the County of Šariš paid the treasury tax. In Slovakia, apart from the taxes from the Košice and Kremnica mints, Jiskra received the thirtieths from Bardejov, Prešov and apparently also Bratislava and Levoča, and the toll collected from Drieňovo. These relatively high receipts were used by Jiskra to maintain his castles and towns, pay mercenaries, staff and others down to the lowest servants.

Władysław the Jagiellonian struck coins in his own name and for himself. Jiskra struck them in the name of Ladislas Posthumus. The first coin of Ladislas Posthumus is a "denár" (penny) with a representation of the cross with two arms on the obverse. It is the ancient symbol of Slovakia, but in the 15th century it was also used in Lithuania and Poland by the Jagiellonians. Therefore, one of the attributes of sovereignty: the issuing of coins, also showed Jiskra's position in the country and his approach to carrying out his obligations. John Hunyady struck coins with his own name.

The general developmental trend in medieval Europe, where around the middle of the 15th century, monarchies began to arise, headed not by members of the numerous European dynasties, but by members of aristocratic families of each country, had the greatest impact on the destiny of John Jiskra of Brandýs. It happened when the male line of a ruling dynasty died out, and the last king did not leave an unmarried sister, when there was a strong activation especially of the lower nobility with a strong national feeling, and when a magnate with a leading position in terms of politics and property and with the support especially of the lesser nobility, could become a candidate for the throne. After the Swedish marshal, Karl Knutsson, Matthias son of John Hunyady became this type of European monarch. Jiskra from

his youth committed to military service as a mercenary, eventually gained the rank of a Hungarian magnate, but he achieved his most influential position in Slovakia and in the Kingdom of Hungary, in the period up to the recognition of Ladislas Posthumus as King of Hungary. After the death of the young king, he only defended his own ambitions and rights. The fact that the core of his army was formed by former Hussite soldiers may have evoked distrust in some parts of Hungarian society, but this does not appear to have been justified.

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