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The Indispensable Figures of Ottoman–Hungarian Frontier Life: Pribéks
(An Analysis of a Military-Historical Term Through the Tradition of the Zrínyi Family)

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Abstract: *The focal point of this research article is the term pribék, a loanword in Hungarian from Slavic languages, to which various pejorative meanings have been attributed throughout history. The use of the term to denote a specific group is closely linked to the Ottoman advance in the Balkans, Ottoman domination in Hungary, and the dynamics of frontier life that emerged thereafter. Although pribéks were considered unreliable by both the Habsburg-Hungarian alliance and the Ottomans, the guidance and intelligence services they provided made them indispensable elements of frontier life, securing their place in history. The Zrínyis, a noble family of Croatian origin, rose to prominence in the frontier defense system established against the Ottomans due to the location of their estates and produced figures who left a lasting mark on Hungarian history. The family's history offers significant data on frontier life. In the final section of this study, which aims to introduce the term pribék and demonstrate the activities of pribéks in frontier life through the tradition of the Zrínyi family, the class character of the term will be discussed. This research article, based on etymological data and drawing on military historiography, can be defined as a social history analysis that centers not on a state-centric approach, but on a group belonging to the lower class.*

Keywords: *Pribéks, Zrínyis, military history, Ottoman-Hungarian borders, social history*

Osmanlı-Macar Sınır Hayatının Olmazsa Olmazları: Pribékler
(Zrínyi Aile Geleneği Üzerinden Askerî Tarihe İlişkin Bir Terim Analizi)

Öz: *Bu araştırma makalesinin odak noktasında Macarcaya Slav dillerinden geçen ve tarihin akışı içinde farklı pejoratif anlamlar atfedilen pribék terimi bulunmaktadır. Terimin belirli bir zümreyi işaret etmek için kullanılışı; Balkanlardaki Osmanlı ilerleyişi, Macaristan'daki Osmanlı egemenliği ve sonrasında şekillenen sınır hayatı ile yakından ilişkilidir. Pribekler gerek Habsburg-Macar ittifakı ve gerekse Osmanlılar nazarında güvenilmez olarak addedilmiş olsalar da sundukları rehberlik ve istihbarat hizmetleri hasebiyle sınır hayatının vazgeçilmez unsurları olarak tarih sahnesindeki yerlerini*

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almışlardır. Hırvat kökenli Zrínyiler, mülklerinin konumu hasebiyle Osmanlılara karşı tesis edilen sınır savunma sisteminde öne çıkmış ve Macar tarihine damga vurmuş şahsiyetler yetiştirmiş soylu bir ailedir. Bu ailenin tarihi sınır yaşamı hakkında önemli veriler sunar. Pribek terimini tanıtmak ve pribeklerin sınır hayatındaki etkinliklerini Zrínyi aile geleneği üzerinden göstermek üzere hazırlanan bu çalışmanın son bölümünde terimin sınıfsallığı tartışılacaktır. Etimolojik verilerden yola çıkılarak ve askerî tarih birikiminden yararlanılarak hazırlanan bu araştırma makalesi, devlet merkezli bir yaklaşımdan ziyade alt sınıfa mensup bir zümreyi merkeze alan bir sosyal tarih analizi olarak tanımlanabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Pribékler, Zrínyiler, askerî tarih, Osmanlı-Macar sınırları, sosyal tarih*

Introduction

The focal point of this study is the term "pribék," which has maintained its presence in Hungarian as a loanword, along with the phenomenon it denotes. The emergence of this term, which carries pejorative connotations, is closely tied to military history and the dynamics of daily life in the frontier zones. My reason for foregrounding the Zrínyi family in analyzing this process lies in the fact that a significant portion of their estates was located along frontier zones, and many members of the family fell in battles against the Ottoman Empire. Another important consideration is the family's Croatian origin; as will be seen below, the term "pribék" entered Hungarian from Slavic languages. For these reasons, following the introductory section, I will first present an overview of the Zrínyi family. In the subsequent section, I will outline the political conditions that took shape in Ottoman-ruled Hungary and the dynamics of frontier life, so that the context in which the term came into use can be better understood. After explaining the pribék phenomenon and giving examples of pribék activities, I will conclude the article by demonstrating, through examples, that the use of the term rested on a class-based approach. By "class-based approach," I do not mean the class distinctions that arose in modernity. Rather, I refer to a social structure in which nobles and landowners stood on one side, and peasants who at times also served as soldiers on the other. I do not, however, claim that this social structure had rigid, impassable boundaries resembling a caste system. After the long wars, there were indeed individuals from the peasant population who obtained noble status by virtue of the military service they performed, but when the overall population is taken into account, their number cannot be said to have been very large. Moreover, military service alone was not sufficient to attain noble rank; one had to demonstrate outstanding military success as a soldier, and this was not something that everyone was capable of achieving. Although movement between the strata was possible to some extent, a clear distinction between upper and lower classes nonetheless existed. It is this distinction that should be understood when I refer to a "class-based approach."

In this article, I have opted to follow Hungarian orthographic conventions in the writing of personal names and titles of works. Accordingly, when writing Hungarian personal names, I list surnames before given names. For titles of works that do not contain proper nouns, only the initial word is capitalized. I adopted this approach because I consider it a helpful means of facilitating access to Hungarian sources. The fact that there were seven men named Miklós in the Zrínyi family has made it unavoidable for me to frequently use expressions like Zrínyi Miklós IV or Zrínyi Miklós VII. I ask for the reader's indulgence for this situation, which undoubtedly

makes the article more difficult to read. I also need to provide an explanation for my use of the terms Ottoman and Turk interchangeably throughout the article. The 16th and 17th-century Hungarian sources referred to the Ottomans as Turks. Therefore, I have chosen to use the term Turk in my quotations from these Hungarian sources, while preferring the term Ottoman in my own lines and commentary.

The Zrínyi Family

The Zrínyi family was of Croatian origin and, through its long-standing military activities, attained a distinguished position both within the Kingdom of Hungary and, in the eyes of Habsburg Monarchy. [1] Pálffy Géza characterizes the Zrínyis as "a family belonging to the Croatian–Hungarian nobility that secured a place within the supranational aristocracy of the Habsburg Monarchy and maintained cross-border connections" (Pálffy, 2007: 39). Owing to the geographic location of their estates, the family assumed a prominent role in the frontier defense system from the earliest phases of Ottoman expansion in the region. Within the context of Hungarian history, two members of the family stand out: Zrínyi Miklós IV (1508–1566) and Zrínyi Miklós VII (1620–1664). The former served as the commander of the fortress during the 1566 siege of Sigetvar (Szigetvár). The latter, his great-grandson, authored the epic poem *Szigeti veszedelem*, composed of the 1566 quatrains, which foregrounded the heroic death of his great-grandfather, the defender of Sigetvar. [2] Through this work, Zrínyi not only produced one of the most significant epic compositions in Hungarian literature but also ensured the enduring commemoration of his great-grandfather's name. So much so that Horváth-Stancsics Márk, the fortress commander who successfully repelled the Ottoman siege of June 1556, is not as famous in today's Hungary as Zrínyi Miklós IV, who lost the fortress in 1566. Commander Zrínyi is remembered in Hungarian history and literature as *the Hero of Sigetvar (szigetvári hős)*. His descendant, regarded as one of the most prominent figures of seventeenth-century Hungarian literature, is frequently referred to as both the *Poet (költő)* and the *Commander-in-Chief (hadvezér)*. Both members of the family were appointed to the office of *Bán of Croatia* by the Habsburg Emperor. [3] In addition to composing the aforementioned epic, the poet Zrínyi also produced a substantial corpus of didactic works on the art of war and politics.

[1] Zrínyi Miklós IV, who is referred to in the Croatian tradition as Nikola Šubić Zrinski, is likewise regarded as a national hero among Croats. *Szigeti veszedelem*, authored by his grandson Zrínyi Miklós VII, was translated into Croatian by Miklós's brother, Zrínyi Péter, and was published nine years after the original under the title *Adrianszkoga mora Syrena* (Blažević & Coha, 2007, pp. 138–139).

[2] The number of quatrains in the epic alludes to the year 1566, when the siege took place. The epic concludes with two five-line stanzas.

[3] The Bán, a member of the Hungarian Royal Council, served as the royal-appointed governor of the Kingdoms of Croatia and Dalmatia, as well as of the region referred to as Slavonia (Horvát–Szlavónország bánja). The region known as Slavonia, which is also designated as Tótország or Szlavónország in Hungarian sources, should not be confused with present-day Slovenia. Slavonia encompassed much of the territory between the Drava and Sava rivers, as well as a portion of the lands south of the Sava (corresponding today to the northern part of Croatia and a small area within the borders of modern Bosnia and Herzegovina). Together with Croatia and Dalmatia, the region was placed under the authority of a single Bán (Pálffy, 2021, p. 241 and 245).

> Fate showed me its bitter face; while taking from me on one side, it granted on the other. It aided me in my struggle against the Turks, yet it took my beloved daughter, and I expect the same end for my son, for he too is seriously ill. If God has deprived me of my children in order to compensate me with a victory that will last forever, I will not grieve, for I will be freer and able to devote myself wholly to the service of God and the fatherland (Kőszeghy, 1997: 103-104).

The passage above appears in a letter written by Zrínyi Miklós VII to Rucsics János on 24 August 1658. At the time of writing, he had just lost his daughter, Mária Terézia. His son, Izsák, meanwhile, was in critical condition. As he himself notes in the letter, he would, in the days that followed, lose his son as well. Zrínyi continues his letter as follows: "I am sending you a small gift; a Turk from Kanisza (Kanije) whom we have only just captured. It is not a great gift, but you may make use of him in household tasks" (Kőszeghy, 1997: 104). The recollections and observations of the Dutch traveler Jakob Tollius regarding Csáktornya, which was the center of the Zrínyi family's estates, parallel the mental outlook that emerges in Zrínyi's lines above. Tollius notes that the halls of the manor in which he was hosted contained numerous bloodstained banners seized from the Turks. He adds that the same halls displayed many paintings depicting Zrínyi's courage. One such painting portrayed the moment in which Zrínyi beheaded a Turk approaching him from behind. Zrínyi's words to Tollius as he praised his horse are also striking. According to Zrínyi, "his aging horse could detect the scent of Turks from a quarter of a mile away, and, by neighing and striking its hooves upon the ground, signaled this to him. He won victories against the Turks thanks to this horse" (Tóth, 1986: 77). In his epic *Szigeti veszedelem*, he generally depicted the Ottoman Turks in negative terms too. [4] In the case of Zrínyi, we encounter a mental outlook in which he could accept the death of his own children if destiny granted him victory over the Turks, send a Turkish captive to a friend as a gift, and even compose the act of praising his horse within the context of his struggle against the Turks. How had such a mental outlook been formed?

The poet Zrínyi was born into a family that had devoted itself to the struggle against the Ottomans. Accordingly, in order to understand how the mental outlook reflected in his corpus took shape, it is useful to look into the history of his family. The earliest known historical document in which the term Zrínyi appears as a family name dates to 1362. Historical evidence indicates that Zrin, originally the name of a fortress, gradually evolved into a family name, and that the family's origins can be traced to the Brebiri lineage. Zrin Castle, located within the borders of present-day Croatia, was granted in 1347 by King Lajos I to Brebiri György IV. The descendants

[4] For the Turkish translation of the epic, see: Altaylı, Alpertunga, (2010). Miklós Zrínyi'nin Szigeti Veszedelem (Siget Tehlikesi) Adlı Eserinin Değerlendirilmesi, Ankara Ü. SBE BDE Hungaroloji Anabilim Dalı, Yayımlanmamış Doktora Tezi. For the English translation of the epic, see: Miklós Zrínyi, The Siege of Sziget, (2011) (Translated by László Kőrössy, With an introduction by George Gömöri), The Catholic University of America Press Washington, D. C. For a functional-contextual analysis of the epic, also see: Ürkmez, Ertan (2024), "Kanije ile Viyana Arasında Bir Kılıç ve Kalem Ustası: VII. Zrínyi Miklós ve Eserlerindeki Türk Tasavvurları", Türk-Macar İlişkileri (Edit. Hasan Güzel & Hasan Hayırsever), Sayfa: 177-211, Ankara, Erkmen Yayımcılık.

who settled there came, over time, to be known as the Zrínyis. According to the document dated 31 August 1362, the first individual to use Zrínyi as a family name was Pál, the son of György. One of Pál's four sons, Péter I (1390-1452), undertook leadership of the family. As a token of his loyalty to King Zsigmond, whom he served as a court knight, he sent him a Turkish captive he had captured along the frontier (Varga, 2016: 21–23, 40–41). It is understood that the poet Zrínyi's gesture of sending a Turkish captive as a gift to a friend rested upon a tradition at least two centuries old. Péter II, successor to Péter I, fell in battle alongside his son Pál III during the 1493 Krbava (korbávmezei) battle against the Ottomans. Pál's brother, Miklós III, lost his son Zrínyi Mihály in the Battle of Mohács, which took place in 1526 (Varga, 2016: 41–44, 64–65, 98). Another son of Miklós III, Zrínyi Miklós IV, took part in the 1529 and 1542 sieges of Vienna and Pest, serving as defender in the former and besieger in the latter. He is known to have engaged in a duel with Mehmed Pasha, the Bey of Bosnia, and to have challenged Kasım Pasha who was Beylerbeyi of Buda to a duel as well. Appointed Bán of Croatia and Slovenia in 1542, Zrínyi also went to Sigetvar to help during the 1556 siege. Though his horse was struck amid the day-long fighting, he himself survived unharmed. When Zrínyi Miklós IV died defending Szigetvár during the siege of 1566, he had already established himself as an experienced soldier who had taken part in virtually every major military engagement conducted against the Ottoman forces (Varga, 2016: 100–101, 134–135, 152).

Zrínyi Miklós VII descended from a family that had lost four of its members in battles against Ottoman forces, and he was born into a world in which clashes with Ottoman frontier units were unceasing. The family tradition profoundly shaped his mental outlook. It should also be noted that the poet's own son, Zrínyi Ádám, was killed while fighting against the Ottoman army in the Battle of Szalánkemén in 1691 (Hausner, 2007: 177–178).

Hungary After the Ottoman Advance and the Dynamics of Frontier Life

The peasant uprising led by Dózsa György in 1514 had profoundly shaken the Kingdom of Hungary. Considering the course of the revolt and the political developments that unfolded after 1520, it is no exaggeration to state that this uprising constituted a major milestone in Hungary's fate. Renowned for his bravery on the frontier and his successes in duels, Dózsa György had been appointed commander of a crusading army organized against the Ottomans. A significant portion of this force consisted of peasants. When the promises made to him were not fulfilled, the planned crusade transformed into a peasant rebellion, and its direction shifted accordingly. Dózsa and the peasant army under his command attacked the landed nobility, plundering the estates and properties of aristocrats. The suppressed uprising ended with the gruesome execution of Dózsa György (Nemeskürty, 1975: 21-175). Although the rebellion had been quelled, the prospects awaiting Hungary were far from promising. Sultan Süleyman's capture of Belgrade in 1521, his victory at Mohács in 1526, and his establishment of a new province in Buda in 1541 created shockwaves not only in Hungary but throughout Europe. Following the unstoppable Ottoman advance, the country was divided into three parts: the territories under direct Ottoman rule, the Principality of Transylvania as an Ottoman vassal, and the lands controlled by the Habsburgs. When sectarian tensions were added to this fragmentation, chaos came to dominate the Hungarian political landscape. Another dynamic that affected

the country as negatively as the prevailing chaos emerged on a socio-psychological plane. Particularly after the victories won against the Ottomans during the eras of Hunyadi János and Hunyadi Mátyás, the titles bestowed upon Hungarians by the Christian world had generated a powerful sense of self-confidence. [5] This self-confidence, however, was shattered in the aftermath of Süleyman's victories (Fodor, 1997: 21-22). The shock of the Battle of Mohács gave way to disappointment and despair. By the mid-sixteenth century, a profound socio-psychological crisis gripped the entire country. The Ottoman Turks came increasingly to be viewed as divine punishment sent to discipline Christians who had failed in their duties.[6]

Although several peace treaties were concluded during the one-and-a-half centuries of Ottoman domination, these agreements and ceasefires appear to have remained merely on paper in the frontier zones. Hungarian historian Takáts Sándor, who described this situation as a *wolf's peace*, attempts to elucidate the process in his work *Rajzok a török világból*, a title that can be translated as "Sketches from the Turkish World", by quoting lines from a letter sent by the Budin Beylerbeyi to King Rudolf on 23 March 1578. Mustafa Pasha complains bitterly that the imperial troops stationed in the fortresses of Sárvár, Pápa, Veszprém, Palota, Győr, and Tata did not cease launching predatory raids. Even on the very day he wrote the letter, a raid had been carried out against Sámbék. Mustafa Paşa adds that the area around Gesztes had been plundered three times in a single day; that people could no longer graze their cattle and sheep around Buda; that they could not tend to their vineyards and orchards; and that they did not even dare to venture out to cut wood (Takáts, 1915a: 346). The lines appearing in Zrínyi Miklós VII's letter to King Ferdinánd III dated 14 April 1642 indicate that, nearly sixty-five years later, the situation remained much the same. The lands owned by Zrínyi, as well as the area under his military command, bordered Kanizsa, and he was in constant conflict with the Ottoman units stationed there. Not only on the lands held by Zrínyi and his Turkish counterparts, but across the entire frontier zone, retaliatory raids continued unabated, with both sides laying ambushes for one another to seize booty and captives. In the initial section of his letter, Zrínyi reports that although negotiations were underway, the Turks of Kanizsa had attacked the village of Krisóc, belonging to the district of Muraköz, they had beheaded a voivode, wounded three men, and carried off fifteen peasants as captives. In the same period, Turks raided the village of Marof near the Mura River, slit the throats of two people, and abducted ten others. They also assaulted a house on the banks of the Drava

[5] Respectively: "defensor Christianitatis - a kereszténység védője - defender of Christendom", "scutum atque murus - a keresztény hit pajzsa és védőfala/védőbástyája - shield and fortress of Christianity", "miles fidei Christiane - a keresztény hit katonája – soldier of the Christian Faith" "athleta Christi - a Krisztus bajnoka - champion of Christ."

[6] For interpretations that conceptualize Turkish/Ottoman rule within the framework of the Old and New Testaments, see: Ürkmez, Ertan (2024), "Kanije ile Viyana Arasında Bir Kılıç ve Kalem Ustası: VII. Zrínyi Miklós ve Eserlerindeki Türk Tasavvurları", Türk-Macar İlişkileri (Edit. Hasan Güzel & Hasan Hayırsever), Sayfa: 177-211, Ankara, Erkmen Yayımcılık. For more extensive discussion, see: Őze, Sándor (1991). Bűneiért bünteti Isten a magyar népet, A Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum; Drosztmér, Ágnes (2016). Images of Distance and Closeness: The Ottomans in Sixteenth- Century Hungarian Vernacular Poetry, Medieval Studies Department and the Doctoral School of History Central European University, Doctoral Dissertation, Budapest.

River and carried off a woman and her two sons. Immediately after the peace agreement, on the night of 4 April, they attacked another house in the village of Gibina, leaving one dead and one wounded among the inhabitants, while three men were taken away as captives (Kőszeghy, 1997: 16-17).

The lines in the letter he sent on 5 July 1648 to his older relative, Batthyány Ádám, stand in stark contrast to the complaint above and lay bare the lawlessness of frontier life. He requests that Batthyány, who held imperial advisory responsibilities for the territories beyond the Danube and for the frontier zone around Kanizsa, to order two or three villages located far from Kanizsa Fortress to disobey the Turks and cease paying taxes. Zrínyi notes that the Turks would be unable to tolerate this and would soon launch an attack, which would in turn provide an opportunity for him and his soldiers to strike back. He reiterates that the villages in question must be situated at a considerable distance; only then could both he and Batthyány, with the soldiers under their command, reach the area in time. Some might argue that such an action violated the laws of war and the terms of the peace treaty. But Zrínyi already had a response to such objections: if they refrained from acting, the enemy's revenues and power would only grow. "They wage war against us using our own property," he writes, and adds this question: "When they seized and plundered our lands, we were in a time of peace; why, then, should we not have the right to reclaim our own lands?" (Kőszeghy, 1997: 45-46). The raids conducted by frontier soldiers, in violation of existing agreements, were in most cases connected to unpaid wages or to the insufficiency of the salaries they did receive. In his letter to Giovanni Sagreda dated 30 April 1663, Zrínyi writes: "My soldiers have not received their pay for six years, so they asked my permission; I allowed them to go out on a raid so that they might plunder" (Kőszeghy, 1997: 135).

Another letter that Zrínyi sent to Batthyány Ádám on 9 August 1654 indicates yet another characteristic of frontier life: trade in captives. Zrínyi states that one of his servants, Horváth András, was being held captive in the fortress of Kanizsa; that he had sent a Turkish prisoner to the fortress in order to secure his servant's release; and that the Kanizsa Turks indeed freed his servant. Up to this point, nothing appears unusual. Yet what happened afterward greatly angered Zrínyi. The Kanizsa men, having allowed the Turk sent to the fortress to enter as the ransom price, demanded that Horváth András be returned and, in addition, requested 600 tallér. When Zrínyi refused to send Horváth András back, they first beat two other captives, Szilágyi and Horváth Miklós, and in the following days proceeded to beat fourteen more prisoners. Two of the beaten captives did not survive the harsh blows and died. Zrínyi requests that Batthyány Ádám carry out retaliation, that is, to have several of the Turkish prisoners in his hands beaten and then sent to the fortress of Kanizsa. Zrínyi guarantees that, should any of the Turkish captives die as a consequence of the beating, he would compensate for this loss. (Kőszeghy, 1997: 79-80). In another letter he sent to Rucsics János in 1658, he reports with satisfaction that his soldiers had seized three hundred cattle belonging to the Kanizsa Turks and had taken captive several prominent Turks, including İbrahim Aga, who had previously been exchanged for Bocskai when he was also held captive" (Kőszeghy, 1997: 109-111). The letters that Zrínyi sent to Emperor Ferdinánd III on 7 December 1653 and 9 January 1654 concern the peasants who had risen up against the Erdődy family. The warnings and

recommendations he voiced in these letters indicate yet another feature of frontier life. The rebellious peasants constituted an important source of soldiers for the imperial army. Zrínyi warned that if Count Erdődy Imre did not abandon his obstinacy, and if another count from the family did not assume leadership, there was a risk that the rebellious peasants would have defected to the Turkish side. If this were to occur, a new gateway through which the Turks could attack Hungarian lands would open, and the empire would be compelled to find at least 600 new soldiers (Kőszeghy, 1997: 61-66; Kovács et al. 2003: 620-626).

From the abovementioned letter of 30 April 1663, we also learn that Zrínyi's soldiers ambushed Catholic mercenaries who served the Turks (Kőszeghy, 1997: 134-136). These accounts portray a frontier world where loyalties were in constant flux and often unclear, with individuals and groups readily shifting allegiance according to their interests. In this chaotic environment, where ceasefires and peace treaties remained little more than words on paper, those described as pribék played a crucial role. They were both unreliable and indispensable.

The Term Pribék and the Pribéks

Hungarian etymological dictionaries, after listing the pejorative meanings attributed to the term pribék over the course of history - such as base, vile, treacherous, thief, robber, highwayman, good-for-nothing, slave trader, executioner, executioner's assistant, spendthrift, ghoul, wild, merciless, dog catcher (one who collected stray dogs), and a despicable person ready to do anything - [7] proceed to explain the word's origin, which is the central focus of this study. The word pribék, a loanword of Croatian and Serbian origin, derives from *prebjeg*, meaning "fugitive" or "one who goes over to the enemy side," and in Old Hungarian it was used in the sense of "a person who fled from the Turks or to the Turks" (Benkő, 1976: 284; Bakos, 1989: 681; Zaicz, 2021: 698).

Takáts Sándor devoted a special section to the phenomenon of pribék in his voluminous work titled *Rajzok a török világból*. He also addressed pribéks in the chapters of his book dealing with guides and spies. Although he adopts a reductionist approach by placing all espionage activities and converts (mühtedis) within the scope of the phenomenon of pribék, his attempt to employ empathy in order to understand the people of the period, and the detailed information he provides on the conditions of the period, offer important data for our subject.[8] Takáts draws attention to the misery of those who, in a country divided into three parts, paid taxes to both sides and were compelled to undergo forced migration. He emphasizes how easily individuals confronted with hunger could shift their allegiance. In the context of forced migration, an important point that should not be overlooked is the Slavic population, mostly composed of Serbs, who fled northward into Hungarian territories following the Ottoman advance. These people, referred to in Hungarian as *Rác*, knew the Ottomans

[7] Respectively: Áruló, tolvaj, rabló, útonálló, mindenre kapható, elvetemült alak, poroszló, hóhér, tékozló személy, kísértet, hitvány, semmirekellő, bősz, kegyetlen, csintalan, sintér, rabszolga kereskedő, szökevény, az ellenséghez átpártoló személy, hite- vagy pártja hagyott személy.

[8] For example, he also labels as a pribék the convert Mark Scherer, who served as an interpreter in the Ottoman palace and was known as Hidayet Aga (Takáts 1915a, p. 314).

better than the Hungarians and Hungarian territories better than the Ottomans. Among them were individuals who knew both Hungarian and Turkish. Consequently, they were regarded by both the Ottomans and the Hungarians as a group capable of offering valuable service. Naturally, a significant portion of the pribéks emerged from among these people, who had been subjected to forced migration, had struggled with destitution, and were intimately familiar with both sides. Depending on the side they served, they adopted either Hungarian or Turkish names. They could change sides in pursuit of higher wages and a better quality of life (Takáts, 1915a: 316, 319 and 329; 1915b: 159 and 173). The success of planned assaults on fortresses and manors, as well as ambushes, depended on capable guides. Consequently, frontier garrisons sought to maintain as many skilled guides as possible. A garrison's military effectiveness was directly proportional to the number of guides it possessed who were familiar with the local terrain. A large portion of these guides were of Slavic origin (Takáts, 1915b: 143-144, 148-149). When guides serving one side switched allegiance, they began to be referred to as pribéks. They could even betray the very troops they were in the act of guiding and lead them into an ambush. The neighborly relationship between the two enemies, Hamza, the Bey of Fehérvár, and Thúry György, the Commander of Palota, provides an excellent example of how pribéks played a double game. The leading figures of the Ottoman garrison in Fehérvár were prisoners in the dungeons of Palota. For this reason, Hamza Bey was unable to carry out raiding expeditions and planned to lure Thúry into a trap using a pribék. According to the plan, the pribék was to put a drug called maslak, supplied by Hamza Bey, into the chalices of Thúry and his soldiers. Once they fell asleep under the influence of the drug, the pribék would open the gates, and the Ottoman soldiers waiting outside the fortress would easily seize it. However, the pribék revealed the entire plan to Thúry, and the Ottoman troops returned to Fehérvár empty-handed (Takáts, 1922: 80-83).

Historical accounts indicate that during military campaigns and siege operations, both sides sought to make extensive use of pribéks for guidance and intelligence. For instance, following the campaign launched by the Ottoman army in 1556, Hungarian intelligence reported that the Ottoman forces would be guided by Deli Bey, a former servant of Zrínyi Miklós IV. Deli Bey had promised the Ottomans he could lead the army across the Drava River within two days. A decade later, during Sultan Süleyman's final campaign, the Ottoman army was again guided by a man labelled as a pribék: Pribék Balázsházy (Mezarich) Márton, a Slav (rác) of Bosnian origin who had served for years as a guide on the Hungarian frontier. Similarly, historical records document that György sent a pribék to the vicinity of Szigetvár during the 1566 siege to keep him informed on three things: the situation of the castle, the status of his father Zrínyi Miklós IV (the castle commander), and the activities of the Ottoman camp (Takáts 1915a: 323; 1915b: 152 and 189). Further evidence comes from the letters of Szalay Benedek written in the same year, which reveal that the pribéks serving Kanizsa kept the Ottoman camp under close observation. Their reports contained detailed information on Sultan Süleyman's daily life, ranging from the garments he wore to his manner of stroking his beard (Takáts 1915a: 323).

Cserenkó Ferenc, a servant of Zrínyi Miklós IV, was one of the three men who survived the siege of Sigetvar in 1566. Some details in his account of the siege are directly relevant to our subject. Cserenkó states that Sultan Süleyman assigned the

task of building a bridge over the Drava River to Hamza Bey, the Sancak Bey of Pécs, and then recounts the subsequent events. When the construction progressed too slowly, the Sultan sent Hamza Bey a long turban cloth. According to Cserenkó, this gesture was a threat, meaning: "If the bridge is not completed by the time I arrive, I will have you hanged with this cloth." At this point, Cserenkó relates a crucial detail: Nasuh Aga, who had been appointed to Pécs in place of Hamza Bey, secretly sent the turban cloth to Zrínyi, the commander of Szigetvár, and informed him of the developments. In light of this account, Nasuh Aga can be seen as a pribék playing a double game. Another noteworthy development occurred on the eve of the siege. When the Ottoman army appeared in front of the fortress, Zrínyi convened a meeting with the inhabitants of the fortress and listed his prohibitions. To enforce discipline and intimidate his soldiers, he had an infantryman, who had previously drawn his sword against a superior, and Vilics Mahmud Ağa, who had earlier betrayed him, beheaded (Fodor and Kelenik 2019: 117-118, 120-121). A related piece of information reported by Cserenkó also appears in the history written by Istvánffy Miklós. Chapter 23 of his work titled *Magyarok dolgairól írt históriája*, which we may translate as "The History Written Concerning the Affairs of the Hungarians", concerns the year 1566 and the siege of Szigetvár. Istvánffy states that the lifeless body of Commander Zrínyi, who died during the siege and was beheaded, was buried by Vilics Mustafa, the commander of the cavalrymen from Banja Luka and formerly a captive of Zrínyi (Istvánffy, 2003: 425). Considering this alongside the detail above, we may assume that Vilics Mustafa and Vilics Mahmud Aga were Slav-origin pribéks who played a double game. [9]

Istvánffy's text contains two further details relevant to our subject. In his description of the defenders' retreat from the outer to the inner castle, he lists four soldiers who, in despair, attempted to flee. One of them was Pribék János, who a few years earlier had escaped from the Turks and taken refuge in Szigetvár Fortress (Istvánffy, 2003: 422). Istvánffy uses the term pribék here not as an epithet for János, but as a surname, just as with the three other figures whose names he provides. Pribék is, in fact, a surname still found in Hungary today. Many contemporary Hungarian surnames likewise derive from professions or occupations, such as blacksmith, carpenter, joiner, miller, shepherd, tailor, and so forth.[10] We may therefore interpret Istvánffy's account as evidence of the process through which an occupational or activity-based epithet evolved into a fixed surname. After Szigetvár Fortress fell into Ottoman hands, Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed Paşa concealed the news of Sultan Süleyman's death and spread the claim that the sultan would march against the Habsburg emperor. Istvánffy notes that the emperor, suspicious of these reports, sent Rain, a rác, to the Ottoman camp in order to observe the enemy forces. Rain knew Turkish and had fled from Esztergom, which had been in Ottoman hands a few years earlier, to seek refuge in the imperial army (Istvánffy, 2003: 431). Istvánffy does not mention the term pribék, but it is evident that Rain was one.

Tarnóczy Farkas, who served as deputy commander of Kanizsa and commander of Veszprém, reported in a 1578 letter that Zrínyi's soldiers had captured a skilled

[9] Kelenik József, who prepared Cserenkó's text for publication, emphasizes the possibility that these two figures may have been brothers (Fodor & Kelenik 2019, p. 121).
[10] Respectively: Kovács, Ács, Asztalos, Molnár, Juhász, Szabó.

guide. The guide had been released to serve them by Farkasyth Péter. After serving the Hungarians for eight years, he was captured by the Turks in Bojna,[11] where he had gone to obtain limestone. Tarnóczy notes that the guide, having once again begun working for the Turks, was leading units on plundering expeditions (Takáts, 1915b: 145). Pribéks appear not only in historical chronicles and letters but also in official military reports. For instance, a report from the vicinity of besieged Kanizsa in September 1600 states, "The pribéks arrived and reported." Writing from the Fehérvár camp on 20 October 1601, Pogrányi Benedek uses the expression "the pribéks who came to us." The following day, Archduke Mátyás wrote to King Rudolf: "According to the pribék's report, the Turks are preparing for the attack they will launch tomorrow" (Takáts, 1915a: 311).

Despite their considerable utility within the dynamics of frontier life, strict decrees imposing heavy sanctions on pribéks were also issued. Royal edicts compelled Hungarian fortress commanders to execute any pribéks they captured. On 8 January 1581, Emperor Rudolf had a decree prepared that prohibited the exchange of captured martaloses and guides, as well as their release in return for payment. The decree ordered that they be beaten to death. The treasury would pay 20 forints for each captured martalos, and between 24 and 30 forints for each guide. [12] Forgách István had his guide, who was a pribék, beaten to death and received 30 forints from the treasury on 22 February 1582 (Takáts 1915a: 310-311; 1915b:147-148). On the other hand, the decrees issued against pribéks appear to have remained on paper, just as the truces and peace treaties concluded at the time did. The dynamics of frontier life were entirely different, and however unreliable they may have been, both sides needed the assistance of pribéks. The necessity of benefiting from pribéks is also reflected in the prose works and letters of Zrínyi Miklós VII, who devoted his life to fighting the Turks. Zrínyi's work *Vitéz hadnagy*, which we may translate as "The Valiant Lieutenant", is a didactic treatise offering important insights into the military art of the period. In this text, where Zrínyi elaborates at length on what an officer of rank must pay attention to, he also includes a section on pribéks. He begins the section by writing: "If one who wishes to defect from the enemy appears, do not miss the opportunity", and continues: "Thus you learn the enemy's plan and position; once the enemy realizes this, he fears you far more." He then proceeds with his warnings:

> The pribék(s) have done much evil, and one must indeed fear him (them), for if a man dares to betray his own people and his own faith, you must consider that his loyalty to you will not be very different. It is not enough to say that you are

[11] A village now located in present-day Croatia, also known as Glina.

[12] Takáts Sándor clearly emphasizes that the term "kalauz", meaning guide, in these decrees refers to the pribéks (Takáts, 1915b, pp. 143-144). In modern Turkish as well, it is still used in the same sense as "kılavuz." The functional overlap between guides and pribéks is also clearly evident in the context of a bloody raid in 1587, from which only the Bey of Sasvár/Szászvár survived. A Habsburg-Hungarian force under the command of Batthyány Boldizsár, Nádasdy Ferenc, and György (the son of Zrínyi Miklós) destroyed an Ottoman unit. The Bey of Sasvár survived this midnight clash thanks to his guide, who knew the region extremely well. After hiding for hours in a swamp, the Bey managed to escape by disguising himself as a villager. Contemporary reports confirm that the guide who saved him was a pribék (Takáts, 1915b, p. 153).

> not afraid of him, for his smooth speech, his oaths, and the grave crimes he committed while on the enemy side, such as killing a man or doing other things, are tricks that pose danger to you and those under your command. By harming you or by shedding your blood, he may wash away his earlier crimes and return again to the ranks of the enemy. The Italians say that to trust is good but not to trust is better. The Hungarians say that they do not trust even their friend. Therefore, it is indeed very useful to entice any man from the ranks of the enemy, but once he is in your ranks, do not trust him so much. Do not sleep with your head on his lap while he holds the razor in his hand, pay attention to what he does, protect yourself, but show confidence and courage before him so that he does not realize you are being cautious (Kovács et al, 2003: 291).

Some lines in the letters he wrote to Batthyány Ádám show that Zrínyi carried into practice the approach he expressed on a theoretical level. In his letter dated 26 November 1647, Zrínyi begins with the sentences, "The day before yesterday a pribék came from Kanizsa, I asked this pribék many things about the situation of the Turks", and immediately goes on to list the intelligence he had obtained (Kőszeghy, 1997: 36-38). In his letter dated 3 December 1650, he responds to an earlier letter written by Batthyány Ádám. From this letter, which concerns the actions of Pribék Iván, it appears that Batthyány Ádám wrote that "the inhabitants of Szalafő who departed to deliver the tribute to the Turks encountered the inhabitants of Muraköz, and that those from Muraköz seized the 300 tallér that those from Szalafő were carrying to pay as tribute." Muraköz was the region where Zrínyi's estates were located, and he was responsible for everything those from Muraköz did. Zrínyi notes that at first he could not make sense of what had happened, because the people they encountered were not those from Muraköz, and that he understood what truly lay behind the event only after hearing what the Vajda of Kotor told him. For the Vajda of Kotor related the disgraceful deeds of Pribék Iván, who was residing in Dernye. Zrínyi states that after he himself made peace with the Turks of Kanizsa, Pribék Iván immediately fled from Légrád to Dernye and is residing there now. Dernye was not within Zrínyi's region. After pointing out that Pribék Iván is not living within his own area of responsibility, and that if he had been he would have punished him with his own hands and compensated the losses of those who were robbed, Zrínyi advises his correspondent to contact the Commander of Kapronca. The Commander of Kapronca could fulfill the request of Batthyány Ádám and could punish Pribék Iván (Kovács et al, 2003: 583-584). From Zrínyi's lines, we understand that the ones who seized the 300 tallér were the pribék and his companions, and that peace treaties did not create a very safe environment for pribéks. Some lines in another letter, written to Batthyány Ádám on 17 June 1654, are in complete harmony with the approach he expressed in his work titled *Vitéz hadnagy*, which he completed between 1650 and 1653. The final sentence in the excerpt below is significant, as it shows that pribéks were indispensable elements of frontier life:

> "You write to me about an earless pribék. I had previously written to Your Excellency that apart from the horse he had taken from the Turks he had nothing else. In my view this pribék committed many dishonorable acts and for this reason fled to Kanizsa. But he later regretted what he had done and asked for my permission so that he might return to the Christians. I pardoned him

especially so that Turkish pribéks would come to me" [13] (Kovács et al, 2003: 642-643).

Reconsidering the Term Pribék in Light of Its Class Character

In this final section, I would like to initiate a discussion on the class character of the term pribék and share my own views on the matter. I noted above that the word was attributed pejorative meanings not only within the sphere of military life but also in the context of social life. The meanings specific to our subject, namely "one who defects to the enemy" and "traitor," were shaped by the political environment of the period. The struggle between the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburgs, and the Hungarians, as in all political conflicts, was not merely a rivalry consisting of clashes between states. It also encompassed personal interests that concerned the entire society, from peasants to aristocrats and from ordinary soldiers to bureaucrats. Individuals could join different alliances and shift sides according to their personal interests. For example, many of the accusations made about Zrínyi Miklós III (1489 - 1534), the father of the hero of Szigetvár, were closely connected with personal interests. He was accused of making agreements with the Ottoman beys who were his neighbors on the frontier and of paying them tribute to protect his estates. In October 1529, his brother-in-law Korbáviai János wrote in a letter to Hans Katzianer, the commander of the forces in Lower Austria and Croatia, that the serfs of Zrínyi had guided Ottoman troops to the fortress of Kosztajnica, and that during their next raid, they had taken them across the River Una so that they might plunder the estates of Keglevich Péter. In a letter written in 1530, the Archbishop of Laibach summoned Zrínyi to account for such actions, and Zrínyi replied that he had taken nothing from anyone to protect his estates and that he had been falsely accused (Varga, 2016: 71). It appears that such accusations also prevented Zrínyi Miklós from being appointed Bán. Following the death of the last Bán, Tuskanics András, who had been temporarily appointed to Croatia and Slavonia, on 16 September 1531, King Ferdinánd consulted his advisers on a successor. Chancellor Szalaházy Tamás stated that the most suitable candidate was Pekry Lajos and that the more senior Zrínyi was unacceptable because he "paid tribute to the Turks" (Varga, 2016: 101-102). After the death of Zrínyi Miklós III in 1534, his son Zrínyi Miklós IV assumed control of the estates. During negotiations in Istanbul on 8 June of that year, Grand Vizier Ayas Pasha spoke harshly to the Habsburg envoy Cornelius Schepper and held him responsible for the violation of the truce of 1533. The issue concerned the actions of Zrínyi Miklós IV on the Croatian frontier. Ayas Pasha declared, "There is a man called Count Zrínyi. His father, who was our tribute-paying subject, has died, and the son has rebelled against us. He not only refuses to pay tribute but also harms the subjects of the Sultan. He robs everyone who crosses his path, and we wish to punish him." Envoy Schepper responded that Zrínyi and others who violated the agreements threatened Ferdinánd by declaring that they would defect to Szapolyai János, the Prince of Transylvania and a vassal of the Ottoman Empire, and that therefore the King's hands were tied (Varga, 2016: 99).

[13] "Here Zrínyi uses the expression 'Christians' to refer to the Hungarian side. From his final sentence we understand that he tolerated Iván in order to be able to make use of a greater number of pribéks."

In 15th and 16th century Hungary, an individual's power was proportionate to the value of their estates. This situation stimulated influential families' desire to acquire more property. In the struggle for influence between the Zrínyis, the Blagay family, and the Bishop of Zagreb Erdődy Simon, bloody incidents occurred. The method employed in their struggle with the Bishop is particularly significant for our subject. On 7 August 1539, Zrínyi Miklós's brother János set out for the Kulpa to seize the Bishop's estates located in Gradec. His soldiers wrapped their heads in turbans in the Ottoman manner and aimed to appear like the martaloses who fought for the Ottomans. The soldiers who were besieging the fortress could not withstand the reinforcements that arrived to aid it. Thereupon, they burned seven nearby villages and killed thirty-nine serfs but they could not avoid suffering a heavy defeat at the hands of the Bishop's army. Zrínyi János, who managed to escape on that day, was killed in the next stage of the clashes on 19 May 1541. Wanting to avenge his brother, Zrínyi Miklós gathered a larger army and renewed the siege. Since Sultan Süleyman launched a new campaign in the spring of 1541, King Ferdinánd intervened and ordered the fighting to be brought to an end (Varga, 2016: 118-119). Chapter sixteen of the work by Forgách Ferenc, Bishop of Nagyvárad (1530-1577), titled *Emlékirat Magyarország állapotáról Ferdinánd, János, Miksa királysága és II. János erdélyi fejedelemsége alatt*, concerns the events of 1566, the year of the siege of Szigetvár. In the section concerning the death of the Castle Commander Zrínyi Miklós IV, Forgách alludes to his father's collaboration with the Turks and writes the following lines: "He turned his stained life into a fame with a splendid end; the child of an old Croatian family that had mingled with the Turks in his youth, he had benefited from the aid of the famous leader, the Croatian Bán Keglevich Péter" (Forgách, 1977: 860).

A similar situation can be observed in the case of Bebek György (d. 1567). Most of Bebek's estates lay between Ottoman-ruled territory and the lands belonging to the Principality of Transylvania. Since these two allies were at war with the Habsburgs, Bebek had to act with caution; otherwise he would lose his estates. When the influence of the Transylvanian Prince János II increased, he sided with him. Yet, when he needed to protect his wealth from János II, he incited the Ottomans. Whenever the Habsburg armies won victories over János Zsigmond and the Ottoman forces, he sought the protection of King Ferdinánd. In 1554 he corresponded with the Beylerbeyi of Buda, and he did not hesitate to ask him for assistance against King Ferdinánd. He also maintained friendly neighborly relations with other Ottoman pashas. The assembly convened in 1556 found Bebek György and his father Ferenc guilty of treason. Forced to reassess his political alliances, Bebek changed his strategy and succeeded in winning the favor of King Ferdinánd in 1557. The imperial authority granted him and his family the fortress of Szendrő. Bebek now commanded the cavalrymen serving on the frontier. Whenever he had the opportunity, he launched raids and conducted assaults against the Ottomans (Takáts, 1928: 69-70). As a necessity of frontier life, Bebek György also had to make use of pribéks. He was compelled to do so to obtain information on Ottoman troops and to ambush them. Yet he fell into the very trap he was preparing for others. The pribék in his service, Ferenc Török, who was also known by the name Hüseyin, had secretly reached an agreement with Hasan, the Sancak Bey of Fülek.[14] With an army of more than five hundred

[14] Török means 'Turk' in the Hungarian language.

soldiers, Bebek set out toward the position indicated by the pribék to lay an ambush for Hasan Bey. As a result of the attack that took place on 20 June 1562, he lost two hundred of his cavalrymen and sixty infantrymen. Along with the remaining soldiers, he was captured (Takáts, 1928: 71-72; Szakály, 1995: 271). After being held for a time in the fortress of Fülek, he was sent to Istanbul. Bebek arrived in Istanbul on 11 July 1562. Aware of the strategic location of his estates, he sent letters to the Habsburg king and to the Transylvanian prince, promising that if he were freed from captivity, he would remain loyal to them for the rest of his life. Both sides wished to draw Bebek to their own ranks. In the end, it was the Transylvanian Prince who won this struggle, and Bebek was released for a ransom on 6 March 1565 (Takáts, 1928: 75-78).

The Bebeks and the Zrínyis, like other influential families of the period, acted primarily in their families' interests. At their core, the political maneuvers of Zrínyi Miklós III and Bebek György, as detailed in the examples above, differ little from the actions typically attributed to those labeled as pribéks. The accusations that placed the Zrínyis and the Bebeks under suspicion may not reflect the truth; they could easily have been products of personal rivalries and jealousies. However, the point I wish to emphasize is not the veracity of these accusations, but rather that the accusers did not use the term pribék for figures like Zrínyi Miklós or Bebek György. Ferenc, who lured Bebek into a trap by playing a double game and ultimately betraying him, was explicitly called a pribék. By contrast, Bebek's own political maneuvers were regarded as a pragmatic policy of balance. He was not only easily pardoned, but both the Habsburg King and the Transylvanian Prince were willing to pay a considerable ransom for him. The data I have gathered indicate that the term pribék was used within an approach that took social class into account. Nobles and landowners who carried out the actions attributed to pribéks, or actions similar to them, were not subjected to the label pribék. As we observed in the case of the Zrínyis, some members of the family have been, and continue to be, regarded as national heroes. Those who were defined as pribéks were, just like the nobles and landowners, engaged in a struggle for existence. However, their struggle was of a different order. They did not have vast estates to expand or significant influence to increase. Instead, in a chaotic environment marked by raiding expeditions, forced migrations, villages obliged to pay taxes to both sides, and widespread hunger and misery, they struggled simply to survive. Like noble families, they too changed sides and played double games. They were indispensable actors within the dynamics of frontier life, yet this utility did not prevent the term describing them from acquiring deeply pejorative meanings. Ultimately, unlike the noble and landowning lords, they lacked institutional power and influence. In the eyes of the political elite, they were not strategic actors but merely useful instruments.

The data I gathered during the preparation of this research article, which aims to introduce the term pribék and to demonstrate the functions and roles of the pribéks in frontier life, led me to the conclusion that the term in question was used specifically for individuals or groups regarded as belonging to the lower classes. One might object that, since the term is of Slavic origin and many pribéks were of Slavic origin, its usage reflects an ethnically based prejudice. However, I argue that the case of III. Zrínyi Miklós, a member of a noble family of Croatian origin, refutes this objection. Despite serious accusations of collaboration, he was never labeled a pribék. Similarly, while Bebek György was found guilty of high treason by a formal assembly, he was

not branded with this term. In stark contrast, the guide who betrayed him, Török Ferenc, is never mentioned without the epithet pribék. This stark discrepancy in labeling, despite similar actions, serves as a crucial historical datum that invalidates a purely ethnic interpretation and underscores the term's primary function as a marker of class. In conclusion, it is possible to argue that the term pribék, which found its place within the corpus shaped in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, serves as an indicator that the class-centric perspective prevalent in the period became embedded in the language and was articulated within the context of military terminology.

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