

Somosierra

Zdzislaw Zygulski Jr.*

Recently Geoffrey Regan in his popular publication «The Guinness Book of Military Blunders» (Great Britain, 1991), put the Somosierra Battle from the time of the Peninsular War into the chapter entitled «Butchers», exposing it as a great blunder of Napoleon, with fatal consequences. The French Emperor trying to lay down his law upon the Spanish nation started, late in 1808, marching in direction of Madrid with an army of 200.000 soldiers but was stopped at the Somosierra Gorge, about 80 kilometers from the Spanish capital, by general don Benito San Juan who with his regiments of about 9.000 soldiers and several cannons blocked the passage. Napoleon was furious seeing no progress of the French infantry and in the morning, of November 30, sent to a charge a squadron of his Polish light horse guard. Comments Regan: the effect was disastrous, out of 88 riders 60 found death and the rest withdrew. Napoleon was ashamed and omitted the fact in his daily report to the army.

The blunder is, however, not on the side of Napoleon but on the side of Regan and it makes doubtful the value of his other revelations. It is my task to present you the real case of Somosierra and its historic meaning. In fact the charge was victorious and it opened way to the French army. But it must be stressed that the Poles had no motivation in the Peninsular War. They fought against their will, *contre coeur*, being in the service of the Emperor, believing in his lucky star and his readiness to help Poland in her tragical situation. This faith proved finally to be built on dubious base.

In 1795 Poland, occupied by three neighbouring powers, Russia, Prussia and Austria, lost her independence and disappeared from political maps of

(*) The National Museum in Cracow, Poland.

Europe. The Poles, however, did not accept partitions and almost immediately started their struggle for regaining liberty. Their support and hope were in revolutionary France manifesting freedom for nations and for individuals. Under French protection in 1797 the Polish Legions led by general Dabrowski were formed in Italy, engaged in fights against Austrian and Russian armies. The patriotic fervour of the Polish soldiers and their military successes were observed by Napoleon Bonaparte. Then he finally took power as Emperor of the French and decided to wage new wars against enemies of France, he found Poland as an important ally. After defeat of Prussia in 1806 he created the Duchy of Warsaw, a substitute of a free Polish State, with a strong army organized after French patterns but with full Polish tradition of uniforms and signs. Prince Joseph Poniatowski was nominated commander in chief of this army. But Napoleon wished to have some regiments of Poles to his personal disposal. In February 1807 the 1st regiment of light horse of the imperial guard was formed: the chevau-legers de la garde imperiale. ~here served exclusively noblemen, and the basic style of Polish national cavalry was continued. By the imperial decree of April 6, 1807 this regiment was included into the old guard just after the mounted shooters and before the Mamluks.

The regiment consisted of the staff and of four squadrons, with two companies in each. With 60 officers and 976 subalterns and soldiers in ranks it disposed 1036 sabres but, of course, these numbers were not fixed. There was a difference between the regular condition and the battle condition. Usually in battles the squadrons were less numerous. The organization of the regiment was ended in March 1808, and the ready detachments step by step sent to France and to Spain. Later on this regiment was busy in Austria, in Lithuania and Russia, in Saxony and again in France, distinguished in 43 battles and skirmishes, three times saving the life of Emperor. A squadron of this regiment, the volunteers, accompanied Napoleon on the island of Elbe. Finally they fought at Waterloo. The regiment was also called a school for generals because 17 generals had started their career in its ranks. It should be added that in time two other regiments of Polish light horses of the guard were formed and besides a similar Dutch regiment in those special square caps.

The history of the 1st regiment has been documented in Polish and in French, in numerous official orders and reports, letters, diaries and memoirs, its fame being spread by short stories, novels, poems, and popular songs, as well as by paintings, engravings and sculptures. Slowly the factual circumstances of the war in which Poland was involved were forgotten, the more that the Poles had never any conflicts with Spain, and to the contrary there was always in Poland a great sympathy towards Spanish nation and the high Spanish culture. Simply Somosierra has become only a symbol of *cavalry achievement fulfilled with an unusual bravado*. Sometimes in paintings only the Polish riders were shown galloping and their opposers not seen.

The Polish light horse uniform was based on the patterns taken from the national cavalry from the years 1776-1794 of which particular features were a high square cap «czapka» and a short tunic «kurtka». The czapka has not been invented in Poland. It is an oriental product, coming from the Central Asia, even from China, known in various countries since the Middle Ages. The square form was a symbol of strength and of wisdom, as square is an ideal form. It was introduced into Poland in the 18th century, eagerly adopted and developed to a form not known anywhere else, connected with the uhlans light cavalry. After 1815 it has been taken over by various European and extra-European armies.

The uniform colours of the Polish light horse regiments were dark blue, crimson, and silver or white. The czapka was crimson with the brass sheet of half-sun and the cipher N, white-red cockade with the knight's cross (a symbol of nobility), with a tall white plume and white cords. It was worn pushed down on the right eye always, even when charging, without use of the metal chin straps. In the field circumstances the plume was often taken aside and the czapka covered with the black oilcloth. The great uniform consisted of the dark blue kurtka with crimson collar, facings and cuffs, and of dark blue slacks with crimson stripe. In the parade variety the collar and facings were decorated with silver wavy lines, and crimson trousers with double stripes. In the uniform for the ball the kurtka was white with crimson facings. Elegant as they were the officers of light horse used also various vice-uniforms with dress coats. Sabres, pistols, and carbines (even with bayonets) were applied as weapon, lances only after the Wagram battle, 1809. The Somosierra charge was led with sabres, not lances.

On the misty morning of November 30, 1808, Napoleon personally reconnoitred the position of general San Juan and gave the order, which seemed to be impossible to fulfil, of the charge of his light horse. This was done by the 3rd squadron of about 150 cavalry, formed in columns four abreast, with 10 officers, commanded by Jan Hipolit Koziętulski.

The gorge leading to the pass, some kilometers long, was narrow, set with stones, lined with low walls and winding but not very steeply. A deep ditch dug by the Spaniards was filled up with rocks and dry twigs by the French soldiers. At each of four turns the Spanish gunners had placed cannons. A total of 16 cannons, ten flags, 30 artillery wagons and 200 assorted carts, many prisoners. 21 Polish soldiers and officers fell and died, numerous were injured, 35 horses died. The path to Madrid was opened for the French army.

As it was said various artists, not troubling about moral implication of the Peninsular War, made of Somosierra a model of bravery, of scorn of death, of self-sacrifice for the final goal of regaining of independence for own country.

First there came popular prints which played at that time the role of photographic images. They were produced and sold in mass in various

countries, particularly in France, by French designers. They joined often exaggeration with naivete, reality being less important. In some examples of these engravings the Somosierra mountains look extremely high, and the ranks of soldiers resemble tin figurines put together by boys.

Purely artistic vision of the charge, being in sharp contrast to the naive prints, was rendered in oil painting by Piotr Michałowski, an outstanding Polish artist, died in 1855, an ardent lover of Napoleonic times. His canvas preserved in the National Museum in Cracow is really a masterpiece of its kind. The Somosierra riders wearing absolutely correct uniforms and sabres make a zig-zag stream going up through the rocky gorge. They are melted up in a dynamic unity. No Spaniards are in the vision.

Somosierra subject was taken over by another Polish painter of romantic period, January Suchodolski who was soldier himself and a pupil of Horace Vernet in the French Academy in Rome. His style was quite different of that of Michałowski. His battle pieces were smooth, with all forms very precise and colourful, but lyric, almost fairy-tale in the mood. He painted also the siege of Saragossa and the battle at Fuengirola of October 14, 1810 when the Polish infantry pushed back an English landing operation.

The Somosierra painting by Suchodolski in the National Museum in Poznan shows the riders in their parade uniforms ranking past in a very nice, sunny day, among picturesque rocks. They raise sabre with gracious gestures, almost theatrical style.

The most realistic and monumental painting vision of Somosierra was executed by Wojciech Kossak and Michał Wywiórski, preserved only in four large sketches from 1899 in the National Museum in Przemyśl (a town of Eastern Poland). These were preparatory projects (measuring 150 cm and 288 cm each) for a huge panorama for Warsaw, being at that time under Russian occupation. In November 1899 both artist went to Spain for making observation on the battle field exactly on the anniversary date of the charge. The landscape was made by Wywiórski, figures of men and horses by Kossak. The sketches were ready, canvas bought up in Brussels, and suitable building contracted, when the idea of such a panorama found an absolute opposition from the part of the governor-general Alexander Imeretynski, a Russian who was sure that the Somosierra light horse heroes would agitate the Poles to the new fights.

Probably he was right. Polish interventions in Petersburg and in Berlin were without effect. And the artists had to abandon their plan. This is pity because particularly Kossak was a great master of panoramas, a kind of painting which flourished in the last decades of the 19th Century and in the early 20th Century, being a forerunner of the film era. He was the chief author (always with collaborators) of the Raclawice panorama, a victory of Tadeusz Kosciuszko over the Russians in 1794, of the Beresina panorama, the retreat of Napoleon from Moscow 1812, and of the Battle of Pyramides panorama, 1798, the charge of Mamluk cavalry against French infantry and artillery.

The Kossak's Somosierra panorama unfolds before our eyes the view of the famous place with all details: rocks, stony ways, low walls and small bridges, with rivets, trees and hamlets, and hundreds soldiers in fight, Spanish, French and Polish, with horses, wagons and guns. All these enable us to sharpen our historic sight concentrated of the Peninsular War, to enliven our imagination, to deep our knowledge, and last but not least, to arouse old sentiments.