

# An Act of Terror: The Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Archduchess Sophie

*By Jill McCracken*

Franz Ferdinand, eldest son of Carl Ludwig, the brother of Emperor Franz Josef, was born in 1863. Educated by private tutors, he joined the Austro-Hungarian Army in 1883. In 1889, the succession passed to Franz Ferdinand's father, Carl Ludwig. When he died in 1896, Franz Ferdinand became the new heir to the throne. In 1899, Franz Ferdinand married Sophie von Chotkovato, who would bear him three children.

The 1908 Austrian annexation of Bosnia was unpopular with the Bosnian people, who also disliked the Archduke immensely. Franz Ferdinand's unpopularity was also related to the policies he intended to apply once he assumed the throne. He proposed to replace Austro-Hungarian dualism with 'trialism,' a triple monarchy in which the empire's Slavic peoples would have an equal voice in government with the Germans and Magyars. This would undermine any hope for independence by the many minorities of Austria-Hungary.

In 1913 Franz Ferdinand was appointed Inspector General of the Austro-Hungarian Army. In the summer of 1914, General Oskar Potiorek, Governor of the Austrian provinces of Bosnia-Herzegovina, invited the Inspector of the Armed Forces to watch his troops on maneuvers. Franz Ferdinand agreed, deciding to visit Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The inspection was scheduled for June 28, 1914. It was planned that Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie would be met at the station and taken by car to the City Hall where they would have lunch before going to inspect the troops. Franz Ferdinand was perhaps unaware of the historical significance of the day he chose to visit in Sarajevo. That particular date, June 28th, marked a tragic point in Serb history.

The 1389 "Kosovo Polje" or Battle of Kosovo, where Serbia's Christian warriors had been defeated by the Turks, was a national holiday. Serbia would lose its independence for the next 500 years. Serb nationalist feelings were therefore, highly sensitive on the day of the Archduke's arrival.

Still, Franz Ferdinand knew that the journey would be dangerous. A large number of people living in Bosnia-Herzegovina were unhappy with Austro-Hungarian rule and favored union with Serbia. Previous assassination attempts against government officials had occurred. The leader of the Black Hand considered Franz Ferdinand a serious threat to a union between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia. He was worried that Ferdinand's plans to grant concessions to the South Slavs would make an independent Serbian state more difficult to achieve.

Three years earlier, in May, 1910, ten Serbian men formed the Black Hand Secret Society. A founding member, the Black Hand leader was Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijevic, the chief of the Intelligence Department of the Serbian General Staff. The main objective of the Black Hand was the creation, by means of violence, of a 'Greater Serbia'. Its stated aim was: "To realize the national ideal, the unification of all Serbs. This organization prefers terrorist action to cultural activities; it will therefore remain secret."

Col. Dragutin Dimitrijevic used the codename, Apis, established himself as the leader of the Black Hand. In 1911, Apis ordered a Serb, Bogdan Zerajic, to assassinate the Austrian governor of Bosnia-Herzegovina with a poisoned dagger. The attempt failed, but the Black Hand did not disband. By 1914 there were around 2,500 members of the Black Hand. The group was mainly made up of junior army officers but also included lawyers, university professors and journalists. Approximately 30 members lived and worked in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

When Franz Ferdinand's visit to Bosnia was announced in June 1914, three senior members of the Black Hand group, Apis, Milan Ciganovic, and Major Voja Tankosic, decided that Archduke Franz Ferdinand should be assassinated. Apis was concerned about the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Ferdinand's trialism plan to grant concessions to the South Slavs. If this happened, an independent Serbian state would be much more difficult to achieve.

The Black Hand leadership sent three members of the Black Hand group based in Belgrade, Gavrilo Princip, Nedjelko Cabrinovic, and Trifko Grabez to Sarajevo to carry out the deed. These men arrived in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where they joined forces with six fellow conspirators.

On the morning of June 14, 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Archduchess Sophie arrived in Sarajevo by train. General Oskar Potiorek, Governor of the Austrian provinces of Bosnia-Herzegovina, was waiting to take the royal party to the official reception at City Hall.

It was a beautiful morning and crowds of onlookers waved flags and flowers as the motorcade passed through the streets of Sarajevo. The Mayor of Sarajevo and the city's Commissioner of Police were in the front car. The Archduke and Archduchess were in the second car with General Potiorek. The limousine's top was rolled back in order to allow the crowds a good view of its occupants.

The assassins were inexperienced with weapons and had been supplied with guns and bombs. At 10:15 am, the six cars passed. The first gunman, Mehmed Mehmedbaši, didn't get a clear line of sight to take the shot so gave up for fear of ruining the operation and alerting the authorities. Then, the motorcade passed the central police station. Black Hand member Cabrinovic hurled a hand grenade at the Archduke's car. The driver accelerated when he saw the object flying towards him and the grenade exploded under the wheel of the next car. Two of the car's occupants were seriously wounded. About a dozen spectators were also hit by bomb splinters.

Swallowing a cyanide pill (each assassin had been equipped with one), Cabrinovic jumped into the nearby Miljacka River. Unfortunately for him, the cyanide pill was too weak or didn't work, and the river was only four inches deep at this time of year. He was dragged out by the angry crowds and captured by the authorities.

Panicked, Franz Ferdinand's driver quickly drove away from the area. At this speed, the other members of the Black Hand group who lined the limousine's route, Cvijetko Popovic, Gavrilo Princip, Danilo Ilic, and Trifko Grabez, were unable to fire their guns or hurl their bombs at the Archduke's car.

Franz Ferdinand and the rest of the procession reached the town hall as he planned to continue with the afternoon's engagements. However, Franz Ferdinand was anxious for information on those injured by Cabrinovic's bomb. Told they were severely injured and at the hospital, the Archduke insisted on being taken to see them. Though a member of the Archduke's staff suggested this might be dangerous, General Potiorek, who was responsible for the safety of the royal party, replied, "Do you think Sarajevo is full of assassins?"

In order to avoid the center of the city, General Potiorek decided that the royal car should travel straight along the Appel Quay to the Sarajevo Hospital. However, Potiorek neglected to tell the Archduke's driver about this decision. On the way to the hospital, the driver took a right turn into Franz Joseph Street. General Potiorek immediately realized the mistake, and shouted "What is this? This is the wrong way! We're supposed to take the Appel Quay!"

As Franz Ferdinand's driver slowed to reversed, Black Hand member Gavrilo Princip was in a nearby café. Jumping at his opportunity, Princip rushed up to the car and at a distance of about five feet, fired several shots into the car. Franz Ferdinand was hit in the neck and his wife, Sophie, in the abdomen. Princip's bullet had pierced the Archduke's jugular vein but before losing consciousness, he pleaded "Sophie dear! Sophie dear! Don't die! Stay alive for our children!" The driver drove the royal couple to the Governor's residence, but although both were still alive when they arrived, they died from their wounds soon afterwards.

Princip and Cabrinovic were both captured and interrogated by the police. They eventually gave the names of their fellow conspirators. Mehmet Mehmedbasic escaped to Serbia, but Grabez, Ilic, Cubrilovic, Popovic, and two others, were arrested and charged with treason and murder.

Eight of the men charged in the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Archduchess Sophie were found guilty. Under Austro-Hungarian law, capital punishment could not be imposed on someone who was under the age of twenty when they had committed the crime. Nineteen year old Princip, therefore, received the maximum penalty of twenty years. Gavrilo Princip died of tuberculosis on April 28, 1918.

On July 25, 1914, the Austro-Hungarian government demanded that the Serbian government arrest the remaining three plotters and send them to face trial in Vienna. The Prime Minister of Serbia, Nikola Pasic, told the Austro-Hungarian government that he was unable to hand over these three men as it "would be a violation of Serbia's Constitution and criminal law". Three days later, Austro-Hungarian declared war on Serbia. World War I had begun.

During the first two years of the First World War, the Serbian Army suffered a series of military defeats. Prime Minister Pasic blamed the Black Hand for the war. In December 1916, the organization was disbanded. Dragutin "Apis" Dimitrijevic and several of the Black Hand leaders were arrested and executed the following year.

## **Questions**

1. Who was assassinated on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1914? Where did the assassination take place? Who was the assassin?
  
2. What was Austria's reaction when the archduke was killed?
  
3. There are many definitions of terrorism. The F.B.I uses this definition: "The unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a Government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives." Based on the information in the reading and this definition of terrorism, evaluate whether the Black Hand was a terrorist group, and whether Gavrilo Princip was a terrorist.
  
4. Given the severe consequences of their actions, was the Black Hand justified in assassinating the Archduke and Archduchess? How else might the Black Hand have addressed its nationalistic aspirations?
  
5. Given the example of Serbia's independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1885, do ethnicities seeking their own nations have other methods to address their concerns beyond resorting to terrorism? Explain.