ADOLPH ZBOŘÍL – AN AUSTRIAN OFFICER IN THE TRANSVAAL ARTILLERY

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Whereas the German Major Richard Albrecht, the Commander of the Orange Free State Artillery, is a well-known figure of South African military history, this is not the case with Captain Adolph Zboříl. Zboříl (a Czech name, pronounced ‘Sbor-shil’) from 1886 to 1893 held the second-highest rank in the Transvaal Artillery. Admittedly, his achievements were less spectacular – and convincing – than Albrecht’s and he left the Transvaal Artillery six years before the outbreak of the Second Anglo-Boer War. Still, it seems worthwhile to trace Zboříl’s career.

Captain R.F.N. Albrecht, commander of the Orange Free State Artillery. (Photo: Cultural History Museum)

The happy fraternity days in Vienna

Adolph was a son of Jakob Zboříl, a businessman from Zöptau in Moravia (then part of Austria-Hungary, now Sobotin in the People’s Republic of Czechoslovakia). Adolph was born on 10 October 1853; there were at least two brothers. Jakob Zboříl owned a wood- and steel trading firm in Vienna and belonged to the well-to-do upper middle-class. His firm was the Vienna representation of several important industries and Jakob Zboříl was a member of the Vienna Spar-und Credit-Casse’s (Vienna savings and credit bank) council.

After high school, Adolph Zboříl studied engineering from 1869, first at the renowned Polytechnikum in Zurich (Switzerland) and then in Munich (Bavaria). In 1871, he returned to Vienna to continue his studies at what was then the Polytechnikum (now Technical University), starting with the winter semester 1871/72.1

A. Zboříl as a student in Vienna, wearing the cap and band of the “Alemannia” fraternity. (Photo: HR Dr. Rabe via Schmidl)

Besides his studies, Zboříl was active in fraternity life. In Zurich, he had belonged to a short-lived fraternity called “Silesia”, and he entered the Vienna “Alemannia”-fraternity on 29 January 1872. Known by his Kneipname (fraternity name) “Stiefel” (“boot”), he soon won a reputation as a great fighter with the sabre. One is tempted to assume that he devoted more time to his fraternity than to his studies. In September 1872, Zboříl became the “Alemannia’s” Senior (similar
to the president of a club). German student-fraternities are now often regarded as a bunch of hard-drinking, duelling lads, pre-Nazi in their political views. But whereas duels were an important part of the fraternity life (being thought a means to train a student's character), and hard-drinking far from unknown, it would be wrong to reduce the fraternities to these stereotyped images. The fraternities of the 1870s were certainly German-nationalistic and liberal, but neither anti-Semites (there were also several Jews in the "Alemannia") nor "small-German" in the Bismarckian sense of the word. They favoured instead a "greater-Austrian" political order for Central Europe. To ensure its conservative character, the "Alemannia" was reconstituted as a Corps in December 1872, putting special emphasis on the duel as a measure of strengthening a student's personality and thus distancing itself from the "reformist" fraternities opposing the duel. Between 1872 and 1876, Zbofil himself fought ten duels ("Mensuren").

Out for Africa

Possibly due to the family's financial situation, the two elder Zbofil brothers, Adolph and Josef (born 1852) left Europe for South Africa in 1878 or 1879. Josef is said to have fought with the British in the Zulu War of 1879 and later with the garrison of Middelburg in 1881, before settling in Johannesburg. Adolph, however, started in the Cape Colony as a merchant.

The information that he fought with the Boers at Majuba has not been verified - it is more likely that he immigrated to the Transvaal only in 1883 or 1884. According to a romantic version, he had to leave Cape Colony together with his fiancée, Miss Edith Priddey (born 1864), because her parents had forbidden their marriage.

Before we continue with Adolph Zbofil's biography, we should perhaps mention that his younger brother, Eduard Wenzel Zbofil (born 1857), a second lieutenant in the Austrian army reserve, followed his brothers. He came to East Africa in early 1886 in the service of the German East Africa Company, but already died there in December that year.

Joining the Transvaal Artillery

On 8 February 1886, Adolph Zbofil applied for the vacant position of captain of the Transvaal artillery. On 1 July 1886, he was provisionally appointed as "administrateur en Adjutant van het Rijdende Artillerie en Politiekorps der Zuid-Afrikaanschen Republiek". This appointment was made definitive in December, Zbofil's salary being £275,00 a year.

Nonetheless, Zbofil kept his small business which he had probably started soon after immigrating to the Transvaal, his most important goods being gunpowder and brandy.
Zboië’s application for the vacant post of captain and administrateur of the Transvaal artillery, Pretoria, 8 February 1886
(Source: Transvaal Archives Depot, SS 1237: R 3017/86, p. 23)
In 1886, the Transvaal artillery had about a dozen guns (which qualified for any army museum, as Adolf Schiel, who joined the artillery in 1888, noted later) and numbered six officers and 120 other ranks. Commanding officer was Commandant Henning Pretorius – Captain Zbofił was the second-ranking officer and apparently the only one with European military training. Zbofił obviously tried to improve the organization and efficiency of the Transvaal artillery: already on the day after his appointment he demanded additions to the artillery barracks in Pretoria. He had the oxen (which were still used to draw at least some of the guns) replaced with horses and when Adolf Schiel, a former Prussian Hussar, became Lieutenant in 1888–89, Zbofił’s reformist ideas had better chances of realization than before. According to Schiel’s memoirs, Zbofił had not managed to convince his superiors, notably Commandant-General Piet Joubert, of the importance of a modern and efficient
artillery force — and, despairing, devoted more

time to his “remarkably beautiful wife” than to the

artillery.10) Still — and despite their later rivalries —
Schiell wrote rather fondly of Zbofil.

Heavy artillery were rare in the early years of the South African Republic. President T.F. Burgers (with top hat) was

nevertheless interested in the founding of an artillery unit and even bought guns abroad in 1874. Here a shot is fired with

a muzzle loading gun. This was one of the first pieces which was acquired by the Transvaal Artillery

(Photos: Cultural History Museum)

Among Zbofil’s more interesting contributions to
the South African military history ranks the “yzeren fortje” or “yzeren forten” (iron forts) which he
designed in 1887. These forts were made of
heavy armour plates which were transportable
and could be put together comparatively easily.
The walls and roof of armour plates must have
made conditions inside quite hot for the 20 or 25
soldiers who found place (and refuge) in the fort.
Altogether at least three forts were made and the
first of these were dispatched to Klipdam and
Pietersburg in April 1888. One of the forts, “Fort
Hendrina”, is today preserved as a national
monument in Louis Trichardt.11)

The uniform came in two versions, of dark blue
cloth for winter and parade wear and of light
sand-grey drill for summer and field dress. Of
rather loose-fitting cut, the jackets had two shirt
pockets and a low standing collar. The facing
colour was sky blue — which was remarkable at
least: Most artillery forces tended to adopt “sym-
bolic” facing colours such as red (Britain, Aus-
tria, and many others), black and red (Prussia),
or yellow and black (Italy). But sky blue? It is not
clear who opted for the sky blue facings, but,
considering Zbofil’s background, two explana-
tions are possible. Dark blue uniforms with sky
blue facings were worn by one of the proudest

Austrian uniforms for the Transvaal
Artillery

In the 19th century, military efficiency was often
regarded as synonymous with smart appear-
ance. (In fact, these views are still aired today,
despite the fact that, for example, the Israeli
Defence Forces have demonstrated most clearly
that smart uniforms are not necessarily a pre-
requisite for military success). Whatever the re-

ationship between combat-effectivity and smart

outlook might be, the Transvaal artillery of the
mid-1880s sadly lacked both. Less than com-
pletely successful in enhancing the unit’s military
efficiency, Zbofil at least managed to acquire
new uniforms for his men. As he was Austrian by
birth (and, until 1891, also by citizenship), it was
probably only logical that he had these uniforms
made of typical Austrian cut, some items even
being manufactured in Vienna.

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regiments of the Austro-Hungarian Army, the famous Infantry Regiment No. 4, “Hoch-und Deutschmeister”. This regiment was recruited in Vienna (“Wiener Hausregiment”) – but as Zbofil himself had no affiliations with this regiment, this possibility is less than completely convincing. More likely is another explanation: Zbofil’s student fraternity was known as the “blue Alemannia”, sky blue being the distinguishing colour of technical faculties. The “Alemannia” had sky blue caps and fraternity students wore a narrow band beneath their jackets; this band was striped black-blue-gold. Although we have no proof of this thesis, it appears possible that Zbofil chose sky blue facings as a reminder of his student days. And as artillery was always considered a “technical” arm, this choice would have been a quite logical one, too.

These blue or sand-grey jackets were matched by blue visored caps of typical Austrian design and blue or sand-grey breeches, worn with black boots. A white sun helmet, sabre (for the mounted gunners and non-commissioned officers) or short straight sword (for the non-mounted gunners), and carbine or revolver completed the outfit. As rank-badges, non-commissioned officers had at first one, two or three six-pointed stars (cut from white cloth) on each collar, supplemented by an equal number of gold chevrons on the right forearm. Later, the stars were abolished and the chevrons worn on both arms.

Officers wore the black Austrian officers’ caps and dark blue Hussar-style patrol jackets with black braiding across the chest and sky blue facings, their rank being indicated by gold six-pointed stars on the collar in typical Austrian fashion. Again, their stiff caps were modelled on the Austrian example, only the Emperor’s initials (“FJI” for Franz Joseph I.) were replaced by the
Dark blue tunic (below, left) with light blue piping and facings, as worn by the Transvaal artillery in the early 1890s. Some photographs show grenade insignia on the shoulder straps and a cap in dark blue with light blue turnups. The NCO's insignia of rank (the chevrons on both arms) were only introduced around 1894, before that date the chevrons were worn on the right arm only.

Field-dress of khaki/light grey colour with sky blue facings (top, right). The sunhelmet was apparently of off-white/khaki colour and had a characteristic lion's head-badge in front, used to hook up the chin-strap. Note the black belt and short sword apparently worn by gunners not mounted. The sabre worn by mounted gunners is shown below.

Officer's pouch, showing the ZAR letters (from an original in the National Museum of Military History, Saxonwold)
familiar letters “Z.A.R.” on the cap’s rosette. Officers carried sabres, of course. In addition, a silver-plated pouch, bearing the letters “Z.A.R.”, was worn on a silver pouch-belt over the left shoulder – which followed the Austrian pattern so closely that for the pouch’s sides the Austrian design was used without modifications, down to the double-headed eagle motive on the flags.12

Corporal of the Transvaal artillery. This photograph shows to good advantage the Austrian field cap (with the rosette bearing the letters “ZAR”) in sky blue colour with black visor and the field blouse with the two stars on the collar. (Photograph: SADF Documentation Service, Neg. Nr. 7000/7/65)

Altogether, these uniforms were smart but practical and less cumbersome to wear than some contemporary designs – we have only to think of the “Prussian” full dress uniforms worn by the Oranje Vrystaat artillerymen! They were worn for about eight years until replaced by the better-known braided blue hussar-style tunics in the late 1890s. The sand-coloured field blouses were worn even longer, well into the Second Anglo-Boer War. The Austrian officers’ rank badges were copied by the Z.A.R.-Police as well as by most volunteer corps raised in the Transvaal in the 1890s. Even burgher officers in the commandos sometimes wore these badges of rank.

The Final Years
When Lieutenant Schiel left the artillery in June 1889 to become native-commissioner of the Spelonken district in the northern Transvaal, he was promoted captain – which Zbofil who held the same rank, considered an affront. Two years later the rivalries between Zbofil and Schiel became public when the Administrateur accused his former lieutenant of abusing the powers of his office. During an inspection tour to Fort Hendrina in October 1891, Zbofil was told that a black maid of Schiel had been hit so hard by her employer that she died soon afterwards. Zbofil initiated an official investigation in the course of which more allegations were brought up against Schiel. According to the German, however, the girl had tried to commit “indecent acts” with his five-year-old son, having pulled down his trousers. When Schiel had noticed this, he had whipped the girl and then sent her off to a local induna. Three months later, in July 1891, the girl had mysteriously died – and, as Schiel put it, the rumours linking him to the girl’s death were unfounded and set up by merchants hostile to him.13

Schiel was finally acquitted of the charges. Zbofil was said to have abused his official position to harm Schiel, although from the documents it
would seem that Zbofil's allegations were not completely unfounded. The rumours about Schiel's behaviour never died and were again brought forward in 1898, when signatures were collected to protest Schiel's appointment as head of the Transvaal prison service.16)

On to Rhodesia

Already a civilian, Zbofil took part in the Matabeleland campaign of 1896, joining the commandos as a sutler.18) At the same time, he had the dubious pleasure to see his rival Schiel appointed as his successor.19)

Probably in 1895, Adolph Zbofil left the Transvaal and went north to the territories of the British South Africa Company. When the uprising started in Matabeleland in 1896, he volunteered to serve as a trooper with the Umtali Contingent. On 27 June 1896, he died of sunstroke at Salisbury (now Harare, Zimbabwe).20) His widow, then 33 years old, married Johannes A.F. Fich on 11 August 1897 in Johannesburg, leaving for Cape Town soon afterwards.21)

Conclusions

It is difficult to present a fair assessment of Zbofil's achievements as administrator of the Transvaal artillery. He failed to transform the old collection of old guns he found in 1886 into a modern artillery force - but given the conditions prevailing in the Transvaal at the time, this was probably a task demanding super-human energies: it was not until the Jameson Raid of 1895/96 that the need for a modern and efficient artillery force of European standard was recognized by most Boers. Zbofil laid the foundations on which his successors were able to reform the Staatsartillerie into the elite force which became justly famous during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902.

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Notes:

1. I am very much indebted to the late Hofrat Dr. Walter Rabe, the noted Austrian student historian, who supplied most of the data for Zbofil's Austrian career. See also Zbofil's letter to Cdt.-Gen. Joubert, 1886 February 8 (Transvaal Archives Depository – hereafter: TAB – SS 1327; R 301766, CR 131/86).

2. This information comes from Dr Rabe's files, who also authored a short biography of Zbofil recently, emphasizing his role in the "Alemannia": "Adolf Zbofil – Wiener Alemannen-senior und Senator der Bunions-lysie" in: Corps Alemannia Wien zu Linz – Corpsarchiv, No 245 (1966), 13–22, and 253 (187), 13–18.

3. Zbofil's Grundschesiscbaft Österreichisches Staatsarchiv/Kriegsarchiv, Vienna: GB Wien (ver 1895). For his help in tracing this document and an entry in the War Ministry's register about his transfer from the infantry to the artillery, I am grateful to Dr Rainer Egger of the War Archives.

4. This information comes from a newspaper clipping, dated 29 August 1897 (unfortunately the newspaper's name is not given), which Dr Rabe found in the "Alemannia" files: "Der Fuchsmajor im Transvaal". "Fuchsmajor" refers to Adolph Zbofil's activities as instructor to junior fraternities of students. Members of the "Alemannia"'s address lists of 1881 and 1883, Zbofil lived in Molteno (District Albert), Cape Colony.

5. ibid and Erwin Zbofil's personal files (Kriegsarchiv, Vienna: GB Aog. IV-S-174 and Qualifikationslisten, P19, 3348).

6. TAB: SS 1327, R301766, pp. 19-21. Over the years, Zbofil's salary rose to £450.00.

7. As fn. 4.


10. Schiel, 23 Jahre, 175.

11. Letter Cdt-Gen to Cdr/RA&P, Pretoria, 1888 April 10 (TAB: SS 1666; R5853/68). For additional comments I am indebted to Colonel (ret.) Dr Jan Ploeger, who contributed immensely to my research, as well as to Mr Schoeman of the National Monuments Council, Pretoria, who kindly supplied me with further data on Fort Hendrina. Remaining parts of the "old" iron forts were removed from the Staatsartillerie Camp in 1897 (TAB KG 250, CR 465/1897).

12. This description has been put together from various photographs and original uniform items – and I wish to thank the staffs of the Afrikaner Museum and the National Museum of Military History (both Johannesburg), the Military Museum Fort Klapperkop (Pretoria) and the Boer Republic's War Museum (Bloemfontein) as well as the SAPD's Information Bureau for their help. For additional information I am indebted to Miss Fiona Barbour, Prof Dr J.H.G. de Villiers and Mr A.B. Walmsey. See also Trichard's memoirs (as fn. 8), p. 81.

13. TAB: SS 2989 and 2990. The documents relating to this investigation fill no less than two volumes! See also Melt van Niekerk, "Adolf Schiel en die Ou German Commando", Agtergrondboek vir Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis 14/2 (1951), 35–206, here 61–84.

14. See TAB SS 2990. CR 1085, pp. 77f. Although it is very difficult to assess these documents after nearly 100 years, I cannot share Van Niekerk's harsh condemnation of "Zbofil se laakbare poging om Schiel te benadeel" (p. 64).

15. TAB SS 3011: R 11529/11.


17. TAB: SS 4017: R 14295/93.

18. TAB: KG 78: CR 1639/94 and KG 111: CR 1236/95. On this campaign Zbofil lost his saddle and gun and demanded reimbursement from the Commandant-General.


20. A death certificate is in TAB: SS 6661: R 1115/97. For additional information I am indebted to the staff of the National Archives of Zimbabwe who were most helpful in establishing the events surrounding Zbofil's death.