

## THE ITALIAN FRONT IN THE VISION OF THE ARTIST AUREL POPP FROM SATU MARE

**Abstract:** The painter Aurel Popp from Satu Mare participated in the military conflicts deployed on the Italian front between 1915 and 1916, as a member of the regiment from Debrecen, a component part of the 20th Honvéd Division. During all this period, he tried to send his wife news about himself, about the events he had participated in, and about the places through which he had passed with his unit.

The main sources of this study are the three letters the painter addressed to his wife, Madzsar Irén. The letters preserved in the collection of the Satu Mare County Museum. Their content resembles a war journal, as the author began to write immediately after sending the previous letter, noting down his thoughts and concerns, as well as the events that occurred from the moment of finishing the previous epistle until sending the next. Thus, the letters reveal information about the regions through which he passed with his unit, the atmosphere on the frontline, in the trenches, but also about the activities behind the frontline. The events are rendered through the lenses of the artist, who described with great finesse and a sense of humour the unusual situations he had experienced.

**Keywords:** World War I, Isonzo, regiment, frontline, letters

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World War I, referred to as the Great War prior to 1939, left deep scars in the minds and hearts of the people who lived during that period. An important historical source for this theme consists in the impressions, memories and images that the participants in the events noted down in their memoirs, diaries, and even in the pages of literary works, in paintings, engravings, drawings, etc.

This study aims to reconstruct some of the events of the years 1915-1917, in which the painter Aurel Popp from Satu Mare also participated. He was a member of the regiment from Debrecen, a component part of the 20th Honvéd Division<sup>2</sup> in the Austro-Hungarian Army. An active participant in military actions on the Italian front and, then, in Russia, he left a collection of photographs taken in various towns through which he passed with his regiment, engravings, sketches drawn during the war, memoirs and letters in which recounted his experiences and happenings on the two fronts.

Of the many sources on this subject, the letters of the artist from Satu Mare have been chosen for this study, as they present the events through the lenses of a visual artist, who described with great finesse and a sense of humor the unusual

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<sup>2</sup> Prior to starting the mobilisation of August 1914, the Hungarian Honvéd units (regular combatant soldiers) were organised into 5 commands with an additional two infantry divisions, two cavalry divisions and 12 independent infantry brigades. At mobilisation, six more divisions were added to the brigades. The entire organisation was under the command of the Hungarian Ministry of Defence.

situations he experienced. Respecting his promise to his wife, Aurel Popp noted down on the pages of his epistles all the events he had witnessed, whether he had been directly involved in them or a mere spectator. Because he had the rank of officer, but also because of his artistic talent, the artist focused more on drawing maps or outlining the routes on which the operations took place. For this reason, he spent most of his time behind the front. However, due to the circles he belonged to, he learned important information about various aspects of the war.

The letters that we use as a documentary source are part, along with other documents, photographs, personal items or works of art, of the Satu Mare County Museum collection.<sup>3</sup> Based on them, as well as on some excerpts from his memoirs, we shall try to present the painter's image of World War I, his representation of moments and experiences on the Italian front, where he encountered all the difficulties and vicissitudes of war. It should be pointed out that the letters he sent to his wife were not affected by military censorship. He attempted to deliver them via trustworthy individuals who could hand them directly to the addressee or her friends.

The letters preserved in the collection of the Satu Mare County Museum represent only a part of the correspondence Aurel Popp sent his wife. It is complemented by the "Aurel Popp" Fund from the Satu Mare County Department of the National Archives of Romania, where there are preserved a series of photographs, maps, notes and other letters sent from the two fronts (the one in Italy and the one in Russia) by the painter from Satu Mare, to his wife and to other family members (his mother and brothers). These documents complete the information about the period and the regions he passed through, together with the military units to which he belonged.

### **Aurel Popp, biographical data**

A renowned painter, graphic artist and sculptor who belonged to the second generation of the Painting School from Baia Mare, Aurel Popp was born on 30 August 1878, in the village of Eriu, Căuaș commune, Sălaj County, in the present-day county of Satu Mare. His parents were Samuilă Popp, a local parish priest, and Maria Sopronyi, originating in Istrău. In fact, the Pops represent an old Romanian family that has given the community several generations of Greek-Catholic priests. In 1882, he was orphaned due to the loss of his father. As of that day, it was the mother who devoted her entire energy to raising and educating her four sons: Aurel, Ioan, Mihai and Octavian.

He attended primary school in the locality of Căuaș, and then in the commune Craidorolț and in the town of Carei. The years he spent in Carei as a high school student, at Piarist High School (1892-1899), had a great influence on the spirit of the future artist. It was also during this period that he made his first artistic attempts, which brought to light his impressive talent.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Henreinafter: Col. MJSM.

<sup>4</sup> Aurel Popp, *La capătul Unei vieți... fragmente de jurnal și alte scrieri*, Selection, translation, notes and foreword by Iudith Erdős, Satu Mare: Ed. Muzeului Sătmărean, 1999, p. 10.

After graduating from high school in 1899, he enrolled in the Higher School of Painting and Calligraphy from Budapest. In 1903 he received a scholarship to study in Italy, which he took full advantage of, visiting Rome, Siena, Perugia, Assisi and Orvieto. After graduation, he returned to Satu Mare, where he did not stay too long because he was conscripted and sent to Vienna to do his military service.

After completing his military service, he received a chair as a substitute teacher at Huedin. After a short period there, he returned to Satu Mare as a teacher at the Royal Roman Catholic High School (1906-1914).

In November 1907, he married Madzsar Irén, the younger daughter of Professor Madzsar János. “He had a famous past due to his fight against former Minister of Education Trefort and other dignitaries, these names causing his fame, but the greater his fame was, the lower was his salary [...] Of course, Madzsar János was on the side of the former owners, that is, of the Romanian church.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1914, after the outbreak of World War I, he was summoned into the ranks of the Austro-Hungarian Army and participated in its military actions both on the Western and on the Eastern Front. The company to which he belonged was assigned to Honvéd Regiment 3 in Debrecen.<sup>6</sup> The experience of actively participating in military operations was crucial to the subsequent evolution of his artistic vision with social involvement. He was embroiled in the turmoil of events from the autumn of 1918 and the spring of 1919, being a member of the Communist Directorate of Satu Mare and serving as Commissioner for problems of education and culture. He was the initiator of the civil guards in Satu Mare, whose role was to maintain public order and peace.

He was awarded the title of Emeritus Artist in 1958, and only two years later, on 8 August 1960, shortly before turning 81, he passed away and was buried in the family chapel.

### **The natural setting of the Isonzo region**

The 12 armed clashes between Italy and Austria-Hungary, which took place during the period of World War I, went down in history as the Battles of Isonzo. This name comes from the river Isonzo (Soča), the military confrontations taking place along this valley. Most of the region is in present-day Slovenia, located between the northern Adriatic Sea and the springs of the river Isonzo. Doberdò Plateau represents the western extension of the Carso (Karst) Mountains, from the northern basin of the Adriatic Sea, being surrounded to the east by the Vallone Valley, south of the Adriatic Sea, west of the Isonzo and north of the river Wippach (the present-day Vipava). Its area is approximately 60 km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Italian Front, the battles of Isonzo**

Until May 1915, Italy maintained its neutrality towards the global conflict that broke out in 1914. On 23 May 1915, it declared war on Austria-Hungary, engaging in a long series of armed clashes. The incident that paved the way in this direction was

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> <http://gebirgskrieg.heimat.eu/5116.htm>

the bombing of the Italian fleet in Venice by the dualist army, inflicting heavy losses thereupon.

Of the 12 clashes, 11 were Italian offensives without a concrete outcome, which caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of soldiers. The Italian General Luigi Cadorna, a staunch advocate of frontal attack, aimed to break through the Slovenian plateau and conquer Ljubljana, thus threatening Vienna. Austro-Hungary was forced to move part of its forces away from the eastern front, into the area of the Isonzo River. Thus, the series of battles waged in this region began. In late October 1915, the German-Austrian troops managed, through a joint offensive, to break through the Italian front at Bovec (Flitsch), Kobarid (Karfreit) and Tolmin (Tolmein).<sup>8</sup> To avoid being surrounded, the Italian Army was forced to withdraw on the Piave Valley.

General Luigi Cadorna believed that the Italian Army would be more successful if it conducted its attacks from the plateau in the eastern region of the river Isonzo. He also wanted the Italians to continue to advance northwards and to cross the mountains from the other side of the river, causing the withdrawal of the Austro-German Army. He did not expect the operations from the Isonzo to be easy. He was aware that the river would overflow. During the period 1914-1918 there was even registered a record in terms of the rains that fell in the region.

The Italian general's plans could not be implemented, his army facing a change due to the Austro-Germans' mode of action. Thus, the Italians had to neutralise their opponents' defence, carried out from the mountains. To achieve this goal, the Italians had to cross the river, a hurdle that they could not overcome in a satisfactory manner.

In the southern region, along the coastline, the geographical features were also in favour of the Austro-German Army.

In the first battle, the heavy fighting took place on the plateau of Doberdò, located between Monfalcone and Sagrado, in order to reach the bridge in Gorizia (Görz), whereby the Isonzo valley could be crossed. The Italians lost 15,000 people, while Austria-Hungary had 10,000 dead and wounded.

Regarding the echo that the fights waged here produced among the Austro-Hungarian Army, it is very suggestive what the Hungarian writer Zalka Máté<sup>9</sup> describes in his novel *Doberdò*: "Doberdò. A strange word. As if there was a beating of the drums and a gloomy rolling could be heard. [...] The name Doberdò did not refer just to the village, but also to the southward plateau, spreading along 10-15 km. This rocky region, with poor vegetation, was the territory most heavily drenched in blood from the Italian front along the Isonzo section. The echo of the name Doberdò sounds, to Hungarian ears, like a drum. Perhaps that's where the name of this village comes from, since blood was not spilled only here. [...] But the entire section of the front line was baptised Doberdò by the Hungarian Army, because this name was related to the drummers, reminding us of the continuous shooting of weapons and the

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> Zalka Máté (1896-1937), a Hungarian writer. His real name was Béla Frankl. He participated in the battles on the Italian front and then in those from Russia, being incarcerated as a prisoner of war in the Russian camps and coming thus under the influence of the communist ideals.

bloody storm. Doberdò acquired a grim reputation at the end of 1915, but at the beginning of 1916 it became synonymous with the notion of the death plains.”<sup>10</sup>

The clashes from the second battle took place in the region Monte San Michele and Gorizia (Görz), the Italian Army managing to occupy a part of the Doberdò Plateau. This time, the number of those who died or were injured on the battlefield was impressively large: 42,000 Italians and 46,000 Austro-German soldiers.

The fights of the third battle continued to aim the occupation of the Doberdò Plateau, failing to open the way to Monte San Michele. This time, Italy suffered far greater losses compared to the forces of the Central Powers, namely 60,000 men, compared to 42,000 Austro-Hungarian dead and wounded.

The “battle for Parliament” was the name under which the fourth military confrontation in the Isonzo region was known. Its name came from the fact that the Italian General Luigi Cadorna wanted at all costs to obtain a victory, since there were forthcoming elections for Parliament, but again, the Italian Army suffered a defeat. It organised more offensives, but to no avail, the attacks resulting in heavy casualties on both sides.

About these clashes, the letters that the painter Aurel Popp sent his wife represent a rich source of information, which is presented in much detail. They represent a kind of a diary of events that happened over the course of a few days. Thus, he noted all the events and changes that had occurred since his previous letter, until the moment he had the possibility of sending the next one. Because he also communicated to his wife secret information that he had had access to: “You must on no account give my letter to others! Much of what I wrote are war secrets and I can have big problems because of this,”<sup>11</sup> Aurel Popp did not use too often the military post to send his letters. He sought trustworthy people he knew, who went back home on leave or who came to visit the front, asking them to hand these letters to his wife.

In the lines he sent his wife, one can find the image of the regions he went through with his unit, the atmosphere on the front line, in the trenches, but also behind the lines. Thus, in the letter he began on 7 January 1916, Aurel Popp wrote the following: “On 28 December, we set off from Palitsche. We set off at 3 in the morning. Palitsche is high. But not near Görz. It was a crummy village, we couldn’t even get any food [...]. In Palitsche we withdrew every day. A horrendously ugly area. Giants mountains and cliffs at every step, walking was a nightmare. I got very, very tired. I struggled all day and in the evening, I listened exhausted to the cannons firing. I realised that my current situation was much worse. Maybe it’s good that man gets used to things, because here it’s quite rare not to hear the sound of cannons.”

“The road was terrible. We’re seized by this anger that God knows what situation we are getting into, that we do not count in the world. I thought we would directly reach the line of fire and, why should I deny this, my dear, like everyone else, I was intimidated too. From Palitsche, we were taken by train to St. Daniel. So we were off to the front of St. Michel. Knowing this, you can imagine with were our feelings when we got off the train. From here, they steered us into this village, where

<sup>10</sup> [http://nagyaboru.blog.hu/2010/09/29/a\\_doberdo\\_fogalma](http://nagyaboru.blog.hu/2010/09/29/a_doberdo_fogalma)

<sup>11</sup> The letter of Aurel Popp, 31 January 1916, Col. MJSM, inv. no. 4729.

we are now: Tomasovica, more precisely Infantry Regiment 3 of Debrecen, with the Honvéd. This is the regiment that was stationed here before our arrival. I took it as a bad sign that they had big losses during their last confrontation. Because it is a Hungarian, this regiment is always sent to the roughest places. This must be a good place, that's what I thought, and sadness came over me as it always does when we get in less important situations. Luckily, I was wrong. When we arrived, Regiment 3 had been in the shelter for a long time. And it has remained thus since I got here. Until when? We'll see at the end of the letter."

"Our regiment always gets to the most dangerous places. To the side of the Doberdò Plateau that is closer to St. Michel. Those who came back are talking about terrible cannon shots, especially about the battle of the Isonzo they say it was terrible, particularly since it was then that our withdrawal really began. I thought then that how many of us, people of 18-45 years, will return. The regiment is made up of such people [...] Those who are at the front have no shelter. Those at the rear are somewhat protected. There's no place for sleep where they are sending Regiment 3; because it is a Hungarian regiment, they are deployed, of course, in the most terrible places. On the line where I will be, they say it is 6-8 km farther back than the front line. From there I could escape somehow – perhaps I can escape still [...] This village is 15-20 km away from the front, but planes fly over it every day and sometimes they even bomb it terribly. Sure, bombs fall also away from the village because they are constantly attacked by cannons and rifle shots. The area is mountainous, with cliffs. The people are Italians-Slavs and they are extremely ill-natured. One cannot drink water at all. For drinking, rainwater is collected in tanks. Water for the army is transported by car. What we can see here, how many people are fed, it's like in stories. The main road passes through our village and, thus, everything passes before our eyes. Food, potatoes, meat, clothes, shoes and ammunition are permanently transported with hundreds and hundreds of carts. From St. Daniel to the front rows of carts can be seen and there are a lot of soldiers marching or drilling. Today the heir to the throne is here and he is decorating those who have distinguished themselves. The other day, on 13, Archduke Joseph decorated many people. So, there is a parade, but at the same time the cannons are roaring and planes are flying over the area. I would sit quietly and I would drink more here, at home, in my room, of 6 feet by 6, in my drawing room, if I did not have to go to the colonel at 12½ to discuss this and that about the fuss tomorrow, but I need to hurry."

"I have not yet written about the furniture. I'm staying in the same room made of earth, with Till Guy and a sergeant. The beds are dirty, with lice, so, normally, I couldn't be sleeping there. But somehow I have got used to it. I can sleep peacefully. It's not cold at all. It's a little frosty now, but in my sleeping place from the south area it is enormously warm. So, I have carried useless things with me, and I will have to throw many of them away."<sup>12</sup>

The letter he began on 31 January 1916 describes in detail the road to the frontline, the manner in which the soldiers were forced to move to avoid being

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<sup>12</sup> The letter of Aurel Popp, 7 January 1916, Col. MJSM, inv. no. 4728.

spotted by the enemies, the emotion felt during the journey and the confrontations, the repeated attacks of the Italians, the losses incurred by the battalion, the shortcomings endured both in the barracks and during the troop movements, homesickness, the thoughts about the loved ones and the fear of no longer seeing them again. It is not surprising that the landscapes are viewed and described with the mind of an artist, a person who can find beauty and sensitivity even in the ruins left by the explosion of grenades.

“Where should I begin? In the last letter, when they sent me to the post, I wrote about Tomasevica. [...] From T., I went to Sagrado, where the regiment came after me. We stayed here one day, and then we went into position. I learned that I also had to go and also my new commander assigned me to the battalion, and so I did remain somewhat safe. [...] I set off with the others on 17 at 5 ½ through Markodini (Montfalcone) directly along the line of fire. And from here, and I say this with all sincerity and not to boast about this, here it is, I write everything in detail, I felt reassured that, thank God, I got over it and, like many others, no harm was done to me. It was already late at night when, on the road strewn with holes from the grenades fired day and night, we were caught up with by the battalion in the village of Markodini that was 7-8 km away. The road was terrible, every moment we were expecting cannon fires from our opponents, but no one would have confessed and said a word about how fretful they were inside. Only the footsteps and the heavy gasping could be heard, because everyone focused very intently. Nearer and nearer, we could hear rifle shots and, under Markodini, in the dark, we could already see the light of each gunshot, which surpassed all expectations. The road became increasingly worse. We were tired and I was so sleepy. We stealthily passed through Markodini. The many ruins which signalled the village were exceedingly pictorial in the night light and I, with my naive artistic soul, could focus on nothing but the formidable images that I saw between these ruins, even though, increasingly more often, I had been hearing here and there that buzzing sound that a bullet shooting out of a gun makes. Beyond the village, to reach our position, we had to pass by a high fence made of stone. Another 6 kilometres from M. From here, every step was a serious danger. Along the fence we had to walk ducking our backs, in some places we even had to go on all fours, lest we should get hit by a bullet. We had to keep walking, so we went with unbelievable indolence and did not think for one minute that we could meet the fate of those bandaged men who passed by us to the place of first aid. It was a difficult journey. Some prayed aloud, we had certainly never thought of God so earnestly and we had never begged him for help so much. Although this was only the beginning. When in the first big hole, the sinkhole, we came across our battalion commander, the lieutenant colonel, we all thought we had arrived. From all sides we could hear rifle shots up close. From here, however, we have had to advance along three similar sinkholes until we got to ours, which was linked to a 3-400 m long trench. The trench was dug in the ground, provided at the edges with rocks and sandbags, and it looked like a wall. But even here we had to move on all fours and as quietly as possible, for we were slightly exposed. When we went down into the trench after the first sinkhole, we met with the Czech battalion which was returning from the shift and withdrawing, outraged that we were being a little loud. When we were past

them, there was a chilling sound, followed by atmospheric pressure and a huge blast. We immediately jumped flat onto our stomachs, on the ground, and there we waited, without a word, for our trouble or our luck. In the dead silence between the three grenade explosions, all we could hear was the beating of our hearts. We waited for a while and then we left the sinkhole now crawling, now standing, now on all fours. [...]. I woke up because of the terrible noise of the grenade explosion, like I wrote Otto too, while I was still in the shelter. It passed right above the sinkhole, so it was impossible for our defence to shoot. Later I got used with these grenades because the foul Italian fired 3-4 every quarter or half an hour. I spent the days in the sleeping place. I did not have to go out, I had no other job but to do sketches (map sketches) for the reports of my lieutenant colonel. [...] Shotguns were heard day and night up in the shelters where the battalions were. [...] I think there were 15-16 dead and about 30 wounded in our battalion. They say it's not much, but I can't estimate. I was tired, I kept thinking of you and all I feared was the unexpected. [...] For 9 days I ate only in the evening, I did not get undressed, and I never took my boots off. We did not wash because we could not find a way to do such things. But it was all right. In the end, everyone had got used to this. The worst situation was that of the soldiers in the service of the officers, among them Tatár too, because they had to go to the first sinkhole for dinner. This was not too pleasant, but they, poor men, they did it because they too were hungry when the evening came. [...] I also inspected what the battlefield was like. Full of stones. In position they had built trenches. Just rocks everywhere. They rose from the ground as if they had been planted there. So, wherever it hits, a grenade scatters its pieces with a terrible power. That is why you must never show your figure, as they say. You must always move stealthily. Day and night! There is only one quiet period, approximately between 8 and 10, before the meal. Then there is no sound, everyone is sleeping, only the guards are watching carefully. Sometimes our men or the Italians organise raids. These are terrible things. For example, once when we were in position, the Italians fired their cannons for 36 hours without a break, we had all gone underground and were waiting for them to finish. Grace to you, Lord, for we have survived this too!"<sup>13</sup>

The twelfth battle, called the "Battle of Good Friday" (Battaglia di Caporetto), which took place on 24-27 October 1917, brought about a change of the front line. The German-Austrian offensive was led by General Otto von Below. A decisive factor for the Austro-German victory was the use of phosgene gas in battle. On the morning of 24 October 1917, the offensive started, managing to create a breach in the Italian defence, which was numerically superior. Italian soldiers had only two alternatives: either to die by poisoning with phosgene gas or to retreat. On the evening of the second day, except for Monte Matajur, the Italian defence was destroyed. The front line was modified, as the upper section of the Isonzo Valley had been occupied by the Austrians. During the following days, there came the biggest defeats ever suffered by Italy. The losses were also caused by the increasingly widespread panic among the Italian soldiers.

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<sup>13</sup> The letter of Aurel Popp, 31 January 1916, Col. MJSM, inv. no. 4729.



Following the victories obtained, the Austro-German Army managed to reach Piave, where it was stopped by the British and the French troops, which had come to the aid of the Italians, getting also involved in their reorganisation.

The letter begun on 19 February 1916 is tense, full of concern for those at home, for the situation of the family, of the children, of the wife. Its lines reveal the soldier's lack of morale, his acute demoralisation caused by the harsh conditions on the frontline, by the psychic tension to which he is subjected because of uncertainty, the unknown, his alienation from the people and the places that are dear to him. "I told you, in general, I cannot even imagine what is at home. I thank God every day that you have no problems and this protects me too and it gives me peace that one day passes after another and every day I'm glad it went past. I try to not fret because, anyway, there's nothing I can do. [...] I constantly keep myself occupied so as not to give myself time for turmoil. But the evenings! When all the corners are dark, my longing for you seizes me [...] Here, isolated from the world, under the ground, there's so many worries bothering my soul, that what I just wrote is nothing. At night we dream such nonsense, for all day long we stay in a place of edginess and craziness, we almost unconsciously throw ourselves into sleep and we sleep so deeply, as only here we could. And yet, all kinds of crazy dreams get a hold of our brain. Last night, I cried again, but I don't remember why. I expect good news, it may be in the mail! The mail comes only in the evening and we worry all day long."<sup>14</sup>

In 1916, late in the autumn, the 20th Honvéd Division, which included the Regiment 3 of Debrecen, one of whose members was Aurel Popp, together with the Honvéd Regiment from Alba Iulia and Oradea, reached the Russian front, where only a few weeks later, they swore the oath of allegiance to the last emperor of the House of Habsburg. But at the end of the war found him in Eger, where his unit had been stationed since the end of 1917.

It is interesting to compare how Aurel Popp presents, in his journal, the Italy that he saw and experienced as a college student, when he had come here on a scholarship, and the Italy that he encountered during the war. The experiences are entirely different, but they are expressed each time through the eyes and the vision of an artist, which he never abandoned, even at moments of danger in the war. During the first period, the young painter was astounded by the beauty and grandeur that were revealed to him, he was overwhelmed with joy, but he was also driven by the desire to discover as much as Italy could offer an artist. "I wish I could have said more about the trip to Italy [...] Our worthy teacher wanted to show us the monuments and museums of Siena, Perugia and Assisi, which he actually succeeded in doing, especially since everyone was gaping at each and every monument or painting [...] I was thinking I was in Italy, where there are so many beautiful things [...] I started studying the map: how and which way I could reach Rome. Or at least Orvieto, where I could see some works by Michelangelo. [...] I stayed one day in Orvieto, and I spent even that time in the cathedral, where I could marvel at the huge painting by Michelangelo. [...] The next day I left for Ancona [...] Oh, Ancona. That fishing

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<sup>14</sup> The letter of Aurel Popp, 19 February 1916, Col. MJSM, inv. no. 4729.

village, built helter-skelter, how beautiful it was in the morning! [...] Like a story I'd dreamed about long before, that's what my journey to Ancona was like."<sup>15</sup>

His talent and artistic vision never left him during the war. Both in the letters he sent to his loved ones and in his journal pages, the image of the Italian front is rendered through the eyes and the soul of a painter. Eloquent, but with much finesse, Aurel Popp manages to capture in writing the hardships of war, expressing his revolt against what happened to him and his comrades. "In November 1915, we reached the Italian front. Cold winds were blowing among the rocks of the Carstic Mountains (Karst). Night drills were carried out in snow up to our knees and in a biting cold, and I, the eternal rebel, at the morning roundup, I would more than once loudly trumpet my grievances in front of my 17-year old comrades. It was already snowing in December, when, after a few weeks of front drills, our infantry company was assigned to Honvéd Regiment 3 in Debrecen. In January 1916, we reached the front line, where, within two weeks, only a few of those 17-year old men were still alive in my company. We had taken a terrible bite of the horrors of war..."<sup>16</sup>

The happiness and the bliss from the first period were replaced by insecurity, revolt and disappointment. The mountains, the ruins caused by explosions, cold and rain took the place of works of art, the sun and the sea. But nothing of the war atmosphere could dampen the artistic vision through which Italy was lived, studied, sketched, drawn and described in his letters and in the pages of his journal. They are a testimony about the military dimensions of the conflict, about the life of the soldiers from or behind the Italian front, about their concerns, their thoughts and their hopes, attempting to achieve a complete picture of the war.

The period Aurel Popp spent in Italy, either for artistic documentation or on the front, marked his life and work. His memoirs and his correspondence with his family members and friends represent an important source of information for the different aspects of life during that time.

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<sup>15</sup> Aurel Popp, *op. cit.* p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 61.