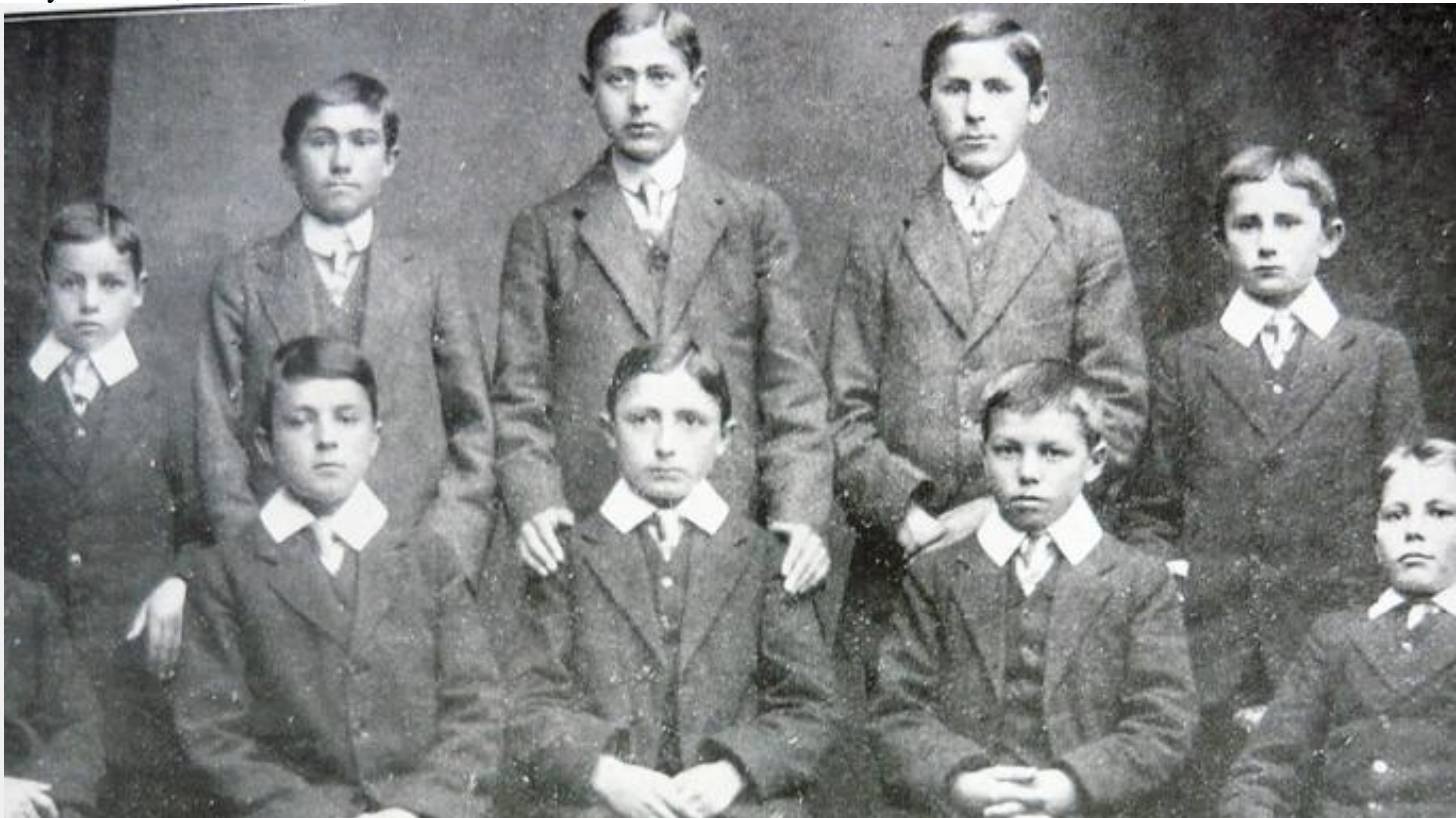


The Times & The Sunday Times

Rugby legends: the Serbian Herioters

Rhona Taylor

May 11 2016, 12:01am, The Times



Serb refugees came to George Heriot's school and founded their country's first national rugby team in 1918 NOT KNOWN

They were child refugees from wartorn Serbia who arrived in Scotland starving and sick, having barely survived their perilous escape on foot across the mountains of Albania and Montenegro. Within months of arriving in Edinburgh in August 1916, the 27 boys had been transformed from traumatised children who had seen thousands of their countrymen die of exposure, starvation and disease, into sporting legends who became famous across Scotland for their talents on the rugby pitch. The boys, who were aged between 12 and 17, had been given free places at George Heriot's School, and were supported throughout the war by the people of Edinburgh. They had never heard of rugby when they arrived at Waverley station, bewildered, traumatised and unable to speak a word of English. But the youngsters immediately displayed such natural talent for the sport that soon three of them were playing for the school's highly regarded First XV alongside future Scotland internationals. In 1918 the boys formed the first Serbian national team, winning a match played in Edinburgh in front of a crowd of more than 8,000. They eventually took the sport back to Serbia at the end of the First World War, and set up the country's first rugby club. Their tale is, according to Louise Miller, a historian who has researched the boys' story, one of the triumph of the underdog. They would have seen and experienced unimaginable

horrors, Ms Miller said, on their journey to Scotland during “the retreat” of winter 1915 after their country suffered catastrophic defeat at the hands of Germany and her allies. More than 100,000 Serbs died attempting to make the crossing. She said: “They were in a really terrible condition when they arrived, so the fact that they ended up being champion rugby players just a few months later is pretty extraordinary. “It was a really remarkable physical and mental transformation. Before the war, rugby wasn’t a game played at all in Serbia, in fact they’d never even heard of rugby. But they just had a natural affinity for the game.”In March 1918 the boys’ talents were showcased when they formed a Serbian sevens team for a charity match at Inverleith in aid of the Red Cross.

Their opponents were a formidable team of Edinburgh public schoolboys who came from Britain’s rugby-playing colonies. The Serbs wore shirts in their national colours, emblazoned with the country’s flag. The odds were stacked in favour of the more experienced colonial boys, but the Serbs won the match, 8-3. “The boys really knew that they were playing for their country,” Ms Miller said. “This was a big exhibition match and there was a real sense of occasion. And the colonial boys had really wanted to play against this famous group of Serbian rugby players at Heriot’s.”

At the end of the war the boys returned to Serbia. Several of them returned to Edinburgh many times, and many described themselves as Scots. Dimitrije Dulkanovic, who was known as the school’s “flying wing three-quarter”, went on to train as a doctor, and set up the country’s first rugby club in Belgrade. Dr Dulkanovic died in 1995, aged 95, and was buried in his old school tie. He was one of five of the Serbian Herioters to attend the school’s tercentenary in 1959, and continued to visit into the 1980s.

He told the school, during one of his visits, that the boys had spent the prime of their lives in “this beautiful country”. “We can never forget the hospitality and friendship which we felt everywhere in Scotland,” he said. “At that wartime we were homeless and parentless, so our gratitude to Scotland and Scottish people will last till the end of our lives.”Dr Dulkanovic’s daughter will be among the boys’ descendants who will join Scottish and Serbian dignitaries at George Heriot’s next month to mark the centenary of their fathers’ and grandfathers’ arrival in Scotland.

They will be speaking at an event along with Ms Miller about the legacy of the Serbian Herioters at the National Library of Scotland on June 6.