

THESES OF PH.D.

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**HUNGARIAN WAR PRISONERS IN HUNGARY,
WAR PRISONER COLLECTION CAMPS IN HUNGARY IN THE LIGHT OF
HUNGARIAN SOURCES
1944 - 1945**

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The purpose and the precedence of the dissertation

The topic of the Hungarian prisoners of war in the second world war was not dealt with up to the period directly preceding the change of the political and economic system because in the one-party dictatorship this was a taboo owing to the extremely adverse living circumstances and the high death rate of those who were captured in the Soviet Union. This topic was first touched upon by Mihály Korom, and later by Lajos Für, but this only related to the estimation of the number of Hungarian prisoners of war in WWII. At the same time, a real breakthrough from a professional point of view derived from the activities of Tamás Stark, as he already determined the number and the loss of Hungarian prisoners of war in WWII on the basis of extended research into the archives, and he came out with publications covering the life of prisoners of war and civilians, as well as the Soviet and international background to the events. In addition, Miklós Füzesi and Gergely Csiffáry took a closer look at the issue of the prisoners of war.

However, no one else beside the author of these lines has published any work to deal with the topic of my dissertation, i.e. the war prisoner collection camps in Hungary.

These camps were only touched upon by Tamás Stark and Gergely Csiffáry and were mentioned in one or two paragraphs of the „White book on the situation of the prisoners of war and captured civilians taken to the Soviet Union”, which was published by the Prisoner of War Service of the Comradely Community of Hungarian Fighters in emigration, in 1950. This is not surprising as the camps were shrouded in utmost secrecy already at the times when they were in operation. With a few exceptions, not even the official Hungarian entities were allowed to enter these camps.

The purpose of the dissertation is to explore the history of the Soviet, Bulgarian and Romanian war prisoner camps set up in Hungary, together with presenting the life, the living conditions and the death rate of the people held captive in these camps as well as the opportunities for their liberation, on the basis of Hungarian sources, and all these issues are supplemented by covering the period spent by the war prisoners outside the collection camps but still in Hungary up to the time of their arrival at the Romanian transit and distribution camps.

In this dissertation, the territory of Hungary is construed as the territory of Hungary in harmony with the Trianon decision, without the reannexation between 1938 and 1941. The reason is partly because the preliminary truce agreement of 11 October 1944 and the final truce agreement of 20 January 1945 also prescribed these borders for the public

administration and for the armed forces of the Hungarian state until the pacification. As a result, only those war prisoner collection camps – established or still in operation after 20 January 1945 – constitute or can constitute *de jure* the subject matter of our research that were set up within the borders of Hungary as stipulated in the truce agreement. On the other hand, even the Hungarian government and the Hungarian public administrative bodies could maintain direct contacts with the war prisoner collection camps and with the persons held captive only within the above-mentioned borders. On the third hand, as I pointed out in the title of my dissertation, I intend to process this topic in the light of the sources that are available in the current Hungary, which are basically identical with the territory of Hungary of that time.

Main chapters of the dissertation:

Hungarian citizens becoming prisoners of war in Hungary

In today's territory of Hungary about 350 000 Hungarian soldiers became prisoners of war; about ten thousand persons until the end of October, based on the contemporary military calculations and on the number of desertations: about 280-300 000 persons from November 1944 until the end of 1945 out of the loss of the Hungarian army covering 560-570 000 persons, and another, minimum 50 000 persons from February until the termination of the fighting in Hungary.

However, the Russian authorities also took masses of the civilian population captive. In Hungary, this had several other, specific reasons outside retaliation and acquiring labour force: 1.) Preparing the annexation of the territory named "Kárpátalja" to the Soviet Union, which – in terms of the territory of today's Hungary – only affected what was called Csonka-Bereg county between the river Tisza and the country border. 2.) Supplementing the number of the prisoners of war. On the one hand, this was probably based on a central instruction, namely because those men who performed military service after 1941 – even if they were no longer soldiers during the time of battles in Hungary – were collected throughout the whole territory of Hungary and were taken to captivity, but men and young boys aged between 13 and 64 were also taken away. On the other hand, the number of the prisoners of war was extended on the basis of personal decisions at a local level, partly in order to increase the personal glory, and partly due to the delay in achieving the strategic or military operational objectives set by their superiors. In the latter case – for fear of retaliation - stronger-than-the-reality opponent forces were reported as a reason for the

delay, and with a view to the fact that they had to render accounts for the prisoners of war, they substituted the missing quota from the population. The largest substitution of the number of war prisoners was made in connection with the battle of Budapest, when Malinovsky marshal explained the delay of the siege with the extremely huge number of the opponent forces (188,000 persons), out of whom 138,000 were taken captive. As against this, the number of the Hungarian-German defending army consisted only of 75-80,000 persons, and about 40 000 of them could have fallen into captivity. The approximately 100,000 persons who were missing from the prisoners of war were added by the marshal out of the population of Budapest and its environs. In total, about 150-170,000 men were taken to captivity from the Trianon-sized Hungary by the Soviet authorities. 3.) Masses of women were also taken to the Soviet Union under the pretext of having German nationality, but they were taken to detention camps rather than to war prisoner camps, therefore they fall out of the topic of my dissertation. Therefore, all in all, 500-520,000 Hungarian citizens got into Soviet captivity in the territory of today's Hungary. Apart from them, another, approximately 80-120,000 Hungarian citizens were taken into Soviet captivity west from our country borders – as a result of settling abroad and fleeing from the Red Army – in the territory of the German Empire, but along the route to the Soviet Union they also turned up in war prisoner camps in Hungary. This means that more than 600,000 fellow-Hungarians were taken into war prisoner collection camps in Hungary.

Walking to the collection camps

The war prisoners had to walk generally for 2-7 days, or sometimes even for ten days from the place of becoming captive to the collection camps that were located mostly about 50, or even more than 200 kilometres behind the front line. The processions became longer and longer, for the most part, because the nearby collection camps were quickly filled up, or due to the expanding epidemic at the camps, while on some other occasions due to the counter-attack of the enemy troops and to the changing orders. During the long walk, no provision was made at all for feeding the prisoners, and it totally depended on the guards. In most cases nothing was given to the captive people for days. Many times, they were only able to get some water from the nearby puddles. Those who tried to escape were shot down without any hesitation. Similar was the fate of those who fainted, or were no longer able to walk. The guards replaced the missing prisoners with people who happened to be passing by. The trip raised special difficulty for the prisoners over the wintertime, when the temperature was minus 10-15 degrees Celsius. During the way, they often had to stop in the

snow fields, under the open skies, perhaps in stables or in unheated stone buildings. Along the route to the collection camps 1-2 % of the prisoners lost their lives due to an illness, freezing, a gun shot or other reasons.

The camps

From October 1944, a series of war prisoner collection camps were established in Hungary, parallel with the westwards advance of the front line. Moreover, several other war prisoner camps were set up throughout the country until the middle of June 1945, when the fighting was concluded in Hungary – not only supervised by the Red Army, but also by the Bulgarian and Romanian armies that were fighting in the territory of Hungary together with the Soviets. As a result, war prisoner camps were opened under the supervision of the first Bulgarian troop in Southern Transdanubia as well as of the fourth Romanian troop in Northern-Eastern Hungary. At the same time, the war prisoner issue, and thus the supervision of the camps belonged to the power of the NKVD, i.e. the War Prisoner and Internation Cabinet of the Soviet Home Office Commissariat. This is why the guards in the Bulgarian and Romanian camps were not allowed to release the persons held captive by them, but they had to hand over the prisoners to the NKVD commanders of the designated, nearby Soviet camps.

In the Trianon-sized territory of Hungary more than fifty war prisoner collection camps were established at 47 settlements and parallel with this numerous war prisoners collection points as well as along the roads towards settlements and railway embarkation places.

The objective and the task of these camps was to collect, enumerate, classify and keep the war prisoners at a well-guarded place as well as to prepare them for further transport until the higher order and the railway wagons arrived in order to further transport the war prisoner quotas. Those camps that were located at railway junctions or river crossing places, for example, at Baja, Cegléd, Székesfehérvár or Szeged also dealt with transit camp tasks besides their collection camp functions. In addition, the Hajmáskér camp was also given a special function as it became an officers' camp from the late summer of 1945. The period of existence of these camps basically depended on the railway transporting opportunities. The smaller camps with worse transporting-geographical camps lasted only for 2-3 months, while the bigger ones and those established at main railway junctions or railway lines were operated for 9-11 months, for example, in Baja, Szeged or Cegléd. The war prisoner collection camps were generally established near the railway lines, as well as in buildings or building complexes that were suitable for guarding and for accommodating

a large number of people. Therefore, the camps were opened mainly from barracks, manor houses, educational institutes, prison institutes or from other places or buildings that were suitable for this purposes, for example, hospitals, airports and town halls.

The captive soldiers in the collection camps were mainly collected west of the camps, while the civilian prisoners were collected within a 30-50 km area around the camp. These camps can be territorially divided into six groups on the basis of the relations between them, the captive power, the wider collection area of the prisoners as well as the procession and transporting routes: 1. group of camps beyond the river Tisza, 2. Northern-Eastern Hungarian group of camps, mainly guarded by Romanians, 3. Southern Transdanubian group of camps, mainly guarded by Bulgarians, 4. the “Budapest” group of camps between the rivers Danube and Tisza, 5. Northern-Western-Transdanubian-Székesfehérvár group of camps, 6. Northern Transdanubian group of camps.

The number and the composition of the prisoners in the camps were continuously changing. Still, with the exception of the periods directly following the establishment and directly preceding the closing of the camps, there was a continuous, average number of prisoners in each camp, and this number was very varied, ranging from a couple of hundred (e.g. the camps in Sirok and Sajóecseg) up to forty thousand (e.g. the camps in Gödöllő, the two camps in Cegléd and two camps in Székesfehérvár). The two biggest Hungarian prisoner concentration points were set up in Székesfehérvár and in Cegléd. The war prisoner camps of the latter two towns held about 130,000 persons in May 1945. At the same time, the average number of prisoners in the collection camps was set between 7 and 15,000.

Generally, captive soldiers were in majority at the camps, but in some other camps there were civilian prisoners all the time, or periodically. On average, 25-30 % of the camp residents were civilians. With regard to nationalities, most prisoners were Hungarians, followed by Germans, but there were also Austrians, Slovaks, Ruthenians, Romanians, Southern Slavs, Italians, even French, Poles and other nationalities as well.

For the most part, these camps were closed down in the same order as they were established, except for those that continued to operate later as transit camps or officers' camps, e.g. the one in Hajmáskér, which was terminated at the turn of 1945 and 1946.

Life and death at the camps

The guards established military order at the camps. From among the prisoners, the camp directorate appointed an internal camp commander and police guards (policáj), who

were mainly selected from Slavian – mainly Ruthenian – prisoners for the sake of easier communication. These guards worked as interpreters, and they were in charge of securing the internal order of the camps. In addition, some prisoners were selected to work in the kitchen, in health service, as barbers and at some places as disinfectors. Their living circumstances were easier as a result of their work. In order to ease the meals and the control of their number, the prisoners had to form sections (ten persons), companies (100 persons), or even battalions and regiments, and they had to select a commander from among themselves, whose name was written down on paper.

The prisoners had to spend most of the days standing in the yard of the camp, which was due to two main reasons: first of all, they had to stand in a queue for meals. On the other hand because of the frequent checking of their number, which was continued until two consecutive roll calls gave an identical result.

The circumstances were miserable at the war prisoner collection camps. The camps were overcrowded, many people did not even have a roof above their heads. For example, there were twenty times more people in the Szeged prison (Csillagbörtön), and 30-40 times more people in the Sopronkőhida prison compared to the accommodation capacity of the building. Even those who had a roof above their heads could get a place in unheated premises, generally on the bare floor, or in stables, but at some other camps there were wooden bunk beds built from wall to wall, and the prisoners could sleep on them if they were not disturbed by the lice, which people got quickly acquainted with once they became prisoners.

The local settlements had to supply food to the prisoner camps, which was a huge burden on the local population due to the war destruction. Depending on the camps and on the various periods, the prisoners were given hot soup and 10-40 dkg bread once or twice a day. Soup was made for the prisoners in oil or petrol barrels, and the soup generally contained maize, peas, beans, cattle-turnip or aristate rice cooked in water. The biggest problem for civilians was the lack of crockery and cutlery. For this reason, they had to rely on their opportunities and resourcefulness, and they ate from lamp globes, flower pots, tin cans or from other pots. Sometimes 5-10 people had to eat from the same pot.

There were always some work opportunities in or outside the camp, if nothing else, burying the dead, for which more food was given to those who did the work. The prisoners were classified according to various aspects: nationality, health condition and age, and the officers were separated from the others. The NKVD also made political screening at the

camps, but, for the most part, no personal records were kept, only the number of the prisoners was registered.

Despite the looting, a lot of exchange trading was done at the camps. Some of the prisoners went mad because of the circumstances, the uncertainty and the idleness, therefore in some camps, when there was less crowdedness, performances, as well as cultural and sport events were permitted, and the leaders of the camps organised propaganda lectures.

As it was forbidden to get near the prisoner camps that were surrounded with several lines of barbed wire, the prisoners and their relatives exchanged information mainly in the form of what was called "stone post". This meant that the „sender” put a piece of stone into the "letter", i.e. into a piece of paper, and threw it over the barbed wire fence. In addition, those who were taken out of the camp to work sometimes had the opportunity to talk to their relatives also personally if it was permitted by the guards in return for a proper quantity and quality of food and drink (mostly brandy).

There was hardly any chance for the prisoners to clean themselves in the camps. There was no soap and water for cleaning or washing, what is more, there was hardly any drinking water. As underwear could not be exchanged, it practically “rottened off” the people. Protection against lice – which was an effective method if it was carried out frequently – consisted of three parts: depilation, disinfection and having a bath, but disinfection boilers and, especially, bathing opportunities were scarce.

The death rate was high among the weak-bodied people due to the over-crowdedness of the camps, to poor and one-sided nutrition, to the lack and the common use of eating tools and to the adverse hygienic circumstances. There were frequent epidemics; dysentery and typhus were spreading. There was no medicine, only the method of separation was used. The further transport of the prisoners, their stay at the camp, their separation within the camp or their eventual transfer to war prisoner hospital was decided in the form of medical “check-ups”, which were based on merely looking at the person in question.

Many people died at the camps and in the war prisoner hospitals; sometimes 10-20 dead – mainly naked - bodies were put into the ground – in unmarked mass graves - every day, as well as 50-60 or even a hundred bodies at larger camps or hospitals. Some got frozen, committed suicide, were shot or died in an accident, but the majority died of infectious diseases, typhus, dysentery, tuberculosis and malnutrition.

No accurate figures are known about the death rate due to the lack of Soviet data. It was strictly prohibited for the prisoners to keep records of the dead. Therefore, we can only rely on estimates. In consideration of the death rates and processes that have been explored so far, as well as of the size, the operating time and transit traffic of the 56 war prisoner camps established at 47 Hungarian settlements it can be stated that 50-70,000 persons were taken into Soviet captivity and died in Hungarian war prisoner collection camps.

Liberation from the camps

There were several opportunities to get rid of these terrible living circumstances: 1.) January-February 1945 was the earliest date when masses of prisoners were liberated from the camps - without the knowledge of the Temporary National Government – by being adopted into the technical formations established by the Red Army. Three such formations were set up with a total of 8116 people. Despite the promises made to the prisoners, these formations were not subordinated to the Hungarian army, but they operated as the Hungarian war prisoner formations of the second Ukrainian Front up till June 1945, when they were transferred to the army. At this time, only 5472 people were handed over, which means that the loss only scored 33 %. They either died, or were taken to hospital or escaped. From the Bulgarian war prisoner camps about 400 persons were „liberated” for picking up mines in May and June, and their captivity – with a low loss rate – only ended on 24 August. 2.) More fortunate were those who were admitted to the staff of the new Hungarian Army after 20 January 1945, i.e. the conclusion of the truce agreement, upon the permission of the General Soviet Supreme Commandment. Stalin only permitted to set up two of the eight infantry divisions that were assumed in the Hungarian truce agreement. This is how the sixth infantry division was established in the area of the Debrecen war prisoner camp, and the first infantry division in the area of the Jászberény war prisoner camp. In May 1945 the army took over more than 2000 war prisoners from even more camps into the railway security and technical formations that were to be set up by the army. Accordingly, a total of more than 20,000 war prisoners were taken over by the army from the Hungarian camps, who had been screened by the NKVD health-wise and from a political point of view. 3.) Although the Temporary National Government was continuously intervening – right from the beginning - at the Soviet authorities in order to improve the situation of the war prisoners and to liberate those who had been taken away as civilians, not much success was achieved by the said government. For the most part, they – especially the governmental bodies controlled by the communist party - only managed to liberate

individual persons, mainly politicians, members of the communist party, scientists or at some places certain groups, for example, deported Jews, railway workers, miners and postal employees. 4.) Another form of liberation was attached to age, health condition and, to a smaller extent, to civilian persons. Shortly after the conclusion of the truce agreement, upon a central instruction, they started to release from the prisoner camps people under the age of 18 and above 50. Apart from them, ill and handicapped people and, in certain cases, civilians were also released. 5.) The last opportunity to get out of the collection camps in Hungary – in a mass form – came in the wake of the Soviet governmental decision in August, in connection with the termination of the Hungarian war prisoner collection camps. In early August 1945, Stalin gave the instruction to release “a total of 708,000 – including 150,000 Hungarian – war prisoner recruited soldiers and warrant officers” held captive in the Soviet Union and in the former front areas. In connection with the governmental decision and with the starting termination of the camps, 30-50,000 mainly sick, old civilians who were still left in the camps were released in Hungary. 6.) The rarer form of liberation was escaping, which most frequently occurred among those who left the prisoner camps in order to work. When the data of the runaway prisoner were registered, it was extremely difficult to get by later because the NKVD started a chase after them, which was unfortunately also assisted by the Hungarian authorities. 7.) There were also other forms of liberation. Some people were released under the pretext of venereal disease. Some others were freed in exchange for brandy by people living near the prisoner camps, also known as "war prisoner liberators" against 100,000 pengős, or its equivalent in food or other valuables. Some of the released persons were once again captivated by the Soviet soldiers on the way home, or at their place of residence.

The issue of nationality emerged as a serious problem upon the release. Namely because if someone was a Hungarian citizen but s/he was born in annexed areas outside the borders of the Trianon-sized Hungary, in that case they were not considered to be Hungarian citizens, therefore, they were not released in Hungary (with a few exceptions) but they were further transported to the Soviet Union.

The number of people released from the Hungarian war prisoner camps cannot be determined accurately because the prisoners were not released in a uniform manner but they were either handed over to the representatives of various governmental bodies, or the local public administration or the communist party, or they were simply let go. For this reason, we can rely on the knowledge that has been explored so far. Adding up the number of those

who were liberated in various manners and in various periods it turns out that a total of approximately 120-140,000 people were released by the Soviet authorities from the Hungarian war prisoner collection camps.

There was a heavy fluctuation at the camps. Many times several groups of prisoners arrived every day, and they were further transported to another collection camp or to a Romanian camp on a daily basis. On average, the prisoners spent 1-2 months in the Hungarian collection camps, but some of them spent only a few days, while others spent even 7-8 months. Many prisoners were taken to several Hungarian camps before being launched to a transit camp in Romania or in the Soviet Union.

Transportation to the transit and distribution camps in the Soviet Union

At the camps the healthy prisoners were separated and prepared for railway transport. 40-60 people were jam-packed in a railway wagon. Generally, the number of war prisoner transports was set between 1200 and 2500 persons. The trip to the Romanian distribution camps lasted for about 10-20 days. In the crowded railway wagons people could only be seated or could only lie down next to each other. During the transportation, meals were even worse than at the collection camps. The prisoners were generally given 10-20 dkg bread or one or two slices of suhari, perhaps some soup, and one or two buckets of water per wagon. Despite the poor provisions, many prisoners tried to escape by opening up the floor of the wagons, with more or less success. During the railway transportation, about 2-4 % of the war prisoners lost their lives due to escaping or due to an illness.

Sources and documents used

Since I was the first to deal with the topic of the Hungarian war prisoner camps, the overwhelming majority of my research is based on contemporary documents as well as on the events recalled by the survivors. Although I made research in more than twenty archives and collections throughout Hungary, I found very little, or no information at all about the camps as these camps were shrouded in secrecy even when they were in operation. In several archives where registered documents used to be available about this topic, the majority of such papers were annihilated during the period of „large-scale document scrapping” in the year 1952. In the Hungarian National Archives the total documentation on war prisoners for the year 1945 is missing from the documents of the Hungarian Red Cross, and the papers of the General Department for Presidency and Military Provisions of the Ministry of Welfare for the years 1945 and 1946 are also

missing! Also, the majority of the *historia domus* was taken away in the 1950s by those who worked for the State Security Office, and even when they returned them, they tore out the sheets that contained information about the period covered by the research. The contemporary national and local press also reported little information about these camps. The research was also made more difficult by the fact that even the local historians do not know a lot about these camps, therefore there are hardly any documents on their history even at a local level.

When processing the topic, the largest help was given by the documents on the year 1945 of the Department of Presidency of the Ministry of Defence and the War Prisoner Department of the Ministry of the Exterior, as well as by the recalls that are available at various places (in individual or collected volumes, periodicals, papers, etc.) out of which the most informative item about this topic was the collection of memoirs of the Comradely Federation of Former War Prisoners. Unfortunately, only 100-150 of the hundreds of researched longer or shorter memories covered the topic of Soviet war prisoners, and mainly to a little extent. In order to supplement the mosaic-like bits of information with the opportunity of oral history, I tried to cover the topic in a more detailed and accurate manner by making numerous interviews and by carrying out other collection work (correspondence).

With regard to the deaths that occurred at the camps, I received a lot of help from the second volume of the book entitled „Rest in peace” by János Bús and Péter Szabó, as well as from various scientific and professional works on infectious diseases, especially the relevant articles of the publications of the Medical Paper in 1946. The publications by András Kis and Tibor Gellért largely helped my research with regard to the sections that covered escaping into various military formations.