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# Forgotten Victims of World War II: Hungarian Women in Soviet Forced Labor Camps\*

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by

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Abstract: Tra la fine del 1944 e l'inizio del 1945 migliaia di giovani donne dai 15 anni in su, incluse donne incinte, furono deportate dall'Ungheria orientale verso campi di lavoro sovietici. Furono vittime innocenti, per "essere state nel posto sbagliato al momento sbagliato". Per periodi dai due ai quattro anni furono obbligate a vivere nelle condizioni più primitive ed atroci, lavorando in miniere di carbone ed in fattorie collettive. La maggior parte di queste donne non sopravvisse. Quelle che vi riuscirono ritornarono con infermità e malattie fisiche e psicologiche che le afflissero per il resto della vita. Al loro ritorno furono trattate dal regime comunista come criminali di guerra ed ebbero enormi difficoltà nel trovare lavoro. Per oltre quarant'anni fu proibito loro di parlare delle loro terribili esperienze. Fu soltanto dopo la fine del regime comunista, quando il loro destino fu rivelato grazie ad interviste e studi pubblicati in Ungheria, che poterono ottenere risarcimenti.

The countless number of lives lost during World War II and the displacement of millions from their native lands are among the most tragic events in the history of the twentieth century. According to experts, the past century proved to be the most violent and the bloodiest one hundred years in human history, an assertion convincingly substantiated by scholars, researchers, and journalists who have published scores of books and articles about civilian and military victims of both world wars<sup>1</sup>. Special emphasis has been put on victims of the Second World War,

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\* The essay, which has been partly updated, has already been published on S. B. Várdy - T.H. Tooley - A. H. Várdy, *Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe*, Columbia University Press, New York 2003, pp. 503-516.

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especially Hitler's crusade against the Jewish population in the countries occupied by the Third Reich. Efforts to inform the general public about the horrors of the Jewish Holocaust have been especially successful and have led to widespread knowledge about these events among practically all the nations of the world<sup>2</sup>.

This level of historical awareness does not exist for most other ethnic groups and nationalities whose lives were adversely affected by World War II. Millions of non-Jews were forced to endure previously unheard of deprivation and hardship, before, during, and after the war. Compared to the extensive investigation of the Jewish Holocaust, historical research has paid little attention to the lot of other victimized groups. Relatively little has been written about them, and as a result, these events have failed to become common knowledge. The fate of those who fled their native lands in Eastern and Central Europe in fear of the invading Soviet Army, and later settled in Western Europe, or immigrated to North or South America, has not been adequately researched. Not much is known about the victims of forced population expulsions and ethnic cleansing, such as the sixteen million Germans who were expelled from Poland and Czechoslovakia (from former East and West Prussia, Pomerania, Silesia and the Sudetenland). In the same vein, with the exception of Hungarian scholars, the general public is not aware of the retribution suffered by about 120,000 ethnic Hungarians who were driven across the Danube from Slovakia to Hungary as a consequence of the Beneš Decrees<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, knowledge about Stalin's extermination of close to fifty

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*Camps*], Kairosz, Budapest 2007, pp. 370. She has recently completed a novel entitled *My Italian Summer*, and is currently working on a sequel to her novel *Mimi*.

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent summary of this mass cruelty, see Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe*, Cambridge, Mass., 2001.

<sup>2</sup> One of the most authoritative standard works (among many hundreds) on the Jewish Holocaust is still Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jewry*, Chicago, 1961. See also the highly regarded work on the largest death camp, Debórah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present*, New York, 1996. On the Hungarian segment of the Jewish Holocaust, see Randolph L. Graham's massive synthesis, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary*, 2 vols., New York, 1981; and Randolph L. Brahm and Béla Vágó eds., *The Holocaust in Hungary Forty Years Later*, New York, 1985. A classic Hungarian-language summary is Jenő Lévai, *Zsidósors Magyarországon* [Jewish Fate in Hungary], Budapest, 1948. See also the documentary collection: *Vádirat a nácizmus ellen. Dokumentumok a magyarországi zsidóüldözések történetéhez* [Indictment of Nazism. Documents on the History of the Persecution of the Jews in Hungary], ed. Ilona Benoschofsky and Elek Karsai, 3 vols., Budapest, 1958-1967.

<sup>3</sup> On the Beneš Decrees, as they relate to the Hungarians, see Robert Barta, *The Hungarian-Slovak Population Exchange and Forced Resettlement in 1947*, and Edward Chászár, *Ethnic Cleansing in Slovakia: The Plight of the Hungarian Minority*, in the present volume, which also contains a list of the Beneš Decrees in the Appendix. According to Barrel, originally 73.187 Hungarians were slated for expulsion on the basis of the parity list. An additional 106.398 were to be expelled as "major war criminals" and 1.927 as "minor war criminals". Had this been implemented a total of 181.512 would have been expelled. But the Czechoslovak government was not satisfied even with these numbers. It turned to the Peace Conference and demanded approval for expulsion of an additional 200.000 Hungarians. These goals, however, were not allowed to be implemented, and thus by April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1948, only 68.407 Hungarians were officially resettled in Hungary. Continued illegal expulsions, however, almost doubled this number, for according to the Hungarian census of 1949 at least 119.000 of these expellees were living in Hungary. Cf. I. Romsics, *Magyarország története a XX. században* [Hungary's History in the Twentieth Century], Budapest 1999, p. 302.

million of his own “compatriots”, including Russians and many other ethnic groups and nationalities, is limited. His victims included Poles, Ukrainians, Baltic peoples, Crimean Tatars, and many others who were exterminated by the millions<sup>4</sup>. Yet, knowledge about the fate of these peoples is not widespread, at least not, to the extent to which the horrors of the Jewish Holocaust has permeated the historical consciousness of the broader public. It is evident that the victims of war and prejudice, misery, and extermination mentioned above have not attracted the same degree of interest of experts, researchers, and journalists. As a result, a gigantic gap of public ignorance and misinformation exists regarding these shocking events, both in Europe and the United States.

The lives and fate of foreign victims of Soviet forced labour camps also falls into the category of “the little known”. Insofar as historically aware individuals in Western Europe and North America have given the whole issue any thought, most have assumed that only POWs and members of the armed forces of the defeated nations were deported to the Soviet Union after World War II. This assumption could not be further from the truth. In the case of Hungary, it was only after the demise of Communism in 1989-1990 that researchers, journalists, and political leaders could begin to focus on the fate of the several hundred-thousand Hungarian civilians, including innocent women and children, who were deported to forced labour camps after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in September 1944.

It is virtually impossible to uncover the full details about these deportations, but the publication of several studies - based on memoirs, diaries, and interviews of survivors - provides a vast amount of information that contributes substantially to our knowledge of these tragic events.<sup>5</sup> These include published works by Tamás Stark, György Dupka, Péter Rózsa, Janos Rózsás, Zoltán Sente, Mihály Herczeg, and Zsolt Csalog; the memoirs of Imre Badzey and Mrs. Sándor Mészáros; and the documentary films of Sándor Sára and the Gulyás brothers<sup>6</sup>. Two volumes of interviews collected by Ilona Szebeni and Valéria Kormos document the fate of

<sup>4</sup> See the relevant studies in the present volume by Alexander V. Prusin on the Poles, and Brian Blyn Williams on the Crimean Tatars.

<sup>5</sup> According to Tamás Stark, since the collapse of the Communist regime in 1989 - 1990, about two dozen memoirs and collections of memoirs have appeared in print. See Tamás Stark, *Magyarok szovjet kényszermunkatáborokba* [Hungarians in Soviet Forced Labor Camps], in “Kortárs” [Contemporary], vol. 46, 2-3, 2002, p. 70.

<sup>6</sup> These volumes are: T. Stark, *Magyarország második világháború einberveztesége* [Hungary's Population Loss during World War II], Budapest 1989; P. Rózsa, *Ha Túléled, halgass!* [If You Survived, Be Quiet!], Budapest 1989; J. Rózsás, *Keserű ifjúság*, [Bitter Youth] 2 vol., Budapest 1989; Z. Sente, *Magyarok a Gulag-szigeteken* [Hungarians on the Gulag Archipelago], Szeged 1989; M. Herczeg (ed.), *A vásárhelyi leventék háborús kálváriája* [The War Sufferings of Leventes (Paramilitary Youth) from Vásárhely], Szeged 1990; György Dupka and Alekszei Korszun, *A “Malenkij Robot” dokumentumokban* (Malenkij Robot/Little Work in Documents), Budapest 1997; M. Sándorné, *Elrabolt éveim a Gulágon* [My Stolen Years on the Gulag], Ungvár-Budapest 2000; I. Zsunyi, *Nehéz idők* [Difficult Times], Budapest 2001; Z. Csalog, *M. Lajos, 42 éves* [Lajos M., 42 Years Old], Budapest, n.d.; Imre Badzey (ed.), *A haláltáborból: Badzey Pál szolyvai lágernaplója* [From the Death Camp: Pál Badzey's Szolyva Camp Diary], Budapest-Ungvár, n.d.. On the documentary films, see T. Stark, *Ethnic Cleansing and Collective Punishment in Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-century Europe*, cit.

innocent men and women<sup>7</sup>. These victims included young girls and boys, who were forcibly taken to the Soviet Gulag to work from three to five years under the most primitive and excruciating circumstances. In spite of the attention given to these catastrophic events since the early 1990's, it will take many more years before most of the facts will be uncovered. It will probably take even longer for this story to work its way into the realm of "general knowledge", and for elementary and secondary level textbooks to do justice to this tragic segment of Hungarian history.

In order to gain a clear understanding of the deportation of hundreds of thousands, it is necessary to examine briefly the nature of Soviet policy toward Hungary after World War II. Since Hungary was at war with the Soviet Union, POWs and abducted civilians were treated somewhat differently from deportees of other occupied territories such as Poland and Czechoslovakia. Soviet intentions regarding Hungary emerged as early as June 1943; when V.M. Molotov, the future Soviet foreign minister, outlined Soviet policy in a letter to Sir Archibald Clark Kerr, the British Ambassador to Moscow. He wrote that because Hungary was providing support to Germany, not only the government, but the entire Hungarian nation must be held responsible<sup>8</sup>. In December of the same year, Molotov reemphasized this view when he reacted to Eduard Beneš's anti-Hungarian invective. He emphasized that no matter what, "the Hungarians must be punished"<sup>9</sup>.

The status of deportations in Hungary was not affected by the armistice, as was the case in Slovakia. In December 1944, the Soviet High Command, in a decree directed to the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Ukrainian Fronts and signed by Joseph Stalin, proclaimed that all German males between the ages of 17 and 45, and all German females between the ages of 18 and 30 must be deported<sup>10</sup>. These deportations were to be carried out on the territories of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Yugoslavia. Although the major targets of the proclamation were the ethnic Germans in the states mentioned, in reality it struck a heavy blow against other nationality groups as well, especially the Hungarians. If the quota could not be filled with Germans and with Hungarians with German surnames, they took any Hungarian off the streets, even if they "did not speak a single word of German"<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> The volumes in question are: I. Szébeni (ed.), *Merre van magyar hazám? Kényszermunkán Szovjetunióban, 1944-1949* [Where is my Homeland? Forced Labor in the Soviet Union, 1944-1949], Budapest 1991; V. Kormos (ed.), *A végtelen foglyai: Magyar nők szovjet rabságban, 1945-1947* [Prisoners Forever: Hungarian Women in Soviet Captivity, 1945-1947], Budapest 2001.

<sup>8</sup> See G. Juhász (ed.), *Magyar-brit titkos tárgyalások 1943-ban* [Hungarian-British Negotiations in 1943], Budapest, 1989, p. 158.

<sup>9</sup> Péter Gosztonyi, *Háború van, háború!*, [There is War, There is War!], Budapest 1989, p. 26. See also T. Stark, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Dupka and Korszun, *A "Malenkij Robot" dokumentumokban*, cit., pp. 33-34.

<sup>11</sup> This process of collecting people for forced labour is described in detail in the documentary collection *Moszkvának jelentjük. Titkos dokumentumok* [We Report To Moscow. Secret Documents], ed. Miklós Kun and Laios Izsák, Budapest, 1994, p. 35 ff.

Soviet policy toward Hungarians was motivated by the concept of collective responsibility and collective retribution<sup>12</sup>. Consequently, unsuspecting civilians suffered the same fate as the Hungarian POWs, or those who believed Soviet propaganda, and in the hope of quick release, surrendered to enemy forces. Civilians were transported to the same network of forced labour camps and had to endure the same dreadful circumstances as the military personnel. The Association of Hungarian Veterans, an emigré organization based in Germany in the post-war years, found that as late as 1951 there were still 3,500 forced labour camps in the Soviet Union holding Hungarians, as well as other nationals such as Germans, Poles, Romanians, Japanese, Spaniards, Finns, Chinese, Ukrainians, and many others<sup>13</sup>.

It has been estimated that over 600,000 Hungarians-both military and civilian-were abducted by the Red Army to work in coal and lead mines, railway and road construction projects, and on collective farms<sup>14</sup>. According to eyewitness accounts and contemporary official documents, civilians were generally arrested in two waves<sup>15</sup>.

The first wave of deportations took place primarily in north-eastern Hungary, from regions that were in the path of the invading Soviet Army. There is no accurate record on the actual number of civilians who were deported during this time, but we know that the first wave of arrests usually took place a few days after the Soviet occupation of a given settlement. The arrests were executed with the help of Hungarian collaborators popularly called "policáj". The Soviet Army rounded up civilians under the pretence of asking young able-bodied men and women to participate in short cleanup operations popularly dubbed "malenkij robot" or "little work"<sup>16</sup>. Unsuspecting civilians were told to assemble in schools, movie theatres, and public buildings so as to perform a few days or weeks of communal work. However, they were not permitted to return home after the work was done. Rather, they were forced to walk twenty, thirty, or even fifty kilometres to reception centers in such cities as Debrecen, Miskolc, and Szerencs. From there, they were loaded into cattle cars, with between forty to sixty people to a wagon, and taken to one of the Soviet force labour camps in the Trans-Ural Region.

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<sup>12</sup> On the brutal treatment of civilians by the "liberating" Soviet Armed Forces, see C. D. Eby, *Hungary at War: Civilians and Soldiers in World War II*, University Park, PA, 1998, pp. 229-323. For the treatment and abuse of women specifically, see pp. 249 - 281.

<sup>13</sup> For a list of 3500 prisoner-of-war and slave labor camps in post-war Soviet Union, see *Fehér könyv a Szovjetunióba elhurcolt hadifoglyok és polgári deportáltak helyzetéről* [White Book on the Condition of POWs and Civil Deportees in the Soviet Union], Bad Wörishofen, Germany 1950, pp. 67-100. Also included is a location map of these camps.

<sup>14</sup> This was the estimate of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office in 1946. But because this figure does not include those Hungarians who had been taken from Romanian-controlled Transylvania and newly Soviet-controlled Carpatho - Ruthenia (Sub-Carpathia), the actual figure may be significantly higher. Cf. T. Stark's assessment in *Magyarok szovjet kényszermunkatáborokban*, cit., pp 75-76; and in Szébeni, *Merre van a magyar hazám?*, cit., pp. 302-310.

<sup>15</sup> This is discussed by Tamis Stark in his *Magyarok szovjet kényszermunkatáborokban*, pp.72-73.

<sup>16</sup> On this topic, see the already cited work, Dupka-Korszun, *A "Malenkij Robot" dokumentumokban*.

The second wave of mass internments began in January 1945, when all of Hungary was affected. Memoirs and Contemporary documents reveal that the deportations of civilians were carried out on the basis of quotas and lists set by the Soviet Secret Police, the NKVD, the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs. The Secret Police controlled and administered all the forced labour camps in the Soviet Union. Since the local organs of the NKVD had to fulfil the numerical quotas, the collection process extended - as was mentioned above - beyond the ethnic Germans to Hungarians with German names, and to many who simply happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time<sup>17</sup>.

The random nature of deportations is illustrated by the recollections of one of the deportees who related an incident that occurred during her long journey to the Soviet Union:

I witnessed a dreadful incident near a train station. We had not reached the village yet and our train was standing at a railroad crossing. A farm wagon pulled by two horses, transporting tobacco leaves, stood on the other side of the rail gate, waiting to cross. The driver must have been about thirty-six or thirty-eight, his son about thirteen or fourteen. A Soviet soldier ran over to them, yanked them both off the wagon, and shoved them into one of the cattle cars. It was terrible to listen to the hysterical cries of the man who screamed, "Take me anywhere you want, I don't care, but let the boy go so that he can drive the wagon home. My wife will never know what happened to us". They [the Russian soldiers] did not listen. They took them anyway. The train started, and as I looked back as long as I could, I saw the two horses standing there stock still, without their master. They did not move at all. The wife would have to wait in vain. Except for us, there were no other eyewitnesses<sup>18</sup>.

The compilation of lists of designated deportees was assigned to the authorities of each locality. These lists were partially drawn up on the basis of registration certificates, but they were also motivated by personal likes and dislikes. As a result, ethnic Hungarians in Romania and Slovakia were routinely selected for deportation by Romanian and Slovak authorities just because they happened to be Hungarians. It also happened that in Hungary itself, in a given village with a pure Hungarian population, lists were compiled by the local authorities motivated by revenge or jealousy<sup>19</sup>.

The full details of the process of deportation are unclear even today. For example, in some regions only able-bodied males were mobilized and deported, while in dozens of other villages authorities concentrated on the deportation of women only. In still other settlements, members of the Soviet Army simply took anyone to fill the quotas.

There were thousands of young women among the deportees. Their exact number is unknown, for many perished either on their way to the Soviet Union or as a result of the inhuman working conditions in the camps. The ratio of men and women internees varied from region to region. It is known, however, that from among those who were deported from the Upper Tisza Region, 60 percent were

<sup>17</sup> See note n. 11 above, and T. Stark, *Magyarok szovjet kényszermunkatáborokban*, cit., pp. 72-73.

<sup>18</sup> I. Vinnai (Voitò Ferencné), in Szebeni, *Merre van a magyar hazám?*, cit., pp. 137-141, quotation from p. 138.

<sup>19</sup> See I. Szebeni's introductory essay to her documentary compilation, *Merre van a magyar hazám?*, cit., pp. 9-10.

women. Most of them were between the ages of sixteen and twenty, and since legally they were still not adults, their deportation also violated the laws on the protection of minors. In this region, 42 percent of the women deportees were between twenty and thirty years, while 5 percent were between the ages of thirty and forty. Women over forty were generally not considered for deportation<sup>20</sup>.

In most settlements, young, healthy, and able-bodied girls and women were put on the lists and were deported along with young boys, young men, and men in their forties. To fill the quotas, Soviet soldiers and their accomplices arrested and deported anyone who fit the age categories, regardless of family status. Survivors told of women three, four, or five months pregnant being dragged out of their beds and taken to the gathering places. They did not receive any special treatment, and were forced to march along with the other detainees twenty to fifty kilometres to the reception centers. At the time of their arrest, the majority were forced to leave without proper clothing and food supplies, and even if they were permitted to take along some food, it could serve only as a temporary solution to their minimum daily sustenance. Their clothing and footwear proved to be totally inadequate for the extreme weather conditions of the Siberian winters. As a result, after years or at times only months of excruciating, hard labour, thousands perished by freezing to death.

Ilona Vinnai (Vojtó Ferencné), a young newly married woman in the village of Gávavencsellő in Szabolcs County, North-eastern Hungary, is a typical example of the countless young women who had to endure forced labour in the Soviet Union<sup>21</sup>. Seized in January 1945, she survived three years of harsh labour on a collective farm and in the coal mines under horrendous circumstances. Like many young women in her village, she happened to be on the list of internees but refused to assemble at the beckoning of the village drummer. Hungarian collaborators, the “*policáj*” quickly found, seized, and escorted her to the school where other detainees were held. She remembered how these “*policáj*” were often worse than the members of the Soviet occupational forces. They showed no mercy, were eager to search the homes of the villagers, and even pulled people from under their beds where they were hiding. Ilona Vinnai painted a vivid picture of the hardships in these camps: “In the winter we suffered from -40, -45 Centigrade temperatures, while during the summer we had to endure the scorching rays of the sun. We could barely move our limbs. In the winter tears froze on our cheeks; we cried from the cold and the pain. During the summer we fainted from the intense heat. But who paid any attention to this? They did not diagnose illness there as they do back home. A person without fever was considered sick only after he or she collapsed. Our physical strength was waning, and because of uncertainty, fear, and constant dread, our spiritual strength likewise<sup>22</sup>. She recalled the agony survivors suffered when their fellow workers perished one after the other, especially those who had lost their fathers, sisters, brothers or husbands. Ilona continued: “But we never abandoned faith in God. When our despair was greatest, we turned to Him, and we

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<sup>20</sup> *Ivi.*, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> I. Vinnai (Vojtó Ferencné), in Szebeni, *Merre van a magyar hazám?*, cit., pp. 137-141.

<sup>22</sup> *Ivi.*, p. 139.

continued to believe from one hour to the next that our captivity will end, and that we will see our loved ones again”<sup>23</sup>.

Living conditions in the forced labour camps were inhuman. Proper nourishment was nonexistent. Watery cabbage soup, or something similar, and black bread made up their daily food. The bread was often so coarse that the prisoners suffered constant severe stomach pains. Those who worked on collective farms learned to smuggle vegetables for themselves and their fellow deportees. In most of the camps, upon their arrival, the detainees lived in underground bunkers. And even later, when housed in barracks, they had to sleep on bare wooden planks. They were plagued by lice and cockroaches. Although medical care was provided at least symbolically by doctors who were prisoners themselves, there were no drugs or medications available for treatment. Thousands died in accidents suffered at the workplace, but the majority of deaths were the result of infections and diseases. Malaria, typhus, and diarrhoea were rampant, and because of the lack of medical treatment and adequate nourishment, prisoners succumbed easily. In addition, the internees were constantly mistreated - screamed at, pushed, kicked, and shoved. The guards and camp administrators forced them to work even on Sundays, notwithstanding the fact that one day of the week was designated as a day of rest.

The working conditions in the mines were horrendous and completely unsafe. Margit Krechl, a native of the village of Sajóbáony, was deported at the age of sixteen, along with her younger sister and older brother. Her story is similar to those of thousands of unsuspecting young girls who suffered similar fates<sup>24</sup>. As was customary, the Krechl siblings were asked to assemble at the school for questioning. Their trusting father a blacksmith, who had not even been drafted into the Hungarian army because of poor health, urged his children to obey the authorities. The family was told that the Soviet liberators needed some help, and that those taken would be allowed to return home in a few weeks. The three siblings walked eighteen kilometres to the gathering center in Miskolc. Once they reached their destination, their fate was sealed. “No one said a word to us”, Margit Krechl recalled. “They were screaming at us left and right, as they drove us into the cattle cars. There must have been thousands like us”<sup>25</sup>. The train took them to the Donets Valley in Ukraine, to a village called Voroshilovka, where they were incarcerated and forced to do heavy labour in the nearby mines.

The experience of working in the mines made Margit Krechl and those with her feel like hell had been unleashed upon them. This hell affected the internees mentally, psychologically, as well as physically. Even decades after her repatriation, Margit Krechl still has deep scars on her head and legs. “You know, these are the permanent marks caused by the mine that collapsed on top of us”, she explained. “They were even stingy with the proper timbering of the shafts. We had to worm our way through narrow corridors crawling on all fours, like moles. My

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<sup>23</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>24</sup> Reminiscences of Margit Krechl (Kürti Sándorné), in V. Kormos, *A végtelen foglyai*, cit., pp. 7-12. See note 7 above.

<sup>25</sup> *Ivi*, p. 7.



task was to shovel the coal into the mine car below. Many perished when the mine caved in. Only those young people survived who had enough lifeblood in them to crawl to the surface. Even today [in the late 1990s] I have nightmares of having to crawl in the dark, while something is constantly pulling me back<sup>26</sup>.

Since most camps were surrounded by double - or triple - wire fences and closely scrutinized by guards perched in watch towers, escape from the camps was virtually impossible. Those who were caught were severely punished and tortured. Mária Melik, one of the young women who was abducted from Rakamaz in Northeastern Hungary, related that of one of the cruelest punishments for escapees consisted of lowering them into a bunker enclosed by concrete walls, and filling the bunker with ice cold water. The detainees were forced to stay in the bunker until they froze to death<sup>27</sup>.

The prisoners were subjected to constant chaos, uncertainty and disarray. Having been transported enormous distances on seemingly endless roads, being dragged from one labour camp to another, and not knowing whether they would ever be released, frightened even the most courageous young men, let alone young girls. But seventeen year old Gizella Csatlós of Balkány, Szabolcs County, thought she had no other choice but to escape<sup>28</sup>. This is part of her story in her own words:

We had been outside only for a few days. The winter weather was becoming milder. As the snow began to melt, on our way to and from work, only a couple of meters from us, we saw the arms and legs of the dead sticking out from the ground. In the evenings in the barracks everyone was whispering that we should try to escape. People usually set out in pairs. My cousin said we should go too, but the guards were already bringing back prisoners who had been caught. There were even some who surrendered voluntarily because they got lost and simply circled around on the immense prairie. We were forced to watch the punishment they received. They had to strip practically naked, and were beaten until they collapsed, unconscious<sup>29</sup>.

Gizella and her cousin decided to escape nonetheless: "We were scared to death of the punishment, but I was plagued by an even stronger emotion. It wasn't even fear, but horror. It happened that next to me on the berth a girl from my village, Margit Krakomperger was dying. She was exactly seventeen years old like me. I kept telling myself. "This is certain death, I don't want to end up like she has. My cousin was very encouraging; he claimed that he could make his way by following the stars"<sup>30</sup>.

After months of vicissitudes, narrow escapes, and hardships, while passing through several clearing camps in Odessa, Kishinev, Chernovitz, they reached the largest reception camp in a place called Bedyichev, which was the gathering place of those who were to be repatriated. Unrecognized as escapees from another camp, in early September 1945 they were told to gather their meager belongings and to go to the railroad station the next morning because they would be going home. "In a

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<sup>26</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>27</sup> Reminiscences of Mária Melik (Tilki Jánosné) in V. Kormos, *A végtelen foglyai*, cit., pp. 33-39.

<sup>28</sup> Reminiscences of Gizella Csatlós (Réti Bélané) in V. Kormos, *A végtelen foglyai*, cit., pp. 19-26.

<sup>29</sup> *Ivi*, p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> *Ivi*, p. 20.

week we arrived in Maramarossziget [a former Hungarian city in Romania]. We were sobbing and laughing at the same time. We kissed the ground in joy. Apparently ours was the first train that brought back deportees from Russia. This was probably true, because other unfortunate prisoners did not receive the kind of treatment and supplies we received. We were given canned foods, fruit, and candy. At the border a local leader even made a speech, but was cut short. Within moments a huge crowd descended on the station. Where did you come from? Who are you? Did you meet my son, my daughter, my father? Everyone was searching for his/her loved ones. But we had to reembark, because Budapest was designated as our final destination<sup>31</sup>. Their train passed through Gizella's native village, where someone from the crowd yelled that her cousin had jumped off the train at Bodrogszegi, and that he was already safe at home in Balkány. Gizella felt betrayed and abandoned because she feared that she would be deceived again, and then transported somewhere else. But her cousin notified Gizella's mother that she was on Hungarian soil. Her mother immediately took the next train to Budapest. When she spotted her daughter at the train station she was so shocked by her changed appearance that she fainted, even though Gizella had endured only seven months of forced labour. Compared to the other deportees detained for three to five years, her internment was relatively short because of her successful escape. Those who were forced to stay longer were in much worse shape than she was.

When Gizella and her mother returned to Balkány, a large crowd assembled in front of their house. Everyone was looking for news about their loved ones. Gizella was frightened. "What should she tell them? That their relatives are treated like beasts? That many of them had perished?"<sup>32</sup> Gizella recalled: "I just uttered a few sentences about where they were, and that they were working in coal mines. The rest they could read from my eyes"<sup>33</sup>.

Few were as fortunate as Gizella Csatlós and a select few who succeeded in escaping from the camps. There are no reliable statistics regarding the exact number of Hungarian civilians and military personnel who were incarcerated and eventually permitted to return home. Official records were not always kept, and when the prisoners died of starvation, disease, freezing temperatures, or in an accident at the workplace, they were simply shoved into mass graves without their names being recorded. Of the 600,000 deportees, approximately one third - 200,000 men, women and children - never made it back<sup>34</sup>. They died a miserable death under the most excruciating and inhuman conditions imaginable.

Mass repatriation from the forced labor camps back to Hungary began in the fall of 1947. Those who survived were marked for life, psychologically, spiritually, and physically. Many lost limbs, contracted incurable diseases, or suffered serious injuries that plagued them for life. The reigning Communist regime warned them to keep quiet and threatened them with retaliation from the moment they reached the

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<sup>31</sup> *Ivi*, p. 23.

<sup>32</sup> *Ivi*, p. 24.

<sup>33</sup> *Ivi*.

<sup>34</sup> This estimate by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office is cited by T. Stark in Szebeni, *Merre van a magyar hazám?*, cit., p. 310.

Hungarian border. They could not count on anyone to appreciate their plight, and the local and state governments repeatedly rejected their requests for financial assistance. They received no help for further training or for the completion of their studies, and the seriously ill and disabled were denied sick benefits and disability allowance. They were given no compensation for their financial losses, and if they were, the sums were minimal. In Debrecen, for example, deportees were given 5 forints, and later 20 forints as final reparation<sup>35</sup>.

The dreadful effects of these deportations affected not only the internees themselves, but also their loved ones who had been left behind. Wives who lost their husbands received no pensions without producing death certificates. But these were often nonexistent because camp administrators failed to keep records of the dead. Mrs. Gyula Kéky who did everything humanly possible to free her husband and son, pleading with authorities in Debrecen and elsewhere, eventually had to resettle in the town of Fot because her house in her native village was confiscated. Her forty-two year old husband and seventeen-year old son were deported from their native town of Hajdúböszörmény in October 1944, and she never saw or heard from them again<sup>36</sup>.

Her words, over four decades later, at the age of eighty-five, when she was interviewed by Ilona Szebeni, describe poignantly these tragic events that touched the lives of so many blameless, unsuspecting civilians: “Why did they take them? Why? My God, but why? They were innocent! Innocent! It was a terribly cruel world in those days. Why did they do this to us? It's horrible, horrible, even today”<sup>37</sup>.

Perhaps with time, as historical research makes greater effort to shed light on these injustices that befell humankind in the twentieth century, the deportation and internment of innocent Hungarian men, women, and children to Soviet forced labour camps will also receive the attention it deserves.

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<sup>35</sup> See Ilona Szebeni's introductory essay in her book *Merre van a magyar hazám?*, cit., p.14. Five Hungarian forints in 1947 were worth less than one U.S. dollar. For more details about the treatment of survivors of forced labour camps by Hungary's Communist government, see V. Kormos, *A végtelen foglyai*, cit., pp. 45-53.

<sup>36</sup> The reminiscences of Kéky Gyulané are recorded in *Ivi.*, pp. 16-22.

<sup>37</sup> *Ivi.*, p. 16.