

“What is the Difference between Freedom and Captivity?”

Repatriation of Prisoners of War from Vojvodina between 1947–1949

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*“What is the difference between captivity and freedom?
The answer is simple: what lies between them. The barbed
wire. But this answer is not correct... The real deprivation
is not confined space. Captivity is not a question of space,
but that of time. All those I asked were, without excep-
tion, prisoners of time.”*

István Örkény: *People of lagers* (my own translation)

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the questions related to the losses suffered by the Central-Eastern European states were subject to political manipulations for decades. Thus issues such as the fate of prisoners of war (POWs), and of civilians driven to work camps were obscured, manipulated and the source of much friction between the nations of the region and the Soviet Union. A common feature of these manipulations was to avoid the truth coming to light. There three types of “magic tricks” of political motives about questions of losses in the war and POWs. The official circles of the Soviet Union, until the death of Stalin, and especially in the Neo-Stalinist era of Brezhnev created the myth of “huge victory, small loss” in order to justify the political and military correctness of the “biggest genius of all times” and to support the perfect image of the system. In Yugoslavia, however, the considerable losses were magnified to justify the political and power monopoly of Tito’s regime with the thesis of “huge victory, huge (partisan) sacrifice”. In Hungary the communist political elite emphasized the break from the Horthy-regime, especially because the war against the Soviet Union rendered Hungary a “sinful nation.” Since the Hungarian army took part in a “sinful war” its soldiers could not have been victims, but sinners. The fate of Hungarian soldiers who perished or were imprisoned in World War II has been, up until recently, a taboo question; including the fate of soldiers from Vojvodina. Bringing light to individual or collective histories about the soldiers enlisted between 1941 and 1944 in the Hungarian army from the Vojvodina territory, which was then part of Hungary, has induced intense reactions in Serbia. It is difficult to overcome the dichotomous view of “victorious winners, vanquished sinners” based

on the repainting of past black, or, the opposite. The first step may be to know more about the people who either formed the past, or, unintendedly suffered its consequences. This study would like to make contribution to bringing light to this issue.

For a long time, only data from emigrant literature were at our disposal about the number of the imprisoned soldiers of the Hungarian army. The usual estimates of Hungarian POWs in Soviet imprisonment were of 620,000.¹ Silence surrounding this question was broken in the 1980s and since then a number of articles, memoirs and diaries have been published.² As for the number of POWs, data found in these writings are varied and no consensus has been reached.

The newest articles cite 600,000–700,000 as the number of POWs, but no sources or counts are given. Stark (1989) wrote about 600,000 POWs, of whom, according to him, 150,000 did not return home. In a later work from 2002 he mentioned 600,000–700,000 as the number of soldiers transported to Soviet prisoner-of-war camps, and he estimated the number of people dying on the way to or during captivity at 270,000–370,000.³ According to Krisztián Ungváry, a military historian, 690,000 soldiers and 230,000 civilians became Soviet POWs, totaling about 920,000 people. He supposes that 610,000 of them were transported to camps, and 105,000–155,000 perished there.⁴ As for the fate of the others, he gives no cues. The situation was complicated by the publication of Soviet internal affairs statistics (we will come back to them later) that give max. 540,000 (according to another source 420,000) as the numbers kept in prisoner-of-war camps within the Soviet Union. On the basis of Soviet sources available to us today we can confirm that in the documentations of the former Soviet Union 65,170 Hungarian POWs are mentioned, of whom 29,168 have been identified with the help of Hun-

¹ *Magyar hadifoglyok a Szovjetunióban. Fehér könyv a Szovjetunióba elhurcolt hadifoglyok és polgári deportáltak helyzetéről.* [Hungarian prisoners of war in the Soviet Union. White book on the situation of prisoners of war forced and civilians deported to the Soviet Union] Hungária, Bad Wörishofen, 1950, 9.

² The following is by no means an exhaustive list: I. Horváth, *Bűnhődés büntetlenül. Hadifoglynapló.* [Punishment without crime. A diary of a prisoner of war] Budapest 1992. J. Veress, *Rabszolgák voltunk...* [We were slaves...] Mátészalka 1997. Gy. Dupka–A. Korsun, *A 'Malenkij Robot' – a dokumentumokban.* ['Malenkij robot' in documents] Užhorod–Budapest 1997. B. Mezei, *Hol vannak a katonák?* [Where are the soldiers?] Székesfehérvár 1998. *Hadifoglyok írják... Hadifoglysors a második világháborúban.* [Written by prisoners of war... Fate of POWs in World War 2] ed. T. Papp, Budapest 1999. J. Zsigmond, *Apám nyomán Szibériában. Az én háborúm és fogságom történetéből 1944–1948.* [Tracing my father in Siberia. On my war and my captivity, 1944–1948] Budapest 2002. A. Nádas OSB, *Hadifoglynapló.* [A diary of a prisoner of war] Győr 2004.

³ T. Stark, *Magyarország háborús embervesztése.* [Hungarian lives lost in the war] Budapest 1989, 58–62; T. Stark, “Magyarok a szovjet kényszermunkatáborokban,” [Hungarians in labor camps] *Kortárs* 46:2–3 (2002). T. Stark, “Magyarok szovjet fogságban,” [Hungarians in Soviet captivity] in *A kommunista diktatúra áldozatainak emléknapja*, Budapest 2001, 37–41.

⁴ K. Ungváry, *A magyar honvédség a második világháborúban.* [Hungarian infantry in World War 2. Budapest, 2004, 476–478.

garian documentations. The researchers in the Central Archives and Military Welfare Office of the Museum and Institute of Military History compiled a database about them.⁵

According to the most recent findings, 50 million soldiers and civilians were killed in the Second World War and a 20-22 million were imprisoned, out of whom 4-5 million died mostly in Soviet or German prisoner-of-war camps, or on their way to the camps. Hungary, if we calculate based on its increased territory, lost 6.2% of its population of 14.5 million. Comparing the losses in terms of the percentage of the population, Hungary suffered the largest losses after Poland (15%), the Soviet Union (8.4%) and Germany (6.4%) totaling approximately 900,000 people. The number of soldiers is estimated at 340,000-360,000 and the number of Jewish victims is around 500,000.⁶ The peoples of Yugoslavia lost 1-1.1 million lives (not 1.7 million), the highest losses were incurred by the Serbs, 500,000-550,000, compared with 200,000 Croatian and 100,000 Muslim victims.⁷ The Parliament of the Autonomous Territory of Vojvodina set up a committee in 2001, under the leadership of Dragoljub Živković, to study the exact figures of war victims from Vojvodina without making any ethnic distinctions. The research focused on determining civilian casualties and, though it is still in progress, it has shared some early results. Based on the committee's studies there were 110,000 civilian victims from Vojvodina (this number used to be estimated at 70,000), though their ethnic make-up has not been identified.⁸

A joint project of Hungarian and Russian archivist and historians was published in the summer of 2005. It includes a thick volume of documentary sources from Russian archives relating to the history of Hungarian soldiers and civilians captured and taken to Soviet prisoner-of-war camps between 1941 and 1953.⁹ The project relied on 141 contemporary sources, mainly from internal affairs. They shed light on Soviet policies on POWs, the complicated network of forced labor camps guarding POWs, the role these camps played in the Soviet economy, the health services provided in the camps, and the political education for the prisoners. Plenty of new data is presented in the book, including the number of Hunga-

⁵ <http://www.hadifogoly.adatbanyaszat.hu/page.php?#6> Date of access 3. October 2006.

⁶ I. Romsics, *Magyarország története a 20. században*. [The history of Hungary in the twentieth century] Budapest 1999, 268.

⁷ See for more details B. Kočović, *Žrtve drugog svetskog rata u Jugoslaviji*. [Lives lost of Yugoslavia in the twentieth century] Beograd 1985.

⁸ "Anketni odbor za utvrđivanje istine događajima u periodu od 1941 do 1945 godine u Vojvodini. Međunarodni naučni skup. Istina..." *Zbornik radova* (septembar 2004), Glavni i odgovorni urednik prof.dr Dragoljub Živković, Skupština APV, Novi Sad, 2004, and also <http://www.mail-archiv.com/sim@antic.org/msg27484.html> Date of access 3. 02. 2006. According to the personal communication of Professor Živković in January 2006; they finally had access to the documentation of the camp in Járek "with great difficulties" at the beginning of the year.

⁹ *Vengerskie voennoplennyye v SSR. Dokumenty: 1941-1953*. ed. D. I. Borisov, et al. Moscow 2005.

rian POWs in each lager, their ethnic composition, and about the Soviet-Hungarian negotiations in connection with their repatriation.

Approximately 4 million POWs were *taken* to the Soviet Union (obviously, more were captured). In terms of the *POWs registered* in the Soviet Union, after the German and Japanese POWs, the number of Hungarian POWs was the largest. According to newly disclosed Soviet sources, of those soldiers registered after having arrived between 1941 and 1945 at soviet prisoner-of-war camps, 541,530 were Hungarians; a later Soviet record mentions 513,767 Hungarian POWs working in labor camps, yet another record from July 1945 reports 425,319 Hungarian POWs of a total of 2,688,275 POWs time in the Soviet Union.¹⁰ (another 300,000 Hungarian soldiers of the Hungarian army surrendered to the American and British forces) The Hungarian POWs in the Soviet Union were scattered in 183 camps.¹¹

Forced labor as an important means of war amends was mentioned in connection with German compensation in 1943 by Ivan Mikhailovich Maiskii, the People's Commissar of Soviet Foreign Affairs.¹² Maiskii suggested to V. M. Molotov,¹³ that the Soviet Union employ 5 million German forced laborers. Forced labor, as a natural way of war compensation is referred to in another work of Maiskii's on the post-war peace plans of the Soviet Union, that became infamous under the title of "The desired principles of a world to come" among Hungarian historians. He put together this memorandum for Molotov, Minister of Foreign Affairs on 11 January 1944, well before the end of the war in the context of German amends "amends by workforce."¹⁴ As the front was moving forward, the

¹⁰ *Vengerskie voennoplennyie v SSR*, 12, 285.

¹¹ The list of those camps where Hungarians were confined to can be found on page 411 of the volume mentioned above. It makes it clear that Hungarian POWs were not only imprisoned in the European areas of the Soviet Union, but in practically all prisoner-of-war camps of the Asian republics and of the Northern territories.

¹² Ivan Mikhalovitch Maiskii (Liakhiveskii) (1884–1975) soviet politician, worked in different diplomatic positions from 1922 on. After missions to Japan and Finland, he was the leader of the Soviet embassy in London (1932–1943), first as an envoy, then as an ambassador. Between 1943 and 1946, Deputy People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs, member of the Academy of the Foreign Ministry of the Soviet Union, and president of the Inter-Allies Amends Committee based in Moscow. Retired in 1946, from 1947 on he was involved in academic work. His memoirs were published in Hungarian, too.

¹³ Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov (Skryabin) (1890–1986) Soviet politician, one of the closest friends and colleagues of Stalin. He was the secretary of the Central Council between 1921 and 1930, and the chairman of the Council of People's Commissars till 1941. Between 1939 and 1949, then between 1953 and 1956 he served as People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Secretary. In 1957 he became disfavored, was deprived of his offices, was expelled from the party, and became ambassador to Mongolia. He was the Soviet member (1960–1961) of the International Atomic Energy Agency based in Vienna.

¹⁴ *Európa kettészakítása és a kétpólusú nemzetközi rend születése (1945–1949)*. [The division of Europe and the birth of a bipolar international order (1945–1949)] ed. G. Mezei, Budapest 2001, 139. The memorandum says the following in connection with Hungary: "The

principle was expanded to the German population of all freed and occupied countries. As for the historic territory of Hungary before the Trianon treaty, the 16 December 1944 decree of the Soviet Union's Home Defense Committee (headed by Stalin) was in force prescribing the interning of adult men and women of German ethnicity. In 1945, the Hungarian government objected 256 (!) times at the Allied Control Council (ACC) to interning members of the civilian population.¹⁵ Forced labor was never actually reckoned in war amends.

The numbers mentioned above in connection with POWs do not reflect the overall number of all those captured. We deliberately used the expression "registered after having arrived" since those numbers do not include those who died either on the way, or before registering in the camps. Also, those numbers do not include prisoner-of-war camps on the front areas, but only reflect the number of POWs enumerated within the territory of the Soviet Union. These numbers, therefore, do not include the number of civilians transported for "*malenkii robot*" either, because we already know that records made in work camps often mix the categories of POWs and civilians deported to do forced labor, who were mostly, but not exclusively, of German origin. On the basis of soviet camp statistics it is very hard to tell, even approximately, what the total number of deported Hungarian civilians was. We do have, however, access to some important data on different sub-issues. According to the newest Soviet sources, for example, 208,239 German civilians were transported for forced labor to Soviet work camps between January and April, 31,923 of whom (20,989 men and 10,934 women) were Germans from Hungary.¹⁶ Hungarian historians estimate the total number of Germans transported from the historic territory of Hungary to Soviet camps for forced labor at 60,000–65,000.¹⁷

Soviet Union is not interested in creating Hungary as a powerful country. (...) [Hungary] needs to be explained that the Allies did not forget her position in the present war. The policies of the Soviet Union in terms of Hungary will, therefore, be limited to saving the Hungarian state, but, at the same time reducing its territory following ethnographic principles. In cases of doubt when applying the principle the decision should be made to the detriment of Hungary. (...) Hungary should be kept, at least in the first few years after the war, in international isolation. Amends should be imposed on Hungary." Maiskii, hoping that the "notorious" question of the Balkans will be answered in a way that is in line with the interests of the Soviet Union, considered the following to be necessary in connection with Yugoslavia: if the "units around Tito grow stronger" the Soviet Union will agree with Yugoslavia on mutual aids. As for territorial questions, he definitively suggests "the restoration of Yugoslavia within the former borders, with some modification if need be." *Ibid.* 142–143. Our translation.

¹⁵ M. Földesi, *A szabadság megszállása. A megszállók szabadsága – a hadiszákmányról, a jóvátételről, a Szövetséges Ellenőrző Bizottságról Magyarországon.* [Occupying freedom – the freedom of occupiers. On pillage, on amends, on the Allied Control Council in Hungary] Budapest 2002, 154.

¹⁶ *Vengerskie voennoplennye v SSR*, 22.

¹⁷ See for more details: *Modern rabszolgaság. Malenkij robot. Magyar állampolgárok a Szovjetunió munkatáboraiiban 1945–1949.* [Modern slavery. Hungarian citizens in work camps of the Soviet Union, 1945–1949] ed. M. Füzes, Budapest, 1990; Gy. Zielbauer, *A magya-*

The long and complicated history of the repatriation of Hungarian POWs is not central to the present paper, but a few stages warrant mentioning. The Provisional Government (formed in Debrecen, 22 December 1944) was the first to deal with the question of POWs and they created, within the Ministry of Defense, the Department of POWs. The Department was responsible for finding, registering and providing for POWs. Parallel with this, another Department of POWs was formed within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, with competence only in terms of POWs in the Western areas and with no coordinating role whatsoever in terms of the Soviet POWs. The POW question, however, had become an issue of political fights of the coalition parties. There could be no central, exclusive body created to treat the issue because of the objections of the Allied Control Council. There were separate departments for the POW question, apart from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Ministry of Defense (led by Communists), in the Ministry of Social Welfare and in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, too. But the Governmental Committee for Repatriation (established on 1 September 1945), the Red Cross and the Central Office for POWs of the Hungarian Workers' Party also played important roles.¹⁸ Important non-governmental associations helped them in their work, such as the National Association of the Families of POWs, the National Aid, the "Hurry, Give and Help", The Social Mission Society, etc. Most of those who were captivated in the West returned home in 1945, but even some of those transports had to wait till 1947.¹⁹

János Gyöngyösi, Minister of Foreign Affairs handed, on 20 July 1945, the first memorandum to the Soviets in which he suggested commencing Soviet-Hungarian negotiations on the repatriation of Hungarian POWs. Led by Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy, the visit of the delegation (Mátyás Rákosi was one member of the delegation) of the Hungarian government to Moscow between 9 and 18 April 1946, came as a breakthrough. During the negotiations Stalin promised personally to repatriate the prisoners, but for a year, hardly anything happened in this respect.

From the Spring of 1946 on, the relatives of the prisoners became more active, influenced by the Party of Small Land-Owners and the National Peasant Party. In order to decrease the political influence of these parties, from 1 July 1946, the case of POWs was transferred to the hands of the Communist Party. Within the Ministry of Social Welfare, as a central administrative body, the department of POWs was created and in Debrecen they set up a prisoner-of-war camp for collection and distribution. According to the promise made by Stalin, in July 1946, the repatriation of POWs from the Soviet Union started with occasional stops.

rországi németiség nehéz évtizede 1945–1955. [The difficult decade of Hungarian-Germans, 1945–1955] Szombathely 1990. L. Tilkovszky, "Magyarországi németek szovjet munkatáborokban," [Hungarian-German in Soviet work camps] *Regio* 2:1 (1991).

¹⁸ Magyar Országos Levéltár [Hungarian National Archives, (HNA)] XIX-J-4-a-Belgrád TÜK 2. doboz. 8/biz.- 1948.

¹⁹ P. Hortobágyi, *Magyar hadifoglyok Belgiumban a második világháború után (1945–1947).* [Hungarian POWs in Belgium after WW2 (1945–1947)] *Valóság* 49:6 (2006), 2.

The first major reorganization of prisoner-of-war camps in the Soviet Union started after the war was over in the summer of 1945. Camps on front-areas, that is, outside the boundaries of the Soviet Union were closed and the POWs were transported to the Soviet Union, and allocated to hinterland prisoner-of-war camps and military work squadrons. The next rationale for reorganization was to make forced labor more efficient, the ones injured or unable to work, therefore, were returned home. According to Soviet data in July 1945, 225,000 POWs, among them 24,909 Hungarians, and in August 387,678 invalid, mostly German prisoners, and 131,000 invalid Hungarians were free to go home.²⁰ (We do not know if there were soldiers from Vojvodina among them.) According to the 13 August 1945 report of the Soviet State Defense Committee, all 708,000 prisoners imprisoned in the prisoner-of-war camps of front-areas were invalid and unable to work, that is 412,000 Germans, 150,000 Hungarians and 9,500 Southern Slavs, etc.²¹ The return the POWs who were able to work could only be started after having signed the peace treaty.

In terms of the Paris Peace Treaty (10 February 1947), the repatriation of Hungarian POWs was to start "as soon as possible", and was regulated by the bilateral conventions to be signed between Hungary and the Detaining Powers. The costs of repatriation were to be paid by the Hungarian State.²² According to the peace treaty, the Hungarian government should have concluded a separate POW treaty with the Soviet Union. Even though they tried, they failed to bring such a treaty to fruition. The peace treaty, nevertheless, created the international legal basis for solving the POW question and made it possible for the POWs from Vojvodina and Transylvania, who were detained outside Hungarian borders, to return home.

On the basis of the sources available to us, the question of the repatriation POWs, refugees and internees of Yugoslav origin was first raised in the summer of 1945. Then the Soviet military authorities in Hungary maintained a transit camp (9 Hungária Bvd), and a repatriation committee was set up in order to assist their returning, cooperating with the Yugoslav delegation of the Allied Control Council. At the end of 1945, the Soviet military authorities decided to end the existence of the camp, so the Yugoslav delegation of the Allied Control Council on 8 January 1946 quoting Article 4 of the truce treaty asked the Hungarian government to create a new one to replace the old one, and, as stated in the regulations, to transport home on its own costs the Yugoslav POWs, internees, deportees and refugees holding a ACC certificate.²³ The Ministry of Internal Affairs

²⁰ *Vengerskie voennoplennyye v SSR*, 12.

²¹ *Vengerskie voennoplennyye v SSR*, Doc. nr. 93, 309.

²² Article 75 of the Geneva Convention, signed 27 July 1929, says "should the Powers conclude a peace treaty, they should also include measures of repatriation of POWs" (my own translation). The Hungarian truce contained no measures on this issue.

²³ Point 4 of the Armistice signed on 20 January 1945 says "The government of Hungary shall immediately free all its Allied POWs and internees. The government of Hungary shall, until further instructions, bearing all costs provide sufficient food, clothing, medical support, hygienic materials for all Allied POWs, internees, refugees, deportees; cit-

planned to use a quite dilapidated building at 130 Andrásy Rd, Budapest. The reconstruction of the building was quite slow due to lack of financial sources, and was finally abandoned as the leader of the Yugoslav Repatriation Committee told the Welfare Office in June that the question of the Budapest transit camp was no longer important. They had no problems with returning POWs, internees and refugees because they had found agricultural work for them around Hódmezővásárhely and Szeged until they would return home.²⁴ The two-member Yugoslav Repatriation Committee, Josip Jakubec and Vasa Kuliti, working side by side with the ACC, finished its work: 560 Yugoslav citizens could return home.²⁵

Minister of Foreign Affairs, János Gyöngyösi asked Zoltán Szántó, Hungarian ambassador to Belgrade, on 28 March 1947, that is after the Hungarian peace treaty had been signed, to acquaint himself confidentially using Yugoslav governmental sources with the following questions, quoted from his telegram: “1) would they object to the returning of people from territories re-annexed after 2 January 1938? 2) Are they willing to pay for the costs of their transportation? 3) If these people could only be taken over after ethnic or political selection I would also like to be informed.”²⁶ The Hungarian government assumed the following position: “Everybody should be able to return to their original or last place of residence.” After around a month, Szántó reported to Budapest that the Yugoslavs “do not object to transporting POWs with local place of residence.” As for the costs of the transportation he was going to give an answer later and the third issue was answered the following way: “the examination of the returning would take place in the usual way.”²⁷ What this meant is that the POWs returning home were going to be examined not from an ethnic, but from a political point of view. The Ministry of Social Welfare in the meantime decided to orient Vojvodina-Hungarian POWs coming home from the Soviet Union to two transit camps: one already operating in Debrecen and one to be set up in Szeged.²⁸ At the end of May, Szántó informed the government about the fact that the “Yugoslav government is willing to send a committee to the transit camp,”²⁹ thus, they decided that the selection of POWs was going to be done here by Yugoslav authorities. In order to

izens of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia as well. It will also provide for transportation so that all these people could return to their homes” (our translation). *A magyar jóvátétel és ami mögötte van... Válogatott dokumentumok. 1945–1949* [Hungarian amends, and all behind... Selected documents, 1945–1949] eds. S. Balogh and M. Földesi, Budapest 1998, 20.

²⁴ HNA XIX-J-1-j-Jugoszlávia-7/b.t.-498-1947. 23.d.

²⁵ HNA XIX-J-1-j-Jugoszlávia-7/b.t.-00345-1954. 23.d.

²⁶ HNA XIX-J-1-Z Cryptograms 1947-1964. Outgoing, Belgrád. Box 1, Cryptogram of Gyöngyösi to Szántó, 28 March 1947.

²⁷ *Ibid.* Incoming. Cryptogram of Szántó to Gyöngyösi 26 April 1947. The Yugoslav government did not consider it necessary to inform its Ambassador to Moscow on the issue of Hungarian POWs from Yugoslav territory in May 1947. *Ibid.* Outgoing. Cryptogram of Gyöngyösi to Szántó 24 May 1947.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, or HNA XIX-J-1-j-Jugoszlávia-7b.t. - 180 144 / res. - 1947. 23.d.

²⁹ *Ibid.* Incoming. Cryptogram of Szántó to Gyöngyösi 29 May 1947.

speed selection up, the Hungarian party suggested that the selection by the Yugoslav POW committee should take place locally in Sighetu Marmăției/Máramarossziget and Focșani/Foksány but the suggestion was refused by the Yugoslav government.³⁰

At the same time, in March 1947, in line with the peace treaty the Hungarian government inquired at the Yugoslav government through the POW department of the Ministry of Social Welfare about repatriating the Hungarian POWs from Yugoslavia. Anton Bebler, Minister of Foreign Affairs reacted in a positive way to the Hungarian inquiries. He emphasized, that "in order to avoid all misunderstanding," that this did not involve Hungarian POWs in internment camps. It has been already mentioned that the peace treaty only contained the "as soon as possible" clause, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs asked what the position of József Domokos chief public prosecutor was on the legitimacy of the Yugoslav position. In his letter, dated 13 June 1947, the chief public prosecutor first pointed out that, according to the regulations of the Hungarian peace treaty, the bilateral POW agreement to be signed should regulate this issue, and, as the obligation to let POWs return home is general in scope, Yugoslavia can only detain POWs either with the authorization of Hungary, or "on the basis of general international legal principles." He went on to say that because he had no information whatsoever on how many detained POWs there were in Yugoslavia, he could not take a stand in the "legality of detainment." He thought it was necessary to note at the same time that as those not repatriated yet were "in internment camps and not in prisoner-of-war camps, we could infer that they could be accused of war or ordinary crimes." A final remark in his letter is that any steps in terms of the POWs could only be taken after the peace treaty came into force.³¹

Ambassador Zoltán Szántó, because he could sense the seriousness of the situation of those in Yugoslav internment camps suggested in Budapest to set up a Hungarian committee who could travel to Yugoslavia in order to examine the situation locally. The suggestion was turned down because of the resistance of the Ministries of Internal Affairs and of Defense. Therefore, no steps were taken in this regard towards the Yugoslav government. Consequently, no Yugoslav-Hungarian negotiations took place in terms of the interned Hungarian citizens from Vojvodina. The Hungarian government understood that the Yugoslav party had limited the whole issue to the reception of some selected "prisoners with German names" who had Hungarian citizenship. This was the way they made Budapest see the rather special interpretation of the international obligations of the Yugoslav government in terms of the retained POWs, fulfilled and non-negotiable according to them.

The data available on the number of POWs received "with German names" and with Hungarian citizenship differ, though not significantly. Some sources mention 388 POWs and 14 internees (11 women and 3 men), others speak of 417

³⁰ HNA XIX-J-1-j-Jugoszlávia-7/b.t. - 180 185-1947. 23.d.

³¹ HNA XIX-J-1-j-Jugoszlávia-7/b.t. - 180 041-1947. 23.d.

POWs and 14 internees, but one can also meet the number of 434 too.³² As far as we are concerned, we consider the minutes of the reception authentic. According to this, a certain colonel Georgiević handed over 422 prisoners on behalf of the Yugoslav authorities to the Hungarian authorities at Horgoš, 17 July 1947.³³ Representing the Hungarian party, lieutenant-colonel Zsigmond Zsille took the prisoners over. A witness of the events, Péter Rubin, secretary of the Hungarian Embassy in Belgrade describes them in the following way: "There were 422 POWs who had been directed to Szeged from Horgoš. They are Swabians who were captured in 1945. At that time, they wore German uniforms and served at different military bodies. Some were members of the Volksbund, others served in the Prinz Eugen unit. Right after the handing-over, the Hungarian border patrols occupy the wagons. The train is redirected to Debrecen, where the department of state security carefully examines POWs from Yugoslavia."³⁴ Originally the transport was to have 423 persons, but one fell ill, and 14 civilian internees had not arrived to the transit camp "because of organizational problems" – these people, therefore, could not return home. As the handing-over of POWs with Hungarian citizenship and with German origin took place before the ratification of the peace treaty, as if it was a political message (the peace treaty came into force 15 September 1947), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ordered Ambassador Szántó to transmit the message of "grateful thanks" to the Yugoslav government for this "friendly gesture."³⁵

The next chapter of the history of Vojvodina POWs from the Hungarian army started in 1947-1948. The Communist Party tried to use the rather intermittent repatriation from the Soviet Union for its own interests, and having seen that interstate-wise the obstacles were hard to overcome, it tried to give an impetus on the political side. On 27 April 1947, Mátyás Rákosi, leader of the Hungarian Communist Party traveled to Moscow in order to inform the Soviets on Hungarian internal affairs. Before his trip he wrote a letter to Stalin in which he pointed out that "it would be highly desirable" if Hungarian prisoners were released "as soon as possible" upon the request of the Communists.³⁶ Molotov met Rákosi in Moscow and spoke about his anxiety that the release of POWs would increase the position of the "reactionary powers." It seems Rákosi got the hint and having returned home he immediately met with the delegation of the Democratic Association of Hungarian Women, a women's association that was allegedly inclined towards the communist cause. The leaders of the association asked Rákosi to intercede for them at Stalin so that their sons and husbands could be released. These preparatory steps led to the writing of the "letter of Hungarian mothers" to Stalin on 6 May 1947. In this letter, available today in Russian, they asked "the great leader of the Soviet Union" to show "generosity, benevolence and support"

³² HNA XIX-J-1-j-Jugoszlávia-7/b.t. – 180 166.res. – 1947.; 180 162.res.-1947. 23.d.

³³ HNA XIX-J-4-a-Belgrád TÜK 4955 – 1947. 1. d.

³⁴ HNA XIX-J-4-a-Belgrád TÜK 4955 – 1947. 1. d.

³⁵ HNA XIX-J-4-a - Belgrád TÜK 180/res - 1947. 1. d.

³⁶ *Moszkóának jelentjük... Titkos dokumentumok 1944-1948.* [Reporting to Moscow... Confidential documents, 1944-1948] eds. L. Izsák and M. Kun, Budapest 1994, 195.

in this particular issue.³⁷ After having prepared the ground emotionally, a few days later, on 9 May 1947, Rákosi, referring to the powerful action of the wives and relatives of POWs, reminded Stalin of the importance of the issue. He asked him to release Hungarian soldiers “generously” before the peace treaty enters in force. After such propagandistic preparations, making sure that the expected political profit would strengthen the communist side, on 13 May 1947 Stalin eventually told Rákosi that before the ratification of the peace treaty they were going to begin the repatriation of POWs in May.

According to the Soviet data Gyula Szekfű,³⁸ the Hungarian ambassador to Moscow, forwarded to Budapest, between May 1947 and March 1948, the names of 100,892 Hungarian POWs who were repatriated. Among them 16,620 were not Hungarian citizens, 10,489 were from Romania, 3,703 from Czechoslovakia and 1,574 from Vojvodina.³⁹

The employees of the Hungarian embassy, established in January 1947 at Belgrade, were actively involved with the reception of the Vojvodina POWs returning home from the Soviet Union. Ambassador Zoltán Szántó⁴⁰ was charged by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with finding out what position Belgrade adopted in this issue. Anton Bebler, deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Yugoslavia, answering Szántó’s personal urging, in his letter on 5 May 1947 said that for the time being they were “studying” the issue.⁴¹ A few days later, on 10 May, the Yugoslav party let Budapest know about the conditions of reception. According to them, the prisoners were first to be collected and registered in Hungary. After

³⁷ Vengerskie voennoplennyye v SSR. Doc. nr. 119, 361-362.

³⁸ Gyula Szekfű (1883-1955) One of the most important conservative Hungarian historians, also worked as an archivist for a longer time. His influential work of political history, *Három nemzedék* [Three generations] published in 1920, searches for the answer to the catastrophe of Trianon. He was editor of *Magyar Szemle* [Hungarian Review], a high quality journal of English orientation, and also published a lot in *Magyar Nemzetben* [Hungarian Nation], an anti-German paper. He was a representative in April 1945 of the Provisionary Assembly, envoy, and then ambassador to Moscow between 1945 and 1948.

³⁹ HNA XIX-J-4-a Belgrád TÜK. 2. d. 8/biz - 1948.

⁴⁰ Zoltán Szántó (1893-1977) communist politician. During WW1 he was in Russian imprisonment. He took part in the events of the Communist takeover of 1919, then immigrated to Vienna, was imprisoned in 1927. In 1935 after his release he immigrated to the Soviet Union where he participated in the work of the Comintern. During WW2 he was editor in chief for the radio channel “Kossuth” in Moscow. He returned to Hungary in the summer of 1945. He was the first ambassador of Hungary to Belgrade and to Tirana from 1947. In January 1949 he was revoked “for a longer time”. In the 1950s, he worked as envoy in Paris, then, as ambassador in Warsaw. From 1954 to 1956 he served as member of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Workers’ Party, from 23 October 1956 member of the Political Committee and the Presidium. After the suppression of the revolution he escaped to the Yugoslav embassy with Imre Nagy and his associates from where he was deported to Romania. He testified in 1958 in the trial of Imre Nagy and his associates.

⁴¹ HNA XIX-J-4-a Belgrád TÜK 1. d. 1656-1947.

having registered them the Yugoslav party was to decide "who would be allowed to enter Yugoslav territory." Belgrade made it clear that the costs of transportation of the prisoners from the Soviet Union to their place of residence were to be paid by Hungary. The Department of POWs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs tried to make the Yugoslavs see that the whole process would be faster if the Yugoslav committee selected the POWs directly in the transit camps of Sighetu Marmăției/Máramarossziget and Focșani/Foksány, but they failed in their attempt. They also tried splitting the costs. The Department of POWs of the Ministry of Social Welfare asked Ambassador Zoltán Szántó to intercede on behalf of Hungary because of its "grave financial situation," so that the Yugoslavs pay for "the costs of transportation of Yugoslav citizens and POWs of Hungarian ethnic origins returning to their future place of residence."⁴² Eventually, even though the Yugoslav government did not accede to either the mode of reception nor in sharing the costs, in July 1947, under these conditions contrary to the regulations of the peace treaty, i.e. without a bilateral POW agreement, the Hungarian government urged that the POW reception be started and notified Belgrade that the POWs were waiting for the Yugoslav reception committee in Szeged.⁴³ A month passed before Belgrade suggested that the POWs from the Szeged camp should travel personally to the Yugoslav embassy in Budapest for the administrative forms to be filled in. They only renounced the requirement for "personal application" when the Hungarian party firmly announced that they were unable to organize that.⁴⁴ The delay in sending the reception committee to Szeged was simply explained by "too much work at the same time".

The Szeged transit camp was set up in the building of the local Neurology building, and representing the city, dr. Károly Zentay, social inspector assisted the Yugoslav reception committee. Hermann Pokorny,⁴⁵ the head of the POW department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was satisfied with the operation of the Szeged camp under communist leadership, because he wrote in one of his reports in the camp "was exemplarily clean and orderly," and cultural needs and of

⁴² The Soviets were negotiating the costs of repatriating Romanian-Hungarians directly with the Romanian government. The Czechoslovak government refused, in fact, Hungarians with residence in Czechoslovakia because of the ongoing deportations. They only accepted 80 persons from the 1947 Hungarian transport of around 1000 people from Czechoslovakia; exclusively those born before 1913 and who spoke Slovakian or had gone through Czech schooling. HNA XIX-J-4-a Belgrád TÜK 8/biz.-1948, 2.d.

⁴³ HNA XIX-J-4-a Belgrád TÜK 2959-1947, 1.d.

⁴⁴ HNA XIX-J-1-j-Jugoszlávia-7/b.t.-180 185 és 180 215-1947, 23.d.

⁴⁵ Hermann Pokorny (1882-1960) colonel general. During WW1 worked in the operative team of the high commission of the Austro-Hungarian army as cryptographer. In 1918 he was member of the Austro-Hungarian delegation at the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty negotiations with the Soviets. From 1937 he was retired. In 1945 he was reactivated and became the leader of the Armistice Department of the Provisionary Government. From 1947 to 1949 he was the head of the POW department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

the POWs are catered for "in an outstanding way."⁴⁶ The POWs arrived after a long journey at the Szeged camp via Maramureş and Debrecen.

In July 1947, Belgrade sent the Vojvodina POWs through the Yugoslav embassy in Budapest the first questionnaires for their registration and selection (*Karton prethodnih podataka*), but the POW department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, only received them in the middle of September.⁴⁷ They were anxious to know, apart from personal data, what Hungarian troops, under which commandment the returning soldiers served, what their rank was when they were captured, but also asked about close family. This way they could examine the prisoners politically, mainly being interested in any "fascist" organization they adhered to.

The sources indicate that there were problems with insufficient number of questionnaires and the slow pace of filling them in. Vladimir Velebit Yugoslav deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, for example, cautioned Ambassador Szántó on 18 September 1947 to send the POW-questionnaires back "urgently," the leader of the Szeged camp still asked for a new batch of questionnaires in November.⁴⁸ Hermann Pokorny, the head of the POW department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in his report III of 28 November 1947 could record 500 completed questionnaires sent to Belgrade through the Ministry of Social Welfare.⁴⁹ Another report mentions "217 new completed questionnaires" sent to the Yugoslav government at the end of November 1947.⁵⁰ After long administrative preparations, Pokorny in his Report IV of 20 January 1948 could finally proclaim that "practically all prisoners from the Szeged Yugoslav prisoner-of-war camp could return home," only those staying who "would have faced persecution" at home "mainly Swabians, SS or Volksbund members." A few months later, in his POW report VIII of 10 September he bitterly noted that at the end of July there were still approximately 400 persons in the Szeged camp. According to the report "their provision is difficult, and their reception is slow and burdensome."⁵¹

600 POWs were received from the Szeged camp by the Yugoslavs by April 1948, meaning only a small amount, only 37% of 1,574, Hungarian POWs from Vojvodina released from Soviet camps.⁵²

From the spring of 1948 on, the political conditions of POW reception dramatically decayed because of the sudden deterioration of Soviet-Yugoslav relations and the anti-Yugoslav decision of the Cominform Information Office in Bucharest. Between April 1948 and February 1949 the reception of POWs completely ceased. The Hungarian government, nevertheless, tried to "rock the boat."

⁴⁶ HNA XIX-J-4-a Belgrád TÜK 8/biz.-1948, 2.d.

⁴⁷ HNA XIX-J-4-a Belgrád TÜK 45/biz.-1947. ; XIX-J-1-j-Jugoszlávia-7/b.t. -180 244-1947, 23.d.

⁴⁸ HNA XIX-J-4-a-Belgrád TÜK 90/biz.-1947, 2.d.

⁴⁹ HNA XIX-J-4-a-Belgrád TÜK 8/biz.-1948.

⁵⁰ HNA XIX-J-4-a-Belgrád TÜK 90/biz.-1948.; 119/biz.-1948.

⁵¹ HNA XIX-J-4-a-Belgrád TÜK 8/biz.- 1948.

⁵² HNA XIX-J-1-j-Jugoszlávia-7/b.t.-00345-1954, 23.d.

After 6 September 1948, the governmental organization dealing with POWs reviewed the case of Hungarian POWs from Yugoslavia and decided to "take some steps in order to receive them." Before this actually happened, they examined the situation of the transit camp in Szeged, and, tried to find out how many Vojvodina POWs there were in other transit camps. What they found was that the Yugoslav reception committee visited Szeged in March 1948 for the last time, and there were still 296 prisoners in the camp from the transport of 1947 whom the Yugoslavs were unwilling to receive. According to their calculations 600 Vojvodina prisoners were still to come from Sighetu Marmăției/Máramarosziget, Romania.⁵³ At that point, the National Central Authority for Controlling Foreigners of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (NCACF) also urged the reception of the residents of the Szeged camp. As police lieutenant colonel József Balázs, leader of the NCACF wrote in his letter, as their relatives lived in Yugoslavia, the prisoners stuck here "lived a life of bumps and beggars, endangering the security and order of the country."⁵⁴

A widow from Feketics, Mrs Lajos Burai tried to draw the attention of the Hungarian government to the case of prisoners stuck in Sighetu Marmăției/Máramarosziget in a letter of 26 September 1948. With support from Budapest, she wanted to start the movement of Vojvodina mothers for the repatriation of their sons. Eventually she failed in her attempts as her letter, sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs via the Hungarian Embassy in Belgrade was not used by Budapest for its own interests. The letter says

"Let us set this letter of Hungarian mothers on its path to Your Excellency because our sons having been absent for four years arrived in Sighetu Marmăției/Máramarosziget and still cannot return home. As they write they just lie there and nobody takes care of them. Hungarians from Romania, Czechoslovakia and Hungary have already returned home, but they, Hungarians from Yugoslavia, are put into lagers and don't know what is going to happen to them. So we ask Your Excellency to do something for their sake, as here nobody wants to hear about their repatriation to Yugoslavia. We are giving you our deepest respect asking you to be generous and bring our boys home."⁵⁵

Ambassador Zoltán Szántó, acting on the orders of his government contacted the Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs in this case, and, finally, on 3 December 1948 urged their reception "in a note of powerful tone." Due to this, the case had finally moved from its position and two weeks later the Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced its will to send a committee to Hungary again. The Delegation led by Mirko Martić met with Jenő Benedek, head of the National Military Welfare Office in Budapest and Debrecen in the beginning of February 1949. On behalf of their government they communicated univocally that they would

⁵³ HNA XIX-J-1-j-Jugoszlávia -7/b.t.-180 640-1948, 23.d.

⁵⁴ HNA XIX-J-1-j-Jugoszlávia -7/b.t.-180 640-1948, 23.d.

⁵⁵ HNA XIX-J-1-j-Jugoszlávia -7/b.t.-180 640-1948, 23.d.

only receive those Yugoslav citizens who "want to return home" and resolutely declared that they refuse to receive not only those who had been declared war criminals or Volksbund-members by them but also those "who were against Yugoslavia's social order." This latter phrase did not only mean the acceptance of state-socialism but also adherence to the anti-Moscow position of the Yugoslavian political elite. Under the given circumstances an analytical study called "the relationship between the delegation and the Hungarian party was tense." The transit camp close to the border in Szeged was wound up in the meantime and the prisoners were transported to Debrecen. The Yugoslav delegation talked to every prisoner personally in the Debrecen camp, "even with those who were living with their relatives and only traveled to Debrecen for the occasion." As a result of these negotiations 531 prisoners were taken over, but refused 146 because of reasons mentioned above.⁵⁶

Those POWs who stayed in Hungary were interned for reasons of security by the Hungarian authorities and were forbidden to keep any contact with relatives in Yugoslavia. Only after the relationship between the two countries had ameliorated in the spring of 1954 were 25 POWs allowed to correspond with their families.⁵⁷

According to the Soviet sources, mentioned several times already, altogether 418,782 Hungarian POWs returned to Hungary till 1949 from the Soviet Union, according to some sources 54,753 persons, according to some other sources 65,170 persons died in GUPVI⁵⁸ camps.

As we could see, there were 1,574 prisoners from Vojvodina, eventually 1,131 persons (600+531 persons) could return to their place of residence - re-annexed to Yugoslavia.

⁵⁶ HNA XIX-J-1-j-Jugoszlávia -7/b.t.-00345-1945, 23.d.

⁵⁷ HNA XIX-J-1-j-Jugoszlávia -7/b.t.-00857-1954, 23.d.

⁵⁸ GUPVI (Glavnoie upravlenie po dielam voennoplennyh i internirovannyh) - the high office of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Soviet Union created to deal with POWs and internees. POWs were, therefore, placed in GUPVI camps. Measures regulating the forced labor of POWs date from April 1943. In December 1949 in GUPVI camps, there were 9,005 Hungarians held captive. The last group of POWs (370 persons) returned home in 1955.