

Rückkehr nach Ungarn 1946–1950. Erlebnisberichte ungarndeutscher Vertriebener [Returning Home to Hungary 1946–1950. Testimonies of Hungarian German Expellees]. By Ágnes Tóth. Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2012. 389 pp.

Ágnes Tóth's impressive book examines a moment in Hungarian history which has heretofore gone essentially unmentioned in the secondary literature on the history of the German speaking minority of Hungary and the expulsion of this minority following the Second World War, a moment in history that has been preserved really only in the memories of those who were directly affected and their immediate family members. The history that Tóth has made the subject of her inquiry is something of a blank spot in European history, in spite of the fact that so-called literature of memory is already enjoying its second golden age.

In her book on the forced migrations that took place in Hungary following the Second World War, a book that was published some twenty years ago,¹ Tóth examined the political, demographic, and economic causes and conditions of the expulsion of the German speaking communities. In her new book, she considers the human and social problems of the resettlements from an entirely new perspective, bringing the memories of those affected into her discussion. The book was published in Hungarian in 2008² and German in 2012, and thus represents a significant contribution both to the Hungarian and the German and international historical discourse on the expulsion of these communities.

The long process of forced migration of large communities in Europe following the Second World War began as early as January 1945. Ultimately, at least from the perspective of numbers, this process affected the lives of almost as many people as the events of the war.³ Between January 19, 1946 and June 15, 1948 some 180,000 members of the German speaking minority in Hungary were expelled to the Soviet and American occupation zones in Germany. Of the

1 Tóth, Ágnes, *Migrationen in Ungarn 1945–1948. Vertreibung der Ungarndeutschen, Binnenwanderungen und slowakisch-ungarischer Bevölkerungsaustausch* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2001); Tóth, Ágnes: *Telepítések Magyarországon 1945–1948 között* [Deportations in Hungary between 1945–1948] (Kecskemét: Bács-Kiskun Megyei Levéltár, 1993).

2 Tóth, Ágnes, *Hazatértek. A németországi kitelepítésből visszatért magyarországi németek megpróbáltatásainak emlékezete* [Returning Home. Hungarian Germans who were Expelled to Germany but Chose to Return and their Memories of their Ordeals] (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 2008).

3 Beer, Matthias, *Flucht und Vertreibung der Deutschen. Voraussetzungen, Verlauf, Folgen* (Munich: Verlag Ch. Beck, 2011), 12–13.

German speaking Hungarians who were displaced persons at the time or who had fled during the war (some 220,000 people in total), 5-6 percent, or roughly 10,000 people, decided to leave Germany, which in the official Hungarian documents of the time was referred to as their “land of origin,” and return to Hungary as quickly as possible (pp.13–19).

It was not simple to return, however. In their struggles to retake possession of the homes they had only so recently lost, those who chose to come back to Hungary found themselves compelled to confront measures taken by those in power, shifting laws, and the actions of organs of the police and border guards. Upon arrival in Hungary, they again were faced with expulsion, interrogation, imprisonment, social exclusion, and discrimination. People took refuge for months at a time in what once had been their dwellings while struggling to regain possession, piece by piece, of the homes they had lost, but they were continuously forced to contend with the power of the state and were treated like strangers in their own land.

The book offers not only an understanding of the process of return and the many trials that accompanied it, but also gives some insight into the ways in which the expulsion were perceived by those who experienced them. It does this from the micro-social perspective, the perspective of the village and everyday life. The German minority communities of Hungary faced the questions and paradoxes of identity, mother tongue, nationality, and loyalty many times over the course of the first half of the twentieth century. This question, however, was never more pressing or problematic than at the end of the Second World War, or rather during the expulsion of the early post-War years. Indeed it came to be part of a struggle fought by the members of the German minority for their very existence. The first experiences of members of this community in Germany and the often unwelcoming reactions with which they were met again raised the question, “so, who are we?” Those who chose to return to Hungary in spite of the perils and risks again found themselves in a hostile environment. Their home communities had been disrupted and scattered, both physically and socially, and in many cases simply no longer existed.

The book is divided into four larger parts that present the history of those who returned. The first gives an informative, thorough summary of the events of the expulsion and the return, essentially from the perspective of those in power (pp.11–68). It exposes the political interests at work, the intentions and goals of national and local figures, the processes by which the political decisions behind the expulsion were reached, and the legal regulations, frequently inadequate

and contradictory, that applied to the process of forced migration and to the individuals who chose to return. The question of the expulsion of the German speaking communities was determined by the principle of collective guilt. Furthermore, the political leaders of the country strove to place responsibility for the expulsion on the decisions of the victorious powers. In addition to the goal of achieving ethnic homogenization, the redistribution of the properties of the German communities in the course of the land reform was also a significant factor in the process of expulsion. The organs of the state did not quite know what to do about the German speakers who chose to return to Hungary. They were surprised to say the least to see that people who months or in some cases only weeks earlier had been compelled to leave the country nonetheless wished to return, even after the trials they had endured, to the places from which they had been expelled.

The second chapter, which contains thematic analyses of interviews that were done with people who had chosen to return, is the real kernel of the book, offering essentially the results of Tóth's research (pp.69–172). The fundamental question of the chapter, which consists in part of a discussion of questions regarding methodology and in part of analyses and assessments of the texts, is simply what motivated the recently expelled members of the German speaking community to return, and what kinds of conclusions can be drawn, on the basis of their decisions, regarding their identities and conceptions of themselves. Tóth's research rests on 54 interviews that were done with people who had been expelled, but who had chosen nonetheless to return to Hungary, 46 of which are part of her analysis.

The people who were interviewed were asked questions about the events of the process of return, their identities, their mother tongues, their use of language, schooling, family and local holidays, their relationships with German culture, and the conflicts and experiences that came with cohabitation with members of other nationalities.⁴ The statistical analysis of the information from the interviews is one of the weak points of the book. The number of cases is too small to bear statistical relevance, and the table contains nothing that cannot be easily gleaned from a reading of the thematic analyses of the selected interviews and personal histories themselves (pp.77–92).

4 In the fourth chapter of the book, entitled Appendix, one finds the tables of data, the categories that were used in the interpretations of the interviews, and the questions that were raised in the course of the interviews (pp.379–83).

In order to better understand the decision to return to Hungary, one must know a bit about the experiences the people who chose to return endured in the years preceding their expulsion. The questions that were raised in the interviews therefore also touch on the attempts that were made before the outbreak of war to mobilize members of these communities politically, the activities, for instance, of the *Volksbund der Deutschen in Ungarn* (People's Alliance of Germans in Hungary), as well as the experiences of the war itself, including efforts that were made to recruit German speakers into the SS, the events that took place in Hungary just before the expulsion began, the experiences people had as victims of expulsion in Germany, and the reasons they had for leaving Germany, their "ancestral homeland," to return to Hungary. Specifically because they are not limited solely to questions regarding the events of the journeys back to and resettlement in Hungary, the interviews further a more nuanced analysis and understanding of the motives underlying the decision to return, situating these motives in a broader historical context.

In the subchapter containing the analysis of the interviews the author discusses the motivations behind the decision to return (pp.92–172). The subchapter itself is divided into five thematic parts, depending on the emphasis of the individual interviews, and each individual part is given a kind of title, a citation selected from one of the interviews. The first part, which bears the title "Back home we are stinky Swabians, here we are Gypsies! So what are we?" examines the question of the "home" (and the memory of "home") that was one of the loci of identity, a locus that was lost with the process of expulsion (pp.92–112). The victims of the expulsion lost not only their houses, smallholdings, possessions, and sources of livelihood, but also their identities. When they arrived in Germany, a country that was essentially unknown to them, they were received neither as Germans nor as Swabians. Their manner of dress was ridiculed, they were unable to make themselves understood in their dialect of German, and their skills, knowledge, and abilities were not acknowledged.

The second part of the analysis, "Even before we had left others had come," narrates the chaotic and humiliating events of expulsion, including the process by which the members of the community were deprived of their rights and their property (pp.112–29). The German speakers of Hungary were stripped of their rights, their homes, and their homesteads before the expulsion began, and whether they were allowed to reside temporarily in the sheds or summer kitchens on their properties or possibly one of the back rooms of their houses depended on the goodwill of the new owners. It was quite clear to them that the organs

of state power were giving the new owners, who profited from their expulsion, favorable treatment, allowing them to take possession of their houses, gardens, assets, and means of livelihood.

The third section, “They did not welcome us,” examines the experiences that the expellees endured upon arrival in Germany, experiences that essentially were colored by the sense that they were unwelcome (pp.129–42). Among their most painful memories were recollections of the Germans with whom they came into contact: “They said, ‘the fugitives are coming.’ We are not fugitives, I said, they drove us out, we are not fugitives.” They were even regarded as criminals: “The people there looked on us as if we had committed some sort of nefarious deed in Hungary, and that’s why we had been expelled” (p.135).

The fourth section, “We longed to return home, to our cradles, not to another country,” deals with homesickness and the expellee’s memories of their homes, in the most literal sense of the word (pp.142–57). The quandary the expellees faced, however, was not simply a question of homesickness, however, but rather a question of belonging. Were the members of the German speaking minority of Hungary German or Hungarian, and which identity should they claim as their own and work to preserve? For those who were unable to imagine living the rest of their lives in Germany it seemed simpler to choose to return to Hungary, even if it might be more difficult and uncertain than simply to remain in the country to which they had been expelled.

The fifth section of Tóth’s thematic discussion of the interviews, “We had nothing but the clothes on our backs,” examines the recollections of those who came back to Hungary regarding the conditions in which they lived following their return (pp.157–69). Often they were compelled to earn their livings as manual laborers, their presence only tolerated by the rest of Hungarian society, and they lived under difficult circumstances and had to endure strict police oversight. Relying on the help of extended family members, they had to rebuild their lives from nothing, yet they managed to retake their homes surprisingly quickly, in a period of only a few years, or at least to purchase a house in the villages of their birth.

The third section of the book, “Realities existing in parallel,” consists of selected interviews that offer complete accounts of the lives of the interviewees and also insights into the distinctive aspects of the ways in which they used language (pp.173–378). Their use of language itself creates other perspectives from which to understand their perceptions of their fates. Thus it was a particularly fortuitous decision on the part of the author to allow the reader to

learn of their individual stories not only on the basis of the passages cited in the thematically arranged analyses of the interviews, but also by reading the entire texts of the interviews themselves. One cannot help but be impressed by the ability of these people, victims of expulsion, to regard the painful loss of their homes as a reason, whether comprehensible or not, to undertake the struggle to preserve their identities, values, and traditions.

The life stories again demonstrate clearly that the question of identity is determined not simply on the basis of language, traditions, customs, or lifestyle, but also the geographical space where these various aspects all comingled. The physical space that figured as the backdrop for everyday life in the villages created the palpable, observable frames for the recollections of the average villager, frames that memory often conjured forth in idealized forms. These frames become the bearers of a shared past. If the geographical space, the site of the common history of the village community and a kind of physical embodiment of everyday life, has, along with the community itself, ceased to exist in its original form or undergone drastic transformation then one of the fundamental elements of the identity of the individual has ceased to exist as well.

The life stories of the victims of the expulsion naturally did not simply come to an end at the end of the four-year period under examination here (1946–1950). The integration of the expellees into German society, both in the former West Germany and East Germany, has been the subject of research and scholarly inquiry, and there is now a wealth of information available. The question of the fates of those who chose to return to Hungary, however, has been largely neglected by historians, as has the question of the ways in which those who remained but who had been deprived of their social status dealt with the changes they faced and the strategies they adopted in order to regain their places in the village communities.

The principal strength of the book is that it gives the reader a chance to familiarize him or herself not only with the archival documents (which reveal the political aims, interests, and decisions) and texts that were published in organs of the press (which offer a glimpse into the ways in which public opinion was manipulated), but also with the tragic personal stories of those whose lives were directly affected. It is not limited strictly to a narrative of the events themselves, but rather examines the intentions and aims of political actors and representatives of state power, the personal motives of the victims of the expulsion who chose to return, and often their emotional inducements and attachments. This incorporation of a variety of kinds of historical sources offers

a nuanced overview of the privations and hardships endured by the German speaking Hungarians who chose to return to their homes in Hungary and suffer the vicissitudes of conflicting national and local, political and personal interests. Finally, it is to Tóth's credit that she gives this overview without dividing her study into two separate sections, one situated at the macro-social level, the other at the micro-social, but rather manages to integrate the history both as it happened and as it was experienced and remembered into a single unified picture.

Translated by Thomas Cooper.

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