

On the History of the Deportation of Germans in Southern Hungary (1946–1947)

Péter Miklós

Abstract

In 1946, the German population was evacuated from Csanád County (now in the border of Csongrád County and Békés County, Hungary). The depopulation of Germans was supported by British, American and Soviet powers, too and in Hungary the Soviet invaders controlled the process. Three villages (Almáskamarás, Kübekháza, Újszentiván) and four thousand seven hundred men were involved in the relocation of Csanád County. The sources of the study include the documents of Hungarian National Archives, Csongrád County Archives, and primarily the reports of the deputy of Csanád County. Not only the story of the event, but also personal histories emerge from these papers and it seems that there was no real conflict between the local Germans and the Hungarians, there was only a fueled conflict for political reasons. In the summer of 1946, there was peaceful coexistence between nations in Csanád County and throughout the Southern Region.

Key words: Central-Europe after WW2, deportation of Germans, minority policy in Hungary after 1945

Out of the German, Serb, Romanian, and Slovak nationalities of present-day Southern Hungary and the former Csanád County (comprising of the southern part of today's Békés County and the south-eastern part of what is Csongrád County today), the Germans and the Slovaks were affected by the population exchanges that followed the Second World War. Apart from the significant German population of Elek and Alsókamarás (Elek went under Békés County administration in the spring of 1946), the smaller German populations of Kübekháza and Újszentiván were also deported during the course of 1946. (Erdmann, 1990) In 1947, most of the Slovaks in Pitvaros, Csanádalberti and Ambrózfalva moved to Czechoslovakia and the relocated Hungarians from the Felvidék were settled in their place. (Miklós 2008)

The Serbs in Csanád County acquired a unique role after 1946: they were regarded by the occupying Soviets as political allies and thus were supported. The South Slavic section of the Anti-Fascist Front of Slavs in Hungary held their May 1946 convention in Baja. The Serb inhabitants of Csanád County (Battonya, Magyarcsanád, Szőreg, Deszk and Újszentiván) were represented by Koszta Sevic, Száva Sztárcevic, Sztefán Neducsics, Dragutin Neducsics, and Jován Putnik from Újszentiván. Their list was sent by Ödön Pásint on 25 July 1946 to Endre Páll, vice-ispán of Csanád and ministerial commissioner of nationality issues. (Nóvé 2012) Pásint's notes included the following: "Regarding also the Yugoslavian-Hungarian cooperation, I strongly emphasize that the ethno-political situation of the South Slavs in Hungary must be satisfactory and adequate in all aspects. Therefore, I am confidentially informing the hon. vice-ispán about the listed persons, along with

their appointment and function, so that the hon. vice-ispán could make any comments and remarks in the matter.” (MNL CSML CSVAI EI, box 1. 5/1946.)

In 1946–1947, many Germans in the Csanád region applied for the Hungarian-ization of their names at the Ministry of Interior. Perhaps their intention was to express their Hungarian identity (i.e. their belonging to the Hungarian nation), but it is also possible that such symbolic acts were an attempt to avoid their deportation – and the hardships and uncertainty it would involve. For example, Elek school teacher Mrs Katalin Sarlós née Mahler changed her maiden name to Molnár, as granted by the Ministry of Interior on 13 June 1945. (MNL CSML CSVAI ÁI, box 37. 3146/1946.) This case supports József Banner’s remark in his paper on the German given names in Elek village: “Adopting Hungarian names had begun after the First World War, but until 1945 it had been sporadic among educated bourgeois residents (mainly clerks and state officials). Mass Hungarian-ization of family names came after 1945, though some name changes also occurred after the deportations and even in recent times.” (Banner 1973, 211)

In July of 1945, a group of Slovaks in Ambrózfalva informed the local national committee about their intention to move to Slovakia. The committee forwarded their wish to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which released the following statement in September 1945, communicated by minister János Gyöngyösi.

“The Hungarian government finds it necessary to state that it would never initiate such a population exchange or relocation on its own, and would sanction it only based on international agreements. Such a concept would never be initiated by the Hungarian government, as it is neither humane nor democratic to wrench an ethnic group from the place they were born, where their ancestors toiled, where their established themselves with a lifetime of labour. However, the government should be willing to consider the idea if there was orientation among the Slovaks in Hungary intending to renounce their century-old relations of coexistence with the Hungarians.” (MNL CSML CSNBI ÁI, box 3. 224/1945.)

The minister’s statement was surely drafted with a good diplomatic approach. On the one hand, it claims that the Hungarian government would not initiate the population exchange and translocation. Note that this was a time when Hungarians faced institutionalized persecution in almost every neighbouring country. By the turn of 1944–45 in Yugoslavia, there were full-fledged pogroms against the Hungarians in Délvidék, resulting in more than ten thousand casualties. In Czechoslovakia, the presidential decrees of Edvard Beneš condemned the Hungarians of Felvidék to be banished (to the territory of the Hungarian state) or relocated within the state (mainly in the place of the already deported Germans). Though the Romanian statute on nationalities was announced as early as February 1945, it was never put to practice, Hungarians were negatively discriminated in Romania, and certain small-scale anti-Hungarian incidents also happened.

On the other hand, Gyöngyösi’s communication also reveals a perspective of Realpolitik, admitting that a prospective international treaty would sway the Hungarian government in favour of population exchange. Two experiences formed the basis of this idea. One was the following: the Hungarian government knew that the Czechoslovakian rule intends to get rid of the Hungarians not only in theory (e.g. in the government programme in Kassa) but in practice as well. The other one was that Gyöngyösi,

as the minister of foreign affairs, was aware of the fact that the political orientation of the Hungarian state, including its diplomatic intentions, was determined by the occupying Soviet Union's international political interests. These interests included the ethnic-national issues in Central Europe as well, the "solution" of which was a question of logistics (of train wagons) for Stalin. The relocation of Germans in the region was the minimum of this solution, sanctioned even by American and British diplomacy.

Despite the above remarks, the Hungarian cabinet finding "neither humane nor democratic to wrench an ethnic group from the place they were born, where their ancestors toiled" could have been a fine principle. Unfortunately, this was no more than a nice-sounding phrase of diplomacy.

To ensure provisions for miners (a highlighted economic interest), the national committee of Csanád County ordered stockpiling for the town and village committees. The committee of Kübekháza (also affected by the relocations) stockpiled 370 kg of corn, 120 kg of potato and 30 kg flour. However, the collecting and the accompanying report was hindered by the process of German translocations. As István Bodó, chairman of the local national committee wrote in his 8 May 1946 letter to the county national committee: "I must apologize for not reporting the stockpiling results on time, because the process of the German translocation consumed all our time." (MNL CSML CSNBI Ál, box 4. 399/146.)

The chairman of the Social-Democrats in Almáskamarás was József Schreirer (of German origins, by the way); his report was discussed by the Csanád County national committee on their session of 12 July 1945. According to the report, "during the deportation of the Swabs, the Russian took people who were positively leftist but of Swab ethnicity, while there are still Volksbund members in the village. The national committee is petitioned to take measures, so that the deported leftist citizens could be exchanged with the Volksbund members in the village." (MNL CSML CSNBI Ál, box 4. session records, 12 July 1945, 2.) The county national committee ordered the local committee to draft a list of those "still in the village, despite their pro-German sympathies", with the purpose of forwarding to the ministry of the exterior. (MNL CSML CSNBI Ál, box 4. session records, 12 July 1945, 2–3.) The national committee in Almáskamarás listed those "Volksbund-members who were transported to Mezöhegyes and Russia from the village, and those presently in Almáskamarás [...] who, if translocated to Russia, could be exchanged with Swabs of Hungarian identity who had already been deported". (MNL CSML CSNBI Ál, box 4. session records, 2 August 1945, 1.) However, the list of names did not allow the committee to distinguish between the "Hungarian-identity" and "German-identity" Germans already deported to the Soviet Union, so they asked the national committee in Almáskamarás to list those persons who "could be transported back from the Soviet Union" (MNL CSML CSNBI Ál, box 4. session records, 2 August 1945, 1.)

Effective from 1 March 1946, German-populated Elek went under the administration of Békés County, instead of Csanád. Therefore, the village lost its district centre status and became a simple village in the Gyula district, while the Mezökövácsháza district in Csanád grew enormous with the settlements once belonging to the Elek district. Though they had argued for belonging to Békés County, now its leaders and citizens wished to get back in Csanád. (MNL CSML CSKBI, box 4. 57/1947. 13–14.)

Vice-ispán Endre Páll handed in his April report to the county administrative committee on 8 May 1946, in which he also addressed the deportation of Germans: they were translocated from Almáskamarás during the course of April.

“During the month, the German-speaking population of Almáskamarás were relocated. Deportation and resettlement was not carried out by local administration, but by various committees of the common welfare offices. Two or three committees were operating simultaneously in the village. Of course, the populace were unable to differentiate among them and their actual or assumed complaints did not address the relevant committee for the case. Consequently, most of these were never resolved. Due to the annexing of Elek village, three villages in our county were subjected to the deportation of Germans. Újszentiván and Kübekháza are due in May and I hope that the procedure will be carried out with more care and better protection of the national property than it was done in Almáskamarás. Here most of the poultry and beehives perished for lack of tending to them. A larger part of the newly arrived resettled people gathered any off-inventory valuables and left. Some entered the closed-down houses by force and made off with the taken items through the gardens. The hon. ispán, as soon as he learned of these events, called the police to prevent further pillage. Accompanied by my deputy, he visited the site in person to restore order. Further damages can only be prevented by moving in sober and hardworking people.” (MNL CSML CSKBI, box 4. 57/1947. 17.)

In the report’s section about the agricultural and crop production aspects, Endre Páll pointed out the economic dimension of the translocations. “In the village of Almáskamarás, the springtime agricultural works could not be completed because of the deportation of the German-speaking population. It is a great question whether the newcomers will be able to finish the remaining work.” (MNL CSML CSKBI, box 4. 57/1947. 21.)

In his May report dated 31 May 1946, Ender Páll gave details on the related events in Újszentiván and Kübekháza. His experiences here were almost identical with what he found a month before in Almáskamarás.

“During May, the Germans in Torontál were also relocated. There were larger groups of Germans in Újszentiván and Kübekháza villages as well, while only a few families were involved in the village of Szőreg.

To carry out the relocation, 320 people arrived at Újszentiván and finished the task in five days. Unfortunately, the residents lost their self-control, treating the belongings of the deported almost as spoils of war and causing great damages to national property. There were complaints about the deportation committees as well, which were forwarded to the appropriate offices.

The deportation of the German populace was followed by resettlement in the vacant houses and estates. This was done by the village land request committees, with the cooperation of the county property management council. I have received complaints in this matter as well, so I found it necessary to assess the reality of the complaints in person. There were articles about the resettlements in the daily newspapers in Szeged, too. At any rate, the county property management council is able to investigate the valid complaints and give property only to those who deserve it.” (MNL CSML CSKBI, box 4. 57/1947. 23.)

The vice-ispán’s report shows that the deportation of the Germans happened

during an important period of agricultural work, just before the summer harvest, posing the problem whether the newcomers would arrive in necessary numbers and whether they will be able to carry out the usual due works. The weather did not favour the farmers of Újszentiván, either; according to the report of the county financial office, the June of 1946 brought much rain and ice hails that damaged the crops. In the vicinity of Újszentiván, corn and tobacco suffered 10-15% damages on 200 acres. (MNL CSML CSKBI, box 4. 62/1947. 16.)

It is worth noting that in his May report dated 12 June 1946, vice Colonel István Lénárt, head of the Csanád county police department did not mention anything about that there had been any political or security incidents during the deportation of the Germans. Concurring with the deportations but independently from those, there were anti-Semitic developments in the county. In Földeák and Mezőkovácsa, Jews returning from the extermination camps and deportation were insulted due to the propagation of libels, while anti-Semitic pamphlets appeared in Makó, featuring the symbols of the leftist coalition parties (the Hungarian Communist Party, the Social-Democrat Party and the National Peasant Party). On 31 May, the synagogue of the Orthodox Israelite community went up in flames. (MNL CSML CSKBI, box 4. 60/1947. 22.)

According to the county deputy captain's report from one month later, though, the fire "seemed to be of criminal origin" but was in fact "a case of neglect". (MNL CSML CSKBI box 4. 60/1947. 24.) In his work titled *The Last Libels*, János Pelle concludes that it was probably provocation against the smallholders carried out by the local police who were influenced by Communists (a provocation that did not succeed). (Pelle 1995, 167–184)

In his December 1946 report (dated December 31, 1946), vice-ispán Endre Páll informed the administrative committee that the inter-department committee monitoring the finances of villages and towns examined the conditions at the site during the end of November and early December. The officials assessed that the expenses of twenty-one settlements in Csanád exceeded their income; a state aid of more than 190 000 Forints was appointed to support them.

As the vice-ispán wrote, "it certainly must not be forgotten that those villages where great numbers of Slovaks registered for relocation are unable to cover their expenses; colonist villages Újszentiván, Kübekháza and Almáskamarás are in a similar predicament, where the settlers in the place of the deported Germans are presently not yet able to pay taxes." (MNL CSML CSKBI, box 4. 57/1947. 69–70.)

Aurél Hencz, school inspector in Csanád County dated his January report 12 February 1946, informing the county principals and the administrative committee about the situation of schools. He explained that pupils of every ethnicity are granted their right to native-language reading, and he also gave details on the ethnic schools of the county.

"In five Serbian E.[astern] O.[rthodox] schools there has been and will be Serbian-language education: in Battonya, Deszk, Magyarcsanád, Szőreg and Újszentiván. Education is in Romanian, as before, in the Romanian E.[astern] O.[rthodox] school in Magyarcsanád. Teaching is in Hebrew in the Hebrew association school that was opened in this school year in Deszk. There will be Slovakian-language education in the following public schools: the state school in Ambrózfalva, Luth[eran]

school in Csanádalberti, state school in Pitvaros, state school in Megyesegyháza, village school in Nagykopáncsi and state public school 1 in Pusztatottlaka; in many of these schools a Slovakian faculty is to be organized. Romanian faculties need to be set up in the state schools of Battonya, Elek, Elek-lőkősháza 1, and Pusztatottlaka 2 and 3.” (MNL CSML CSKBI, box 4. 61/1947. 2.) At this time, at least partially German-language schools no longer operated in the county. (Tóth 1998, 56. and 193.)

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