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Labor camps in Komárom-Esztergom County

Csolnok, Oroszlány, Tatabánya

Theses

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I.

Research assignment, topic choosing

I have chosen the history of the Hungarian labor camps between 1952 and 1956 as the topic of my thesis work, because the Hungarian labor camps are not well known after 1953, yet most of the people think these camps were closed in 1953.

I have focused on the history of the three camps existed in Komárom-Esztergom county: Csolnok, Oroszlány and Tatabánya. This choice was reasoned not only by their geographic location, but by their intertwined history as well: all the three camps served mining and they often exchanged prisoners whose fate strongly connected in the events of the 1956 revolution, especially in the actions of the so-called miner brigade.

Among the four types of camps established in Hungary, books were published primarily about the internment camps, Recsk and Tiszalök: firstly reminiscences and later scientific works as well. Namely, the history of Recsk appears in the reminiscences of Sándor Erdey, Zoltán Sztáray, Zoltán Nyeste, György Faludy, and summarized in the works of Géza Böszörményi and Barbara Bank. Whereas, the camp in Tiszalök was explored by Miklós Görbedi.

Several books investigated the other two types of the camps, the displaced persons camp, and the prisoner-of-war camp, written by Zsuzsa Hantó, Kinga Széhenyi, József Saád, Zalán Bognár and others, including reminiscences and a book of interviews as well.

However, there is only one published book, two short studies and two reminiscences about the fourth type of the camps: the labor camp or work camp located mainly near to coalmines.

Therefore, I targeted the following research objectives:

- What kind of antecedents implied the openings of the camps in the examined towns?
- How did the situation of the Hungarian coalmining contribute to establishing these camps?
- Where did these labor camps take place in the system of the Hungarian camps and what kind of differences and similarities can be shown compared to the other ones?
- What was the institutional and legal background of the forced labor of the prisoners?
- What time and in what circumstances were the camps established in the three examined towns?
- What was the difference between these camps?
- How did the number of the prisoners change in these camps?
- How did the everyday life of the prisoners look like in these camps?
- How can the life of the jailors and the prisoners be contrasted?
- What time and why were these camps closed?
- Did the ex-prisoners join to the 1956 revolution?
- How did the years in prison affect the ex-prisoners free life?
- What happened to the coalmines and the buildings after the closing

of these camps?

- How do people commemorate the former camps?
- Creating the complete list of the prisoners and the jailors

II.

Adopted methods, sources

To capture a true picture about the Hungarian camp system after 1953, I explored the available sources in several archives and the official records to compare them and to contrast with the reports of agents, the press, the scientific literature, reminiscences, and the self-made interviews. To better understand the events, I visited the place of the former camps and tried to localize the mineshafts as well. I also aimed to make the list of the prisoners and the jailors.

1. Archival sources and official records

During my work, I was searching mainly in the National Archives of Hungary, in the Komárom-Esztergom County Archives and in the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security. The most files are about the Coalmining Trust in Dorog and Tatabánya, the party organization of the camp Command, the documents of the prosecutions and the reports of spies.

Moreover, I have found sources in the Historical Archive of the City of Tatabánya, in the Budapest City Archives, in the Military Historical

Archives and Records, in the Records of the National Headquarter of the Law Enforcement, in the Records of the Coalmining Museum in Oroszlány, in the Records of the Museum in Tatabánya and in the OSA Archives.

2. Scientific literature/bibliography

I have found the most information about establishing the Hungarian camps in the study of György T. Varga, “*Adalékok a börtönügy és a rabmunkáltatás történetéhez, 1949-1953*” and in the dissertation of Barbara Bank, “*Szögesdrótok mögött*” and in her book “*Állami titok*”. Besides, I have found several publications about the history of the camps and the belonging towns in 1956. Among these sources, the best were the study of Pál Germuska, titled “*Komárom megye*” and the manuscript of Miklós Horváth titled “*A Belügyminisztérium Büntetésvégrehajtási Parancsnokság és alárendelt szervei tevékenységének vizsgálata (1956.október 23 - 1956.november 4.)*”.

The only book, which was written about my research topic, is the work of Gábor Barakka: “*Rabtáborok Oroszlányban*”. I have also found two shorter studies: Tibor Fakász, “*A csolnoki rabtábor*” and Attila Tóth “*A pokol tornácán*”.

3. The press

While these camps were operating, the press did not report about them. The first article was published about the release of the prisoners. Besides, there were written some other short articles about the commemorations made in

the time of the Hungarian regime change. Thus, the press gave just a little information to the archival and other sources.

4. Reminiscences, oral history

During my work, I made several interviews with the ex-prisoners to supplement the insufficient information about the documents and the bibliography. They were Miklós Dobovics, Ervin Ernst, Ervin Felkay, Árpád Halász, András Kuster, Iván Tóth and András Zsótér. I made interviews also with Ferenc Szeifert, the priest of Csolnok, and with József Klinger who worked in Csolnok as a miner. Before I finished my research, two ex-prisoners from Csolnok had published his memories: Tibor Petrusz, “*Rákosi börtönében*” and Ervin Ernst, “*Rabtábor a meddőhányón. Jó szerencse semmi más*”.

5. The former spots, souvenirs

I visited the former spots of the camps and made some photos of them, specifically of the shaft IX in Csolnok, of the shafts XVI and XVIII in Oroszlány and of the shafts X, XIV and Síkvölgyi in Tatabánya. I also tried to make photos about the souvenirs and documents of the ex-prisoners that were from the camp.

6. List of the prisoners and jailors

A special aim of my research was to create the lists of the prisoners and the jailors that are placed in the appendix. However, despite of my long lasting collecting work, these lists are incomplete. The main reason of that is there

were only three lists in the archives. I have found two of them in the Komárom-Esztergom County Archives that summarize the application of the prisoners for conditional release and the belonging official decisions. The third list is from the OSA Archives, which contains a list of 160 prisoners from Tatabánya. I have collected all the other names one by one from the Political Prisoners Community, the ex-prisoners reminiscences, the interviews I have made, the available publications and the reports of the spies related to the prisoners.

III.

Main points of the essay, new scientific achievements

➤ In the history of the three settlements, Csolnok, Oroszlány, and Tatabánya, the exploration of coal deposits was determinant. This made possible the development of the settlements and the surrounded area, moreover generated the demand for establishing labor camps in the Rákosi regime.

➤ The nationalization of the Hungarian mines and the foreseen numbers of the first 5-year plan contributed to employ prisoners in the coalmining, because only with the civil miners they could not fulfil these plans.

➤ There were four types of the camps between 1945 and 1956 in Hungary: for prisoners of war, for internee, for relocated people and for prisoners. However, there was an essential difference among them: people

were delivered to the internment camps and to the farms in the Great Hungarian plain with an internment or relocation decision, which was from the ÁVH. But, people who got to the prisoners camp, had been given a judicial judgment for a determined period because of political reason. Besides, there were other differences among the camps: the work, they must made, the establisher institution and the operation time of the camps.

➤ The Economical Directorship of the Ministry of Justice controlled the work of the prisoners until the December of 1951 when the Directorate of Public Work was established. Moreover, the Coalmining Trust had an important role in Dorog and Tatabánya, where the prisoners worked and the Mine and Energy Ministry, whose name changed a lots of time.

➤ Regarding the three settlements, the first work camp was established in Csolnok, where the prisoners began to work in April 1952. In Oroszlány, the employment of the prisoners began some months later in the shaft XVIII, but here, prisoners had already been working before in a building. Tatabánya was the last one where the buildings of the prisoners were built up. They finished them by the November of 1952 at the shaft Síkvölgyi and XIV. The camp by the shaft X began operating only after the November of 1955, but internment had been working since the January of 1952 in Tatabánya-Alsó.

➤ Every examined camp employed ‘prisoners’ in the coalmines however, there were disparities in their distribution regarding the committed or not committed crimes and the level of their sentence. In Csolnok and in Tatabánya, the number of those people was the highest, who organized, agitated or spied. In Oroszlány, the most of the prisoners illegally crossed

the border. In accordance with these facts, the people were sentenced for 2-6 years in Oroszlány, for more than 4 years in Tatabánya, and for more than 10 years or life sentenced in Csolnok.

➤ The number of the people in the camps was the highest in Oroszlány, there were always more than 1200 people. There were usually only 600 people in Csolnok and in Tatabánya. The exemption under this rule was the summer of 1956 when the number of the prisoners in Csolnok increased over 1000.

➤ The life of the prisoners was much better in these labor camps, than in other types of camps or in prison. There was an economical reason for the better circumstances; furthermore, the greater part of the operation time was after Imre Nagy amnesty. Therefore, the prisoners could write letters on a restricted way and receive visitors. There was cultural life in the camps, and there was even a strike in Csolnok.

I have written about the everyday life of the prisoners, about their catering, their health, their work in the mine, their accidents, their prison-breaking trials, and in addition, their relationships with the civil miners, the jailors, and their relatives. The specialty of these camps was that the sentenced worked with the civil miners here in contrast to other types of camps and prisons. The analysis of their release process and their relating applications meant another interesting question.

➤ The life of the jailors resembled that of the prisoners. Because of the housing shortages of the era, the jailors lived also near the shafts on the outskirts of the settlements, far away from their families – like the prisoners. In addition, their internal conflicts made their everyday work more difficult.

The situation was the most conspicuous after the Imre Nagy amnesty in Csolnok, because jailors who worked by the ÁVH before did not execute the commands given by jailors who had been working by the law-enforcement. Meanwhile, the latter were waiting for the translocation of former ones. However, there was no such problem these days on the other two commands according to the known sources. The situation improved later also in Csolnok.

➤ These labor camps operated until 1956; the prisoners were freed during the 1956 revolution. In Csolnok, they had been striking in the mines for 96 hours resulting, that they were released with official documents. In Oroszlány, the prisoners tried to break out and some of them died in the conflict. This hard attempt contributed to their release. In Tatabánya, no violent event took place; here, the commander let the prisoners go free, after he had got an instruction and had seen the marching mass.

➤ After crushing the revolution of 1956, the government punished all the people involved including the miners as well. However, at the same time, the regime softened the dictatorial character of the control, at least closed the work camps. A few surveys were still created about the reopening of these camps and employing prisoners in the mining industry, but these plans were never realized because of a decision of the party and an order of the government.

➤ Many of the released prisoners went to Budapest and joined to the revolution. Two different group formed from the ex-prisoners of Csolnok and Oroszlány with the lead of Istvan Szirmai and László Rusznyák. This two groups united and became the so called „miner brigade” that joined to

the resistance on the Széna square. Besides, János Futó organized an own group as well, and some of the ex-prisoners took part in the fight at the headquarters of the party.

➤ Some people emigrated after crushing the revolution of 1956, while others stayed in Hungary. Some of the latter went back to the prison to serve their time as others got pardon. However, the consequences of being ex-prisoners accompanied them in their everyday life. Spies from their colleagues or ex-prisoner friends inspected them; it was harder to find a job and almost impossible to build greater career.

➤ The mining had an important role in the Kádár-regime too, because of its great economic importance, but the mining company gradually closed those shafts where the prisoners worked before. This process started in Csolnok in 1969.

➤ In Oroszlány, the 1960s were the heyday of the mining, but the local mining corporation also began to close the shafts from 1971. In Tatabánya, a few new shafts were opened, but they also began to close them soon. However, the company here did not dismiss the workers, but started new activities.

➤ People tried to reuse the buildings of the former commandants as a hostel for workers. In the end, all these buildings were demolished both in Csolnok and in Oroszlány and there is forest in the place of the former shafts IX and XVIII nowadays. The shaft Síkvölgyi, in Tatabánya is an exception; there is a functioning modern spring factory today.

➤ After the political transition, people began to organize commemorations at the location of the former camps. First, a memorial

tablet was inaugurated to honor the prisoners and the civil miners in Csolnok in 1992. After 4 years, the community initiated a relief in Oroszlány, which represented a prisoner miner. In Tatabánya, a monument got ready in 2004, which stand in the center of the city. In addition, local people opened miner exhibitions in every settlement; the first was in Tatabánya in 1975.

➤ During this research, I tried to collect as much names of the prisoners and the jailors as much I can. The result of my work is I have collected the name of 203 jailors and 1797 prisoners so far: 569 prisoners from Csolnok, 961 from Oroszlány and 267 prisoners from Tatabánya.

IV.

Publications in the topic of the essay

- *Az elítéltek mindennapjai és az 1956-os forradalom eseményei a csolnoki munkatáborban.* In: *Memoriae Commendamus.* Tanulmányok a XI. Eötvös Konferencia Történeti Üléséről. Szerk.: Kapitány Adrienn és Locsmándi Dániel. Budapest, 2011. 231-250.
- *Bányamunkatábor Csolnokon.* In: *Memento.* Az 1945–56 közötti Magyar Politikai Elítéltek Közösségének Magazinja. Budapest, 2011/2. 15-20.
- *Őrök a csolnoki munkatáborban.* In: *Sorsfordulók és mindennapok.* Modern Minerva Könyvek 4. Tanulmányok a 19-20. századi magyar és egyetemes történelemről. Szerkesztette: Strausz Péter- Zachar Péter Krisztián. Heraldika Kiadó, Budapest, 2011. 279-296.
- *Munkatáborok Magyarországon. Csolnok. Egy bányamunkatábor létrehozása és 1956-os megszűnése.* In: *A vidék forradalma 1956.* Történelmi Ismeretterjesztő Társulat Egyesület. Budapest, 2012. 122-131.
- *Azonosságok és különbségek az internálás 20. századi intézményrendszerében.* In: *A diktatúra évtizedei.* PPKE -BTK - Történelmi Ismeretterjesztő Társulat Egyesület, Piliscsaba, 2013. 271-279.

Other major publications

- Bokodi-Oláh Gergely: *Fonyód 1956*, Fonyód, 2011. Recenzió. In: Orpheus Noster, IV. évf. 2012/2. 92-94.
- *A diktatúra Szabad Szája: politikai vicclapok 1945-1956*. In: Utak és útkereszteződések. Ünnepi tanulmányok M. Kiss Sándor tiszteletére. Történelmi Ismeretterjesztő Társulat Egyesület, Budapest, 2013. 513-522.
- *Adalékok az adózás történetéhez*. Szerk.: Horváth Attila - Galambos István - Marschal Adrienn. Történelmi Ismeretterjesztő Társulat Egyesület, TITE Könyvek 4. Budapest, 2014.