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Polish Refugees in Nyíregyháza

The friendship between the Polish and the Hungarian people is based on historical experience. This is the essence of the well-known old poem:

Polak, Węgier — dwa bratanki, i do szabli, i do szklanki, oba zuchy, oba żwawi,
niech im Pan Bóg błogosławi.

Pole and Hungarian — two brothers, good for sabre and for glass. Both courageous, both lively, let God bless them.

However, there is also a saying among Hungarian proverbs close in meaning to the above poem: *a friend in need is a friend indeed*. That is how the Hungarians felt and what they intended to prove when Poland was attacked by the German Nazi army in 1939. There used to exist an unwritten alliance between the leaders of the two countries aiming to achieve an effective political relationship including military-political cooperation at that time.

Diplomatic protest

As for the antecedents, the relationships following World War I became complicated since the treaties of Paris influenced the two nations in different ways. While Poland was hoping to build a united homeland of a united nation, Hungary lost two-third of its country. By having the so-called successor states in between the two states, the thousand-year-old mutual border was gone. At the beginning, Czechoslovakia was more effective in pursuing its interests. It had a more developed industry. Edvard Beneš managed to enforce his diplomatic training and, last but not least, enjoyed the support of the Powers of the Triple Entente. Nevertheless, the situation changed considerably over the next decade and the formation of the new alliance

(Rome-Berlin Axis) clearly presented the dangers of the Nazi conceptions and politics as well as the devastation following their victory. The Polish were in the danger of being invaded, and the Hungarians were threatened by the compulsory alliance formed on unequal conditions. There definitely were some results of the alliance, which could convince the whole nation, namely the First Vienna Award of 1938. At that time, inhabited mainly by Hungarians Northern Hungary, which was annexed to Czechoslovakia after the treaty, was given back to Hungary. Prime Minister Count Pál Teleki, being a famous expert in geography, aimed to restore the ethnographic borders by a possible revision of the peace treaties. Being far-sighted, he could not become an unconditional follower of Germany.

The Hungarian government believed that a Polish-German conflict could not be localized and would risk a world war making Germany unable to win. This opinion was announced by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Count István Csáky during the Italian-Hungarian governmental talks in April 1939¹. The Hungarian Government could rely on the support and agreement of the political élite when defining further reasons for the Italians: the borders of Hungary would not be opened in case the German army intended to cross the country since it would mean a wartime affiliation in the western powers' (Entente's) opinion.

Their further argument was based on the realistic danger of giving a chance to Hitler to occupy Hungary.

Count Csáky stated that letting the German troops use the territory of Hungary to cross would seriously be hindered by the Polish-friendly Hungarian public. The minister wrote,

If the German troops, without any words or with possible protests, were let to enter and cross to fight against Poland, it would lead to a revolt and a moral breakdown causing Hungary to lose its confidence and get into a more disadvantageous position than the German-supported Slovaks are².

The Italians did not consider the situation so serious. They believed that it would remain a local action (just like the annexation of Austria did), therefore the Hungarian diplomacy expected Italy to support them against Germany.

Yet, on 24 July, 1939 Prime Minister Pál Teleki was obliged to confirm that 'Hungary will run its policies in compliance with the resolutions of the Axis Power, but the country is not prepared to enter a war against Poland due to moral considerations.'

The Germans could not help acknowledging the polite but firm refusal and the Hungarian diplomacy could successfully carry on the impression of a seemingly loyal partner even when Poland was attacked.

¹ G. Juhász, *Magyarország lengyel politikája a második világháború alatt*, [in:] *Barátok a bajban / Lengyel menekültek Magyarországon 1939–1945*, ed. L. Antal, Budapest 1985.

² G. Ed Juhász, *Diplomáciai iratok Magyarország külpolitikájához 1936–1945*, Vol. IV, Budapest 1962, Document No 90.

The reception of the Polish refugees

At 5:40 a.m. on 1 September, 1939, Radio Warsaw announced that the German troops had crossed the border. On 17 September, without any prior notification or declaration of war, the Soviet army started the occupation of Eastern Poland along the entire Polish-Soviet border. Soon, Poland fell prey of two aggressors. That was the time when Hungary opened its borders to Polish refugees. As for the precedent law, Hungary intended to apply Law XXX of 1936, which was composed on the Geneva Convention following Hungary's accession to the League of Nations³.

There are only estimations rather than exact numbers referring to the amount of people who arrived in Hungary. There were both civilians and military units. Some say that a population of 100,000–140,000 was soon settled in organized conditions. Upon opening the border, the Minister of Foreign Affairs had contacted the Polish Ambassador and offered to organize the sheltering of the refugees and to assist the route of the ones who decided to move farther from Hungary. The Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Chief of Military Staff agreed on the duties. Then they informed the Ambassador that the ones arriving with arms were to be disarmed due to the martial law and to be received in internment camps. Civilian refugees able to look after themselves were to be treated like any civilians living in Hungary, while those requiring help were to be received and looked after in refugee camps. Ambassador Leon Orłowski, being an excellent diplomat who used to work for the Polish Embassy in the USA and the UK, was aware of the fact that Hungary was running immense risk. He took every effort to employ as many of his own employees in settling Polish camps as possible⁴. To avoid an initial confusion, as requested by the Polish government in exile, the evacuation of the soldiers was organized by the Polish representation in Budapest for as long as it was possible. Practically, this meant that officially they used Hungary only for passing through, concealing the fact that they were armed so that they didn't need to stay as prisoners of war. The Hungarian offices of internal affairs could secretly contribute. For instance, the passports issued at this time but dated earlier were accepted as legal documents. Soldiers were given this type of documents and therefore could leave the country as tourists. Later, the government had civilian clothes sewn for them from military cloths. Obviously, the Germans noticed these 'tourists' who then escaped through the green border to Yugoslavia in order to reach France where they could start organizing the Polish Army in exile⁵. Thanks to the prompt administration, the evacuation of the Polish soldiers was mostly completed by the summer of 1940.

Initially, the Hungarian government took it seriously to refer to the Geneva Convention when dealing with refugee matters. Later on, however, they needed to face more and more issues requiring individual approach.

³ Law XXX of 1936 codifies the agreement dated on 27 July, 1929, known as the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field.

⁴ L. Orłowski, *Egy követ emlékei*, [in:] *Barátok a bajban...*, *op. cit.*

⁵ I. Lagzi, *Lengyel menekültek Zala megyében a második világháború idején*, Zalai Gyűjtemény 3, Zalaegerszeg 1975.

On 15 September, 1939, at the very first moment, Dr József Antall, Sr⁶, was appointed Head of Social Department IX of the Ministry of Home Affairs to deal with matters including taking care of refugees, which was connected with the fact that registering foreign citizens was within the competence of the guards.

In all areas of life, József Antall searched for and supported the opportunity for refugees to organize their own lives. So as to manage aids, he founded the Hungarian-Polish Refugee Committee. As a civilian organization, it could deal with refugee-related matters more easily. On the other hand, the Citizen's Committee for Helping Polish Refugees (abbreviated Polish Citizen's Committee) led by Henryk Slawik, undertook the safeguarding of the refugees, organizing their cultural life and many other tasks. They could gradually take over a range of duties from the Polish Embassy bound to be closed down due to the fact that the delegating country did not exist any more resulting from the collapse of the Polish State. Among the supporting organizations was the Polish Red Cross operating within the Red Cross working in Hungary, mobilizing refugee doctors or even establishing Polish military hospitals.

Organizing education was a particularly significant matter. Through József Antall's good personal intercession in various offices, all levels of education were available: from primary to university ones. The most famous institution was the secondary school in Balatonboglár. József Antall also ordered all refugees to be registered as Catholic unless they refused it. In this way they saved the lives of Jews. The priests arriving together with the refugees could serve their clerical duties in the Polish language, and they were supported by the head of the Hungarian Catholic Church, the Prince Archbishop⁷.

The expansion of the war led to the worsening of the situation in Hungary. Prime Minister Teleki committed suicide, and not only did the German-friendly government give up the Poles, but also the Hungarian clerks protecting them. Yet, due to the fast and effective work in the initial months, the military men were able to move forward and the civilians were protected and saved by the Hungarian people, until they could return to their homes.

Nyíregyháza becomes the receiving town of refugees

During the first days and weeks, the refugees coming from Košice and Chop could mainly count on the local inhabitants, but soon the Hungarian government prepared more appropriate reception and refugee camps. The mayor of Nyíregyháza, Pál Szohor, as ordered in a phone conversation by the Minister of Home Affairs, offered them the manor of Varjúlapos, previously adapted for the refugees

⁶ Dr József Antall, Sr, a representative of the Smallholders' party, was the father of József Antall, the first Prime Minister of Hungary following the change of regime. He accomplished his tasks with great empathy and competence. In: K. Kapronczay, *Lengyel menekültek Magyarországon a II. világháború idején*, [in:] *Magyarországi lengyelek*, Körtánc füzetek.

⁷ The József Antall Society was founded to make his achievements known and to cultivate his memory, <http://www.antalljosef.hu>.

from Transylvania⁸. This land, 15 kilometres from the town, was the property of the Dessewffy Counts who leased it out for 25 years. There was accommodation available for 150 contracted workers coming for summer harvesting jobs and the territory also had a flour-mill, an oil-press and ironworks of its own. Besides that, as premises for breeding animals, it included several stables and warehouses. The well-equipped agricultural centre had earlier given shelter for refugees from Transylvania, but it is also said to have had Ukrainian SICH partisan war prisoners there, although there is no written proof thereof.

The local press, *Nyírvidék*, stated on 24 August 1939 that 'Poland is on the verge death' and on 23 September it announced that the inhabitants of the town welcomed the refugees from Poland with great sympathy and established a fund for their needs. Several refugees were given jobs immediately. 28 December 1939 marked the beginning of a new era in the life of the Varjúlapos camp with the arrival of the Polish refugees⁹. There were mainly young men of military age coming. Since many of them continued their journey if they had acquaintances or relatives elsewhere or wanted to join the army organized abroad, the exact number of them cannot be stated. Based on the registers, however, it may be estimated that several hundreds of people stayed there for shorter or longer periods.

The mayor became responsible for the camp and he made the previous mayor's son, István Balla, who was a lawyer, responsible for organising maintenance and control of the camp and dealing with everyday matters¹⁰. The salary of the town employees was paid by the Ministry of Home Affairs and the dwellers were also given daily pocket money (soldier's pay) of 20 fillers (Hungarian currency at the time) for cigarettes, letter sheets, etc. Among the employees of the camp there was a resident supervisor responsible for the order at the camp, a cook, a supplier and a temporary helper, an accountant and an interpreter. Twice a week, a doctor in charge attended there and the merchants of the town were commissioned to deliver basic food (meat, bread, milk, spices, etc). Adults were given food three times a day, while children could have five meals. The camp was visited by József Antall, a Department Head in charge at the Ministry of Home Affairs responsible for refugee-related matters and declared the place inappropriate¹¹. As he stated, its distance from the town made the camp more difficult and expensive to be maintained and it could not meet the public health requirements.

There might have been other reasons behind, suggested by the fact that József Antall managed to take care of some of the men there at that time. University professor Bogdan Wienavski and four of his fellow dwellers were sent to the Polish-Hungarian Association, Gren Henrik and four others were guided to the Sisters of Charity

⁸ Hungarian National Archives Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County Archives V.B. 186. Documents of the mayor of Nyíregyháza, collection No III.663/1939. Collected documents are hereinafter marked in a shortened form as III.663/1939.

⁹ NAGY, FerencNagy, *A Nyírtelek-Varjúlaposi gyűjtőtáborok története 1939–1944*, [in:] *Nemzetek és birodalmak /Tanulmányok dr. KÁVÁSSY Sándor 70. születésnapjára*, Nyíregyháza 2005.

¹⁰ III/663/1939, p. 51.

¹¹ A. Telepóczkiné Radnai, *Lengyel menekülttábor Nyíregyházán (1939–1940)*, *Városvédő* füzetek 3, Nyíregyháza 2003.

in the capital city. This fact may lead us to the conclusion that there must have been several highly-qualified men among the inhabitants of the camp.

The town was soon able to find a better solution and offered to move the refugees to Sóstógyógyfürdő, which used to be (and still is) the recreation and tourist spot of the town. At that time, the place was rented by Dr Ede Rónai, but he made an agreement with the owner – the town. The camp could be established there with more buildings and in a more differentiated way. The fact that the length of the operation of the camp was unknown and might have made the town residents unable to visit the suburbs during the summer months, could have made the offer more significant.

The 'Swiss-Lodge', as it is known today, gave home to the refugees in its 16 rooms. The Szeréna Holiday Lodge for Children behind it could also be used, but needed to be renovated first. Through the Red Cross, an English lady, Miss Wilson offered a sum of 8177 pengős (Hungarian currency at the time), enough for a third of the renovation works¹². At the end of the works, in January, she gave more money for boilers and showers. The mayor also offered the building of the soda works, which could be refurbished to accommodate 150-200 people. The camp in Varjúlapos was closed down. Many people travelled on and the number of the ones remaining there was not so significant, but there was a need for employees, so they were also transferred to the new place. The suppliers of the new place were also the same as the ones at the camp. Interestingly, the town had 50 pairs of boots made for the new dwellers. The acquisition of blankets, bedsheets and other accessories was also finished. The dwellers of the camp organized their own daily life more often and could move freely, but needed to obey the rules of the house formulated by themselves.

Life in the Refugee Camp in Sóstógyógyfürdő

By 10 January 1940 the renovation works had been finished and a day later the dwellers moved in. There were only 89 refugees at that time, since many went to other camps. The rules of the house were set out by the dwellers themselves and were written both in Hungarian and in Polish¹³. The first few points were related to discipline:

- The dwellers were to cultivate friendship among one another. In case of a disagreement, it was the responsibility of a court of honour to settle the matter.
- A person in charge, generally the senior or the eldest dweller, was to be chosen in each room. The person's responsibilities were to help others in managing their affairs and to conduct a common evening prayer. Otherwise, there was a refugee Roman Catholic Polish priest who would hold the service.
- Each day, there was a Polish policeman on duty on the territory of the camp. His responsibilities included conducting postal services (collecting and distributing letters), documenting new arrivals, reporting illnesses to doctors if necessary,

¹² III.663/1939 without a registration number (ikt.sz).

¹³ III.663/1940. K: 6710/1940.

assigning dwellers to kitchen or heating work according to their rooms. He was to keep peace and to check exact returns from leave.

As a daily routine, the person in charge of the room was given the food ration cards in the morning to distribute them. The ones on unjustified leave did not get food that day. On the other hand, they could move freely round the town, but each day there were only 25 people given the right to leave and they were to return by 10 p.m., when the gates were locked. The documents show that the employees of the town did not take the rules very seriously. To support travelling, the dwellers were given 60 season tickets by the town. However, there was one thing the mayor insisted on, namely that he was in command of the camp. That is why the dwellers chose a liaison, Captain Piotr Rzucidłó, who maintained contact with the Polish Refugee Committee and the Polish Citizen's Committee chaired by Henryk Slawik. Mayor Pál Szohor acknowledged this fact, but reprimanded him for travelling to Budapest several times without a permission to collect money for French passports and signed the documents as *commander*. As a matter of fact, the mayor took seriously only the signature as it could be checked. He turned a blind eye to the captain leading investigations or assemblies for the officers¹⁴. In case of a rough intervention, he would have walked into a trap, since officially he was in charge of a camp for *civilian* refugees in Sóstó. According to the resources of the Archives, there were altogether 637 people staying there during 3 months, but never at the same time.

The documented lists and social forms are more often incomplete, but it can be stated that an average dweller was aged 26 to 28. The town requested a report on the change in the amount of people each Monday. Apart from the data such as name, place of birth, religion, education, parents' names and address, they wanted to know what documents were available to prove if a refugee was a student, if they wanted to continue their studies, what languages they spoke or whether they had visited Hungary before or not. Later on, education became of great importance since the Nazis persecuted Polish intellectuals and among the soldiers there were many students who could temporarily continue their secondary or higher studies only in Hungary. József Antall's personal permission made it possible for their applications to be accepted, as there was no official state stance available. As stated in a letter of 17 February 1940, a boarding house was opened for those studying in Budapest, which was of great help and in the following years there were hundreds of students entering the branches of our universities¹⁵. Most of them applied for the University of Technology and among the dwellers of the Sóstó camp there were four youngsters aiming to study there.

There was a clubroom of literature at the Sóstó camp as well, where refugees could read, and the town residents also collected books in Polish for them. They would have liked to get news about the world events and would need a radio. The money for the device was partly donated by the town, but the dwellers' own contribution was also added.

¹⁴ III.663/1940. K: 6710/1940.

¹⁵ K. Kapronczay, *Lengyel menekültek magyar földön*, http://www.antalljosef.hu/hu/lengyel_menekultek_magyar_foldon_-_a_masodik_vilaghaboru_eveiben.

The dwellers were registered in various ways, but not throughout the whole period of the camp functioning. Therefore, the data is only valid to explain the circumstances and the support provided for the refugees. On the other hand, we may presume that the appearance of remaining officials and the assistance of the refugees' alms were harmonized. There can be found lists of the Red Cross donations, with the names of the beneficiaries, including medicine, charitable gifts, e.g. clothing (overcoats, jackets, trousers, shoes, sweaters, vests, waistcoats, stockings, and handkerchiefs).

Another personal file shows with what documents the refugees could identify themselves, why they came and what they planned to do later on. As for official documents, they either used the certificates of the Krakow military academy, those proving chamber membership (also of the Chamber of Medicine) or industrial union membership, and even official documents stating that they were reserve sub-lieutenants. Neither the gaps in the certificates, nor the forms stating occupation were regularly completed. When asked about the reason for arriving there, the majority said they wanted to join the Polish division. One of the refugees disclosed that they had been advised to say that in order to be allowed to enter Hungary. The fact is that they must have told the truth, since many of them went on towards the southern border to reach France. Many of them said that they came to reunite with their families because their relatives had left Poland earlier and were living in some Hungarian villages. There were some who took all the responsibilities and stated that they came of their own free will. The data sheet of Novobilszki Micszlár is informative in many respects. He was born in 1917. His religion, as suggested by the Hungarian administration, was of course Roman Catholic. He was an unmarried military school student in civilian clothing. It is not specified which school year the 23-year-old student was in. Also his appearance was described extraordinarily: he was short, his face was *Swabian*. What is a Swabian face like? As explained later, he had blonde hair, blue eyes, a normal nose and his moustache was shaven. But the mother tongue of this soldier was Polish. He could not speak any other languages, no matter if he was the son of Swabian, Jewish or Polish parents.

In a phone conversation of 26 March 1940, József Antall ordered the dissolution of the camp. The reason is still unknown, but the rapid action must have had political reasons behind. József Antall had previously donated 100 railway tickets to the dwellers to enable them to relocate within the distance of 90 kilometres. Many of the dwellers were transported to Tab, many went to hospital without any specific diagnoses of their diseases. The ones sent to work were not mentioned. The food supplies and the remaining equipment were given to the alms house with the order from the town to set up a temporary reception centre for 12 people so as to accommodate the ones waiting to leave, or still coming or staying there. It was not Poland whose situation became better, it was Hungary's deteriorating. Yet, a tiny model island of resistance, the Refugee Camp of Sóstó became an essential part of the town of Nyíregyháza history. In 2007, the Hungarian Parliament and the Polish Sejm declared 23 March the Day of the Polish-Hungarian Friendship. Each year, the Polish minority and the leaders and residents of the town of Nyíregyháza express their respect and leave flowers on the metal-coated memorial at the entrance to the former camp on that day.

Uchodźcy Polscy w Nyíregyháza *Streszczenie*

Po napadzie Niemiec na Polskę we wrześniu 1939 r., rząd węgierski otworzył granice dla uchodźców polskich. Tysiące uchodźców przybyło z Polski na Węgry także po 17 września 1939 r. Rząd węgierski sprawnie zadbał o utworzenie obozów dla uchodźców. Już w grudniu 1939 r. udostępniono im dworskie centrum gospodarcze w miejscowości Nyíregyháza, a z czasem obóz ulokowano w uzdrowiskowej dzielnicy miasta Sóstógyógyfürdő, w budynkach tzw. Domu Szwajcarskiego, Domu Sereny i fabryki wody sodowej. Burmistrz i ludność miasta dbali o bezpieczeństwo uchodźców, zapewniając pomoc i możliwość dalszej ucieczki. Zachowane materiały, dokumentujące życie obozu, znajdują się w archiwum miejskim.

Słowa kluczowe: najazd nazistowski, otwarte granice węgierskie, przyjaźń polsko-węgierska, uchodźcy polscy, obóz dla uchodźców

Polish Refugees in Nyíregyháza *Abstract*

As in September 1939 Germany invaded Poland, Hungary's borders were opened for Polish refugees. There were ten thousand Polish refugee groups arriving after 17 September 1939. The Hungarian government was kind enough to open camps for the refugees. Centre for accommodating refugees was opened in December 1939 in Nyiregyhaza, and in time the camp was located in the spa section of the city in Sóstógyógyfürdő in the buildings of the Swiss Lodge, the soda works and the Szerena-Lodge. Providing assistance and the opportunity of the further escape, the president and residents looked after safety of the refugees. Documenting the life of the camp, preserved references are placed in a city archive.

Key words: Nazi incursion, open Hungary's frontiers, Polish-Hungarian friendship, Polish refugees, Refugee Camp

Польские беженцы в Ньиредьхазе *Резюме*

После нападения Германии на Польшу в сентябре 1939 года, правительство Венгрии открыло границу для польских беженцев. Тысячи беженцев из Польши прибыло в Венгрию также после 17 сентября 1939 г. Правительство Венгрии приняло решение об открытии лагерей для беженцев. В декабре 1939 г. такой лагерь был организован в сельскохозяйственной усадьбе в городе Ньиредьхазе, который со временем был перенесен в курортный район этого города – Шоштодьёдьфюрдэ. Для лагеря был предоставлен так называемый Швейцарский дом, Дом Серены и помещения фабрики содовой воды. Мэр и жители города заботились о безопасности беженцев, предоставляли им помощь и возможность покинуть страну. В городском архиве сохранились материалы, которые документируют жизнь лагеря.

Ключевые слова: нацистская агрессия, открытые венгерской границы, польско-венгерская дружба, польские беженцы, лагерь для беженцев

Appendix

No. 1. Dr József Antall, Sr. (1896-1974) ministerial counsellor, Head of Social and Financial Aid Department IX of the Ministry of Home Affairs, responsible for Polish refugee-related matters. His son, Dr József Antall (1932–1993) became the first Prime Minister following the change of the regime in Hungary



No. 2. Henryk Ślawik (1894–1944), Polish left-wing journalist and politician, exiled diplomat, martyred rescuer. From 1939 he worked for the committee supporting the Polish refugees in Hungary (Komitet Obywatelski ds. Opieki nad Polskimi Uchodźcami)



Polish Refugees in Nyíregyháza

No. 3. The memorial at the entrance to the former Refugee Camp in Sóstó, made by the sculptor Lajos Bíró. The town of Nyíregyháza had the memorial raised in 1990. Below is the wording of the memorial in Polish and in Hungarian



Az emlékmű lengyel és magyar nyelvű szövege

KU PAMIECI OBOZÓW
DLA UCHODZCOW
POLSKICH
UTWORZONYCH W
OKRESIE OD 27 - GO
GRUDNIA 1939 - DO
27 - GO MARCA 1940
W VARJULAPOS, A
NASTEPNIE W DOMKU
SZWAJCARSKIM ORAZ
W BUDYNKU
WYTWORNI WODY
SODOWEJ W SÓSTÓ
OD MIASTA NYÍREGYHÁZA
W ROKU 1990

A VARJULAPOSON,
MAJD A SÓSTÓI
SVÁJCI-LAKBAN
ÉS A SZÓDAGYÁRI
ÉPÜLETBEN - 1939
DECEMBER 27 - 1940
MÁRCIUS 27 KÖZÖTT
FENNÁLLOTT LENGYEL
MENEKÜLTÁBOR
EMLÉKÉRE
ÁLLÍTOTTA,
NYÍREGYHÁZA
VÁROS 1990-BEN

No. 4. The central building of the former Sóstó Refugee Camp today, known as the Swiss-Lodge



No. 5. The memorial in winter, as seen from the square in front of the Swiss-Lodge, with the Water Tower and the Bathhouse in the background



