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**“Malenki Robot”
– Hungarian Forced Labourers in the Soviet
Union (1944–1955)¹**

Since historiography has kept silent about the “malenki robot” phenomenon in Hungary, the dark chronicle of Soviet occupation has mainly lived on and spread within families and as oral tradition. In the Hungarian territory occupied by the Red Army, armed men gathered people from the streets and took them away with the excuse of the removal of ruins. The expression “malenkaia rabota” (a little work) was used to justify their actions and to offer reassurance. It indicated that there will be need for the work of the civilians, though for a short time only. Today, the expression, perceived as “malenki robot” by the Hungarians, evokes memories of deportation to the Soviet Union and forced labour.

On 25 July 1945, at the Potsdam Conference, Stalin told Truman and Churchill about the post-war situation of the Soviet Union: “I usually do not complain but now I must say that we are in an extremely difficult situation. Due to our enormous losses, we do not have enough men and, if I revealed the true circumstances of my country, I should burst into tears.”²

Stalin, just as in Yalta before, indicated that he wanted to use the prisoners of war (POW) of the enemy countries in the territory of the Soviet Union to offset, at least in part, the great human and financial losses incurred by his country. Therefore, the Soviets regarded the work of POWs as reconstruction and compensation duty. Considering the truly huge losses of the Soviet Union, the Western Powers *de facto* recognised his claim for POW work. However, did the demand for forced labour by foreigners emerge really just because of the damage caused by Nazi Germany and its allies?

Lavrenti Berija, commissar of the interior, issued a decree on 19 September 1939, only few days after the invasion of Poland by the Soviet Union, on the organisation of a new camp system using POWs and interned civilians as labourers.³ The acronym for the camp system set up in late September was UPVI

¹ T 034143 grant from the Hungarian National Fund for Scholarly Research (OTKA), and the Bolyai János Research Fund of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences contributed to the research on the forced labour of Hungarians in Soviet custody.

² Stalin's statement is cited by Andreas Hilger, *Deutsche Kriegsgefangene in der Sowjetunion, 1941–1956*, Klartext, Essen, 2000, p. 173.

³ On the organization of “archipelago GUPVI” see: Stefan Karner, *Im Archipel GUPVI. Kriegsgefangenschaft und Internierung in der Sowjetunion 1941–1956*. R. Oldenbourg Verlag, Wien–München, 1995, p. 55.; Stefan Karner, *The GUPVI*. In: *Bulletin du Comité international d'histoire de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale*. Montreal, 1995, pp. 177–189.

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(Upravlenie po delam Voennoplennykh i Internirovannykh – Administration for Affairs relating to Prisoners of War and Internees).

UPVI was established besides Gulag and the two camp systems cooperated closely. The chiefs at UPVI mostly came from the Gulag's administration. On the part of NKVD (Peoples Commissariat for Internal Affairs), General Vasili Tsernishov, former commander of Gulag, supervised the camp system. In the summer of 1941, General Serov, another former commander of Gulag, became the head of the UPVI camp system. In February 1945, the camp system was expanded and reorganised and it became GUPVI, that is, it was turned into Central Administration for Affairs relating to Prisoners of War and Internees. At that time it included over 350 camps and 4,000 auxiliary camps. Besides these, there existed special work brigades, hospital camps, detached work brigades, corrective work camps, political detachment camps and prisons. According to Soviet figures, these held a total of over 4 million foreign prisoners during their overall operation.⁴

The establishment archipelago UPVI–GUPVI during the first days of the war indicates that the Soviet leadership considered the war a suitable occasion to fill up its industrial and agricultural sectors with foreign manpower. The early setting up of GUPVI proves that they did not distinguish civilians and soldiers and that war, beyond the expansion of the Communist system, also served to secure the Soviet Union's manpower supply.

The events in Hungary in the last months of World War II and subsequently were not unique phenomena: these formed an integral part of Soviet policy conducted in the occupied territories. The conclusion of collective responsibility, ethnic cleansing, and the using of masses for forced labour were all essential parts of the Soviet system.

Soviet policy applied in Hungarian territory fits into a series of collective retorsions and ethnic and political cleansing carried out inside and outside the Soviet Union.

Deportation

Civilian population was deported from Hungary in two waves. The first wave of mass arrests happened immediately after the military operations. Two or three days after the occupation of some greater village or town, the Soviets generally collected and took away the people using the removal of ruins as an excuse. There are only scattered data available on the number of the deported. After the occupation of Kolozsvár (Cluj Napoca), the Soviet armed forces carried off some 5,000 civilians. They took 300 civilians from Hajdúböszörmény on 28 October 1944. Some 2,000 men and women were driven to prisoner camps from Nyíregyháza on 2 November and 300 civilians ended up in Soviet captivity from Hajdúnánás.⁵

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Magyar Országos Levéltár (*Hungarian National Archives*) KÜM Szu tük. XIX-J-1-j IV-48229. Box 25044/45.

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The deportations of greatest extent took place in Budapest. Marshal Malinovski, fearing reprisal, explained the protracted occupation of the capital with the great number of German-Hungarian troops. He indicated the presence of a 180–200,000-strong force in his earlier reports, while the surrounded German-Hungarian units only numbered about 80,000 men. Since the marshal had to hand over the promised number of prisoners to GUPVI, he had to make up the difference between the fictitious and the actual number from civilians. Following the occupation of Budapest, Marshal Malinovski reported 138,000 prisoners of war. Since the number of real POWs, including the German troops, could not be more than 40,000, he gathered some 100,000 civilians from Budapest and its surroundings to secure the promised number of prisoners.⁶

The second wave of deportations followed the first by 1-2 months. It was much a more organised, and carefully planned and prepared operation which, however, did not cover the whole territory of the country.

The deportations in the present-day territory of Hungary were carried out in accordance with the decree of the Soviet Union's Committee for State Security (KGB) issued on 16 December 1944. The decree ordered the "mobilisation" of ethnic German women and men of working age in Romania, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia and their deportation to Soviet camps.⁷

The deportation of ethnic Germans from Hungary was subsequently "legitimised" by the decree of Ferenc Erdei, minister of the interior of the provisional government, on "*the registration of persons of German origin in the territory of Hungary for the purpose of their employment in the forced-labour service*".

Mobilization, in principle, only affected ethnic Germans. Yet, the majority of the deportees were Hungarians. The second wave of deportation in the post-war, present-day territory of Hungary, following the advance of the front, started in the area east of the Tisza River and Northeastern Hungary, continued in Budapest and in the region between the Danube and Tisza Rivers, and ended in the South-eastern Transdanubia. It seems, from the way the selection of population took place, that the Soviet internal affairs detachments had a prisoner quota for the various areas. If this quota could not be filled up with ethnic Germans, then came the Hungarians with German, and then those of Hungarian name. However, if they could meet the quota, they even left the local Germans behind despite the order above.

Soviet troops and Hungarian "polic" escorted the prisoners to the receiving camps at 25–30 kilometres from the front, of which about 80 operated in Hungary. The collecting camps operated beyond these. In the territory of the country there

⁶ Zalán Bognár, Egy csata utóélete [*The consequence of a battle*]. In: Studia Caroliensia, 2000/1 pp. 78–81.

⁷ György Dupka–Alexei Korsun, A "Malenykij Robot" a dokumentumokban [*Documents on the Deportations of Hungarians from Carpatho-Ruthenia*]. pp. 33–34.; Stefan Karner, Im Archipel GUPVI. Kriegsgefangenschaft und Internierung in der Sowjetunion 1941–1956. R. Oldenbourg Verlag, Wien–München, 1995. p. 25.

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were ten camps (Baja, Debrecen, Gödöllő, Jászberény, Székesfehérvár, Vác, Kecskemét, Cegléd, Szeged, Gyula) that held more than 20,000 prisoners.⁸ These camps were guarded exclusively by Soviet troops. The inhabitants of the area could not even go near to the camps usually set up in military barracks. Occasionally, however, it was possible to bribe the guards with gold and alcohol, and the most tenacious could receive news about their relatives or, sometimes, obtain their release. The prisoner already “bought” was safe, but the guards remedied the “deficiency” from among the locals. There were camps where one could send in food and there were some camp commanders who even received relatives, calmed them, and promised that the captives would be released soon.

The real prisoners of war, the Hungarian soldiers who switched sides in the hope of freedom, and the civilians spent 1 to 2 months locked up together in the collecting camps. They were then loaded onto wagons and told that the place of their work would be “somewhere else”.

There is only approximate data available on the number of the Hungarians who fell into captivity and were deported.

The Central Statistical Office (KSH), considering the possible number of Hungarian soldiers captured in Soviet territory, in the fighting in Hungary, and during the withdrawal of March–April 1945, estimated that altogether 600,000 Hungarians fell into Soviet captivity.⁹ Since the 1946 KSH report makes mention neither of ethnic Germans carried off from Hungary nor of the Hungarians deported from Carpatho-Ruthenia or Transylvania, the total number of Hungarians and ethnic Germans in Hungary captured and deported by the Soviets can exceed the KSH data by as much as 50–100,000 people. The order of magnitude of these estimates is reinforced by Soviet data that emerged after 1989. According to the figures of the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs, there were 526,000 prisoners in the Soviet Union on 31 October 1945.¹⁰ However, this number includes only those who were registered in the autumn of 1945. This number could not cover those who were captured earlier and died before October 1945. The Soviet data did not include those who died in the transit camps and during transportation. Yet, the death rate was much higher during transportation than in the camps in the Soviet Union. Accordingly, the data on the 526,000 persons registered in the autumn of 1945 actually stands for more – even by as many as 100,000 more – prisoners.

⁸ Hadtörténelmi Levéltár (*Archives of Military History*), Budapest, Békeelőkészítő anyag [*Peace Preparation material*] A/I. 94/4766.

⁹ Hadtörténelmi Levéltár (*Archives of Military History*), Budapest, Békeelőkészítő anyag [*Peace preparation material*] A/I. 94/4766.

¹⁰ Gosudarstvennaia arhivnaia sluzba Rossiiskoi Federacii, Centr hranenia, istorikodokumentalnih kollekcii (*State Archives of the Russian Federation, Center for preservation of historical collection*), Moscow, MVD, fond: 1/n opis: 01e delo: 81. See also: V. P. Galicki, Vengerskie voennoplennie v SSSR [*Hungarian POW's in the Soviet Union*]. *Voenna Istoriceskii Jurnal (Review of Military History)*, 1991/10, p. 45.; *Voennoplennije v SSSR, Dokumenti i Materiali [Prisoners of war in the Soviet Union, Documents and Materials]*. Ed. M.M. Zagorulko, Logos, Moscow, 2000, p. 332.

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The number of civilians cannot be accurately established. The POW department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs tried to compile a list of deported civilians based on the declaration of the relatives during 1945. The lists available contain the names of 75,811 people from the countryside.¹¹ However, this does not include in full the number of German deportees, and the number of Hungarians registered subsequently is not complete either. Considering the deportations in Budapest and surroundings that affected some 100,000 civilians, and those in Carpatho-Ruthenia or Transylvania, the number of civilians can exceed 200,000.¹² This is approximately one third of the total number of prisoners.

Transport

The prisoners were transported from the collecting camps in Hungary to transit camps in Romania. Often Hungarian police forces also participated in the loading. Similar to the Russian guards, they too hit the prisoners with their guns and forced them on board. Usually 60 people were squeezed into one wagon. 30-30 people had to settle at the two or more storey bunks in the left and the right. There was a stove in between but captives received fuel only sporadically. There was a small hole bored in the bottom of the wagon, which served as the toilet. The openings on the sides were covered with barbed wire and the doors were locked before departure. There was a brake booth with guards at the end of the train. On the way the trains occasionally stopped to get water and that was the last chance for escape. However, the guards opened fired as soon as somebody tried to flee. Evidently, they were responsible for showing up with a certain number of prisoners, so they had to find new prisoners to make up the losses.

The prisoners reached one of the transit camps after days spent travelling. The two largest camps of this kind were in Foksáni (Foksani) and Máramarossziget (Sighetu Marmatiei). Infamous transit camps operated near Brassó (Brasov), in Temesváron (Timisoara), Jasi and Ramnicul Sarat. Besides Romania, many Hun-

¹¹ József Domokos devoted years for studying petitions of the relatives of deportees, and the lists of deported persons compiled for the Allied Control Commission. On the basis of these sources stored in the Military Archives in Budapest, he identified 75,811 deportees from the countryside. The results of Domokos' research were published in: Magyarország a második világháborúban, Lexikon A–Zs, [*Hungary in World War II. An Encyclopedia*] ed. Péter Sipos–István Ravasz, Magyar Hadtudományi Társaság, Petit Real Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1996, p. 498.

¹² On the deportations of Hungarians from Transylvania see: Fehérkönyv az 1944. Őszi magyarellenes atrocitásokról [*White Book about the atrocities committed against Hungarians in the Fall of 1944*], Edition of Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania, Cluj-Napoca, 1998 pp. 27–30; Transilvansky Vopros, Vengero-Rumunsky Territorialnyuy Spor i SSSR 1940–1946, Dokumenty [*The Transylvanian Question, Hungarian–Romanian Rivalry for Transylvania and the Soviet Union, 1940–1946*] Rosspen, Moscow 2000, pp. 288–289.; On the deportations from Carpatho-Ruthenia see: György Dupka–Alexei Korsun, A "Malenykij Robot" a dokumentumokban [*Documents on the Deportations of Hungarians from Carpatho-Ruthenia*]. Intermix Publishers, Ungvár–Budapest, 1997. p. 15.

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garians were transported to the camp near Szambor in Western Ukraine, which was another important transit post.

The death rate was monstrous in these camps. No reliable data are available but the recollections of the survivors can provide an authentic picture of the circumstances in these transit camps. Dysentery epidemic decimated the prisoners in Temesvár in the summer of 1945, with some 30,000 German, Hungarian, Romanian and prisoners of other nationality dying there. The survivors taken to the camp in Foksáni also talk about epidemics and dying masses.

The recollections reveal that the prisoners received food only once a day during the weeks of transportation, and it was usually dry bread and some hot liquid dubbed as soup. In the case of winter transports, there was often no fuel, so the stoves in the wagons could not be heated up enough. These circumstances caused about 10–20 per cent of the prisoners to die. The dead were left by the tracks and nobody registered the casualties.

After the transit camps and weeks spent in wagons, the prisoners arrived in one of the infernal “circles” of the Soviet archipelago.

The Soviet archipelago

The Hungarians were scattered between some 2000 camps. According to information received from returned survivors, several camps were successfully identified by the Ministry of Defence, then under a minister of the Smallholders Party. There were Hungarians in 44 camps in Azerbaijan, in 158 in the Baltic States, in 131 in Belarus, in 119 in Northern Russia, in 53 in the surroundings of Leningrad, in 627 in Central Russia, in 276 in the Ural Mountains, and in 64 in Siberia.

The prisoners decimated and psychologically and physically broken during the long train journey could only leave the wagons with difficulty, leaning upon each other. They experienced Soviet reality at the very moment they got off. Many described in their recollections that the locals rushed to the just emptied wagons in search of the remnants of some edible food. Those who were transported from Romania on board of ships experienced the same in the Black Sea ports. Miserable and starving locals waited for them in the port of Sevastopol begging for clothes, shoes, and food. The prisoners arrived in a world where they could bring something even after weeks of hardship. It happened often that the guards plundered the shipment they had been escorting when they left the wagons or the ships. The captives had to line up, they were counted, and then they had to put their remaining personal belongings on the ground or in baskets. The confiscated objects usually ended up at the guards but it also happened that they were distributed among the locals who surrounded the new arrivals. The guards, to whom the survivors often referred as the “Tatar boys”, were cruel. They shot or beat to death with the butt all those who stopped while they were supposed to be marching. The inhabitants of the villages and towns passed by the procession surrounded the transports with fierce hatred and occasionally only the guards could

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save the prisoners from the wrath of the locals. On other occasions it was the guards to beat up the people they were escorting. The marching prisoners, as they were dragging themselves along, had to put up with a shower of stones, threats, and spits. At that point they could not yet understand what the people were shouting at them, they only understood the term “fascist”. However, hostility was not based on hatred deriving from nationalist or racist prejudice. Russians were told that the “prisoners of war” all committed war crimes, they were mass murderers and, basically, they were responsible for the misery of the country. Yet, the anger of the locals was primarily fuelled not by their thirst for revenge but their bitterness and hopelessness. They were shouting that the prisoners should go home, since they themselves had hardly anything to eat and the newcomers would take away even that from them. Sometimes, the local population was furious with the Hungarians for strange and unexpected reasons. According to a recollection, *“truly dull people live [in Krasnojarsk]. They said to us, ‘So, you are Hungarians? Well, it’s your problem! You were surely Communists, so you deserve your fate! ... Yes, you should be tied up with Béla Kun, he had been a Communist too and then died here in Krasnojarsk. But see for yourself what happens here!’.”*¹³

The buildings were huge grey sheds. The prisoners were lousy and dirty after the long journey but the inhabitants of the camp were in no better condition either. Defencelessness and hopelessness worked the prisoners collected from different countries into a single grey mass. They were all wearing rags and the new arrivals could hardly distinguish the men from the women, and the people of different nationalities.

Life in the camps can be described authentically but never accurately. Hundreds of recollections reveal that the life, the working conditions, and the relationship with the guards and the locals changed from camp to camp. In some the guards killed for fun, in others the guards pillaged the nearby apple orchards together with the prisoners. In certain camps the captives regularly received permission to leave to the neighbouring villages, while, at places, the guards fired at anybody who went near the fence. In some people had work 14 hours, in others 12 or 8 hours. In some cases they received token payment, in others they did not. There were camps where almost every prisoner died, while in some the losses “only” amounted to 10 per cent. In some cases one was killed for running away, in others only received punishment. The circumstances of life and work depended on the commanders, the guards, the relationship with the locals, and the still unknown “orders from above”. Furthermore, the social and geographical environment, the climate and the date and period of captivity also influenced camp life. In 1945, there were numerous camps where prisoners had American tinned food to feed on, while starving became general by 1946. Despite considerable differences, camp life universally meant distress, defencelessness, and despair.

¹³ Zsolt Csalogh, M. Lajos, 42 éves [*Lajos M., Aged 42*]. Maecénás Budapest, 1989. p. 67.

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Prisoners were forced to build their own camps. The most rudimentary ones were huge, 2-3 metres deep basins dug in the ground, with several thousands of people held under the open sky. The system of camps that were able to hold prisoners and make them work for longer periods was developed during the war and the post-war years. In general 4 rows of wires surrounded the camp. Two high ones stood 3-4 metres apart and, at 4-5 metres from each, a one-metre high defensive wall ran parallel in the inside and another in the outside. The internal defensive wall was the limit of how far the prisoners could go. The guards moved between the two higher fences and towers stood in the corners of the camp. There were camps with two rows and others with three rows of fences that could not be approached to less than 2 metres.

The major part of the sheds used as permanent quarters were shelters dug in the ground that held some 300 people. The buildings that accommodated more, about 1,000–1,500 prisoners, were built of bricks.

In these, the rooms opened from corridors. In the lower rooms there was a one-story, in the higher ones two- or three-storey rows of boards. The beds were made of these boards of various size laid down crosswise. The prisoners did not receive covers, mattresses or straw. At the same time, the sheds were crowded: So many were lying next to each other that a whole row had to move when one wanted to turn to the other side. Usually there was no window-glass in the windows and there were no stoves. The prisoners prepared their own stoves from bricks and iron plates, on which they could also boil water when they managed to get some fuel.

The men and the women were in different barracks and the guards generally stayed in a separate building. Prisoners were accommodated not only in camps built for that purpose. Factories, storehouses, barns, and plundered monasteries and churches were also turned into camps.

The day of the prisoners started with breakfast and then they had to line up. Several survivors recalled that the commander gave a brief speech to them, in which he summarised the reason of their deportation. According to a very simple explanation, they were fascists and had been deported in order to make good all the wrongs they had done to the Soviet Union.

Following their arrival into the camp, if there was a suitable facility, the prisoners were disinfected and their hair was removed. Then came a medical check up, which was only a pinch in the bottom of the prisoners, as the doctors inferred their general state of health from the flexibility of their skin. There were four categories established: the prisoners in group one and two were required to do every kind of job. Those in group three did not have to work in the mines. The severely feeble, dystrophic people were usually made to work within the camp.

The civilians and POWs, who usually arrived in good clothes and boots, were given camp clothes. The garments of greater value were taken away and the prisoners were given dirty rags pulled off from dead Soviet or German soldiers. They wore canvas shoes with wooden soles. The prisoners themselves also prepared footwear from waste rubber and canvas. The free Russian workers wore same

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kind of footwear. Only the officers had real shoes, American boots or Russian boots with linen insert. Occasionally several prisoners had to share a pair of footwear, so the person whose shift was over had pass it on to the next. They had no underwear. In the winter they usually received padded trousers, quilted jacket and Halia boots – if not, they had to go on wearing their usual clog. The ones working in the mines received sackcloth trousers that, in lack of a belt, were fastened with strings or wires, a shirt that could be fastened at the neck, a quilted jacket and, for footwear, gum or wooden shoes.

Registration took place several times during the first month. However, the Hungarian soldiers captured at the Don River in early 1943 were for example only registered in the spring of 1943 for the first time. By that time nearly half of the prisoners had died. The prisoners had to appear in front of a board made up of officials and doctors, and a four-page data sheet including 52 questions was filled out about everybody. The questions concerned every little detail of their life at home. The interrogators inquired about social (class) background, qualifications, language knowledge, and political views. If the person was a soldier, he had to render detailed account of the time he spent at the theatre of war. A post-card-size personal card with the most important data was also prepared of everybody. The prisoners then took this card and the four-page questionnaire with them from camp to camp. The Russians tried to verify the authenticity of the answers by holding several interrogations during one's stay in the camps. Those whose answers changed between two sessions were considered suspects. The prisoners who could not speak Russian were at the mercy of their questioners. Several recollections indicated that the interpreter translated arbitrarily or, obviously at prior orders, described the civilians as members of a fighting unit. Many prisoners only discovered the "mistake" months or years later. However, if they protested, they only became suspicious without their record being corrected.

An informant system was organised within the camps for the uncovering of the past of the prisoners, their observation, and the gathering of damning proofs. The informants were selected by the political officer. He ordered the chosen prisoner into his office and told him about his task. The squealers had to gather information on the pre-war activities of the prisoners and their family members. They also wanted to know what was on the mind of the prisoners and especially the officers, what they were talking about, what were their plans. Upon reporting, the squealers received extra ration of soup from the political officer. When they were unveiled, they were quickly removed to another camp to escape the revenge of their fellow prisoners. However, the people who were forced and intimidated to become squealers usually gave themselves up to their companions. They told the others what they had to report about and they agreed on the details of his report. This was not only a moral but also a rational decision on their part. The squealers were also people struggling to survive who, at the same time, had to be loyal primarily to their fellow citizens – if only for fear of their eventual revenge should they be unveiled.

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The captives usually worked 10–14 hours a day. In theory they did not have to work on Sundays, but the command of the camp found things to do then as well. In certain cases the prisoners received token payment, in others they did not. Those had better chances for survival who were employed in some factory or in agriculture as skilled workers. However, most of them worked in mines, at clearings or built roads or railways. The conditions were worst at Gulag camps that held the convicts. The three most infamous camp districts – Vorkuta, Norilsk, and Kolyma – were north of the Arctic Circle. According to recollections, time and again the temperature dropped to close to 60 degrees below zero, but the severe, constant wind, called the *purga*, was even worse. The regulations required the prisoners to work outdoors until 36 degrees below zero and they could be made to work in a closed space between 36 and 42 degrees below zero. With this cold many froze to death during the several kilometres they had to walk to get to their workplace. The prisoners worked inside the camps when it was colder than 42 degrees below zero.

According to the regulations, the daily ration of the prisoners was as follows: 600–700 grams of bread or biscuit, 90 grams of barley or husked wheat mush, 600 grams of potatoes and vegetables, 40 grams of meat, 120 grams of fish, and 20 grams of sugar. The German Red Cross reconstructed the actual ration of the prisoners on the basis of the survivors' recollections. This revealed that they only received the daily potato/vegetable ration as specified. They usually received cabbage or turnip as vegetables. The actual ration they received from the flour-paste-like bread was 400–600 grams and some Hungarian prisoners remember considerably smaller, 200–300-gram rations. They almost never received meat and the randomly distributed salted fish rations were also far from the specified quantities. On the other hand, the prisoners often received barley or nettle soup. The starving prisoners complemented their daily diet with whatever they could find. Those who worked near some water with fish and scallops, while in other camps the people hunted for *susliks* and crows. In the late 1940s their circumstances improved somewhat in the camps where they received some payment for their work. They could buy potatoes and salted fish in the canteen after the deduction of the “costs” of “room and board” and protection.

The general state of health of the prisoners quickly deteriorated due to the minimum and unvaried diet, the harsh circumstances, and the overwork. They received practically no medical attendance. Although there existed a “consulting room”, the doctors, prisoners themselves, had neither equipment nor drugs. The prisoners ate charcoal against diarrhoea and chalk dust against stomach ache. For other infections they normally used diluted potassium permanganate. However, there were “special” treatments as well. In camp No. 6 of the Siberian Berkul, the people ate raw rat liver against night-blindness. In one of the camps of the Donietz Basin, typhoid fever was “cured” with tea made of burned bread. Still here, scabs were “treated” with grease mixed with sulphur. In many other places the prisoners prepared tea from pine needles for vitamins.

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Only the sick with a fever had a chance to get to a hospital. Given that those had no equipment either, they could not be cured but they were at least left in peace for some time. Infections caused the death of large number of people. The ill lost weight quickly and emaciated until they died. Frequent diseases included malaria, typhoid fever, and scurvy which caused the teeth to loosen and fall out.

Many died in “accidents” at work (crumbling mines, explosions) or froze to death. The high death rate turned the people apathetic. The deaths were reported with delay so that the companions could collect the rations of the dead and they were not always registered. Registration usually was suspended in the times of epidemics. Upon a person’s death normally not the actual reason of death was recorded in the minutes. Before the burial the head of the dead was smashed because many tried to escape by feigning death. The stripped bodies were buried in mass graves. In the winter, when it was impossible to dig graves in the frozen ground, the remains of the dead were covered with snow. Officially nobody notified the family of the deceased, if they were informed, it was by a survivor.

Commanders and guards held the fate of the prisoners in their hands. They decided on what counted as a crime and they determined the punishment. The range of crimes and punishments was wide. For escape and attempted escape death was the usual sentence but the commander was occasionally satisfied with public beating. There were guards who did not do anything if an exhausted prisoner sat for a while, while others tortured those who “rested without permission” to death. “Jail” was the most general punishment. It was a pit dug into the ground with no place to sit, so the jailed person had to stand day and night on bricks. The guards made this even more unbearable by stripping the miserable and pouring water under them so that they could not sit down at all. Prisoners were also tortured with heat: they were closed into heated cloth-disinfecting rooms for ours.

The locals and the free or convicted Russian workers greeted the Hungarians with hostility at first. Several survivors said that upon their arrival, as they marched toward the camp and passed the villages, stones were showered at them, the locals spit at them, threatened them, and shouted to them to go home. At work the Russians did not talk to the prisoners. The shovel lifted up threateningly was the main teaching tool in the mines and factories. The locals feared that the prisoners will take away the little food and opportunity that was left.

The relations normally changed when the Hungarians learned to speak Russian and, on occasions, received permission to visit the village near the camp. The local people understood that the prisoners were innocent and that they were just as miserable as themselves. Often proper exchange of goods evolved between the locals and the captives. Skilful Hungarians prepared simple utensils from waste materials and exchanged them for food. The Russians’ demand was especially high for small crosses that could be worn on a necklace: they even gave money and bread in exchange of those. The Russians and Ukrainians usually did not have much more foodstuffs than the prisoners but the local population did not fall victim to the regular epidemics occurring in the camps. The basic difference

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between the lives of the prisoners and the average Russians was that the people outside the camps were free, though even their freedom was very much curtailed. The Russian workers could not change their workplace, could not leave their home, and could not travel. They were constrained to stay at one spot, much as the prisoners. However, the “free” at least had their family and did not meditate on the past and did not long for freedom, since, in one way or other, they have always lived under inferior circumstances.

The survivors paint a tragic picture of the general situation of post-war Soviet Union.

At the same time, the prisoners could see that not only war but also the confusion characteristic of Soviet management and the wasting due to negligence contributed to the misery. Many forced labourers saw freight trains stranded on tail tracks with completely corroded machinery brought from Germany. It also occurred to them that, in the midst of the terrible shortage of foodstuffs, hills of harvested wheat rotted in lack of organised transport, storage, and distribution. Soviet corruption, inseparable from the Soviet lifestyle, and the unlawful appropriation of goods developed amongst these circumstances. According to the recollections of the survivors, Soviet society was based on stealing. Everybody stole from everybody else. Not commerce but stealing ensured the exchange and circulation of objects and valuables. This was even more so in the camp archipelago. The guard was stealing from the prisoner and vice versa, the prisoners were stealing from each other and everybody was stealing from the factory. However, factories also thieved the people when they did not pay them or did not distribute jackets to them. The prisoners, whenever they could, stole fuel for their stoves but the guards often took that away from them. The chief and his subordinate were also stealing. People cheated, they were constrained to cheat at rationing and the registration of finished work. Stealing was an integral part of life in the camps and it became the only means of survival. A Hungarian priest was asked by fellow prisoners whether the Ten Commandments still counted and stealing was still a sin. The priest reflected briefly and then answered that thieving from each other was still a sin but stealing from the guards or from work was not.

Survivors transported back home

The provisional government and then, following the first free elections, the government of Ferenc Nagy, considering their limited possibilities, did a lot for the liberation and returning of POWs and interned civilians. Béla Miklós, head of the provisional government, complained at the occupation authorities because of the deportation of civilians on 26 December 1944 and then again on 7 January 1945.¹⁴

¹⁴ László Szűcs (ed.), Dálnoki Miklós kormányának minisztertanácsi jegyzőkönyvei, 1944. december 23.–1945 november 15. [*Minutes of the Council of Ministers of the Miklós Dálnoki Government, December 23, 1944–November 15, 1945*]. vol. A., p. 149. note 22.

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Ferenc Nagy, at his negotiations in Moscow in April 1946 raised the issue of returning the POWs to Hungary. Although the Soviet government announced the release of prisoners in August 1945, their organised transportation only started in June 1946.

However, the trains arrived regularly to the receiving camp in Debrecen only until November. After a long interval, Stalin continued the release of prisoners in May 1947 in order to improve the election chances of the Communist Party that proclaimed itself the “liberator of POWs”.

The registration of the prisoners returning from the Soviet Union started reliably after June 1946. Most of the sources estimate the number of those who arrived before that to be between 100,000 and 150,000. Between June 1946 and December 1948, the POW Receiving Authority in Debrecen registered 202,000 returned prisoners.¹⁵ Between 1949 and 1951 another 20–25,000 arrived home but no accurate data is available on those who returned after 1951. Some 3,000 prisoners were transported back between 1953 and 1955. Based on Hungarian sources, altogether some 330–380,000 people arrived back home.

Considering that neither the people were registered in the transit camps nor the deaths along the way, the more than 200,000-strong gap between the number of the deportees and the returned can indeed reflect the number of Hungarians who died in the Soviet archipelago and during the outbound journey. However, the survivors were also victims. The majority of the prisoners arrived home sick and many became disabled for the rest of their life. Their captivity is a troubling memory even from a distance of decades.

¹⁵ Hadtörténelmi Levéltár (*Archives of Military History*), 1948. eln. III. Tájékoztató.