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ON THE FRONT

Soviet Military Conquest and Sack of a Small Town, Felsőzsolca, in Hungary in the Autumn and Winter of 1944 - 45

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ON THE FRONT

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Introduction
to the American Edition

Following Hungary's decline as a major Central European power around 1500 AD, the nation passed through a number of major crises. The two most significant of these were the Battle of Mohács (1526) and the subsequent Ottoman Turkish occupation and Habsburg rule; and the Treaty of Trianon (1920) following World War I, which resulted in the dismemberment of historic Hungary and the Magyar nation Hungary's involvement in World War II on the wrong side was the direct result of the Trianon catastrophe and of the nation's struggle for territorial revisionism. So was the country's Soviet occupation in the final months of the war. It was this occupation that tore Hungary out of the fabric of Western Civilization, and for a half century made her part of the Eastern Orthodox Slavic world, which is totally foreign to her Western traditions. One of the consequences of this odious Soviet domination was the reappearance of the institution of slavery. It came in the form of the Soviet forced labor camps, to which hundreds of thousands of Hungarians were deported. A unique form of this modern-day slavery was the malenky robot ["little work"], under the guise of which tens of thousands of Hungarian civilians were collected and then dispersed in various Soviet slave labor camps. The Soviet conquerors and their unscrupulous Hungarian collaborators were not very selective. They took everyone who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. They deported young and old, irrespective of gender. They even collected and sent to the Gulag fifteen to sixteen year old girls, as well as expectant mothers. It is nearly impossible to describe the misery and exploitation that awaited these unfortunate Hungarians in the slave labor camps of the Soviet Gulag. If they were lucky enough to survive and return home, their misery and exploitation did not cease. Communist Hungarian authorities, who were anxious to please their Soviet masters, continued to view these repatriates as war criminals and treated them

accordingly. Most of them died in poverty, misery, and much before their time. This book by Mr. Sándor Zsiros — a respected former teacher, and editor of the historical-cultural periodical Örökség [Heritage] — describes the workings of this barbarian system as applied to the village of Felsőzsolca, on the outskirts of the university town of Miskolc. The author describes the Soviet military conquest of his hometown, the excesses, plunderings, and rapes committed by the barbarian Soviet troops, the collection of civilians for malenky robot, the ignominious role of their Hungarian collaborators in this collection process, and the transportation of the prisoners to Soviet slave labor camps. And he performs this task partially on the basis of his own memory, but especially upon the reminiscences of those former Gulag prisoners from his native village, who were fortunate enough to survive, and then still able to talk about their experiences following the collapse of the communist regime in 1989-1990. The town of Felsőzsolca was only a tiny dot in the huge "cannibalistic machine" known as the Soviet Gulag, which consumed the lives of millions for many decades, and which reached Hungary in the winter of 1944-1945. Although only a small speck in the Gulag system that stretched over thousands of miles in Eurasia, the events at Felsőzsolca still give us a glimpse into the essence of this murderous Leninist-Stalinist institution. This book certainly enriches the scanty Gulag-literature, which pales besides the literature about the other great 20th-century system of mass murder, the Holocaust. As compared to the latter, the Gulag is almost terra incognita. This is best demonstrated by the fact that at American universities one cannot find a single student who doesn't know something about the Holocaust. At the same time, in most introductory classes of history, barely two or three out of a class of forty or fifty have heard of the term Gulag, and even they have little knowledge of what this term covers. It is books like Sándor Zsiros's On the Front that bring the true nature of the Gulag into full focus. Let us hope that there will be others on this path of revelation, and that eventually justice will be served to those who suffered so much

on the Gulag, and then died a miserable death in Stalin's monstrous system of mass extermination We are honored to be able to publish this book in our own Duquesne University Studies in History series.

Prof. Dr. Steven Béla Várdy
McAnulty Distinguished Professor of History
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Foreword

Felsőzsolca is neither a large nor significant village. Today, it is a bedroom suburb of Miskolc, a once-industrial city in North Eastern Hungary. It was not large or significant in the 1940s either, but it did find itself briefly on the front line in the last months of the Second World War. While battle raged in the streets and gardens, the people of Felsőzsolca cowered in the cellars of the very few houses of any size and substance. The Nazi Germans had little strategic interest in the village, and the advancing Soviet troops chased them out, or eliminated them, quite quickly. The story told in this book is about what the Soviet government called the 'liberation' of Hungary as it actually the beginning of a long and oppressive occupation bore down particularly hard on these people. Eyewitness accounts tell of Soviet heavy-handedness at best, and – much worse – of beatings, of rape, of disappearances, and of deportations. Names and numbers of the victims are forthcoming, but we shall never know the full tally of women violated and men hauled off to Romania and the Soviet Union for no better reason than that they were on the losing side. That is why this short book is important, and why we should pay tribute to Mr. Sándor Zsiros, its author. He is a former teacher and local historian who has written other books on the history

of Felsőzsolca, including one about the 'buried church.' He was a young boy at the time of the events that he describes, and was moved to write this book by his memories, and by his love and respect for his hometown. He reminds us that Felsőzsolca was once ground between two millstones. People suffered and died; they survived against the odds, or they perished. Russian occupiers kept the story under wraps for forty years: 4 April 1945 was on the record as a "glorious" day in Hungary's history, and no one was allowed to say otherwise. It was only after 1989 that it was safe to ask questions again, to record answers, and to level accusations of inhumanity, even of what we now call 'war crimes.' These accusations have come late – but not too late. It will never be too late to add further details to the public record, while there are those still alive who can testify to what occurred. We owe it to them to take account of their memories, as we owe it to them whom they remember. This valuable book repays a large part of that debt.

Prof. Dr. Colin Swatridge
University of Miskolc

Preface

to the Hungarian edition of 1994

Readers have a special and remarkable book available to them. Its author, Sándor Zsiros, published his finely structured, well-written history of Felsőzsolca not long ago. It is an excellent monograph – as one who knows the village can testify. And now, just a year later, he has produced a new book – well in time for Christmas – for people interested in Felsőzsolca and beyond. Why do I call this book a special one? Because both its literary form and content are unique. The purposeful mixing of memories and historic facts lend it a quite particular tone.

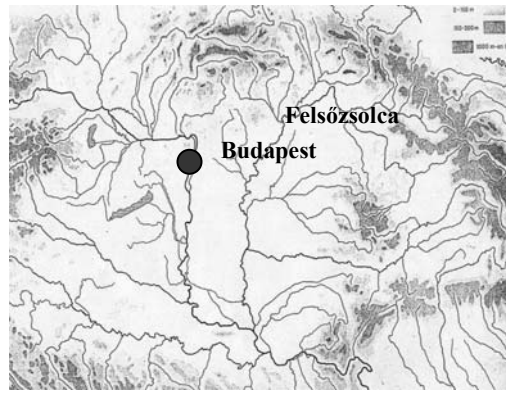
The local historian − whilst he lays emphasis on the need for accurate information – enlivens the description of the era by interviewing those who survived the hell of those events. Memories and facts line up next to each other, answer each other, and make the sufferings and events of those terrible weeks and months immediate and palpable. And this is exactly what gives a very special value to Sándor Zsiros's book. The author may well say in the preface: since the Turkish invasion Felsőzsolca hadn't had to endure such devastation as the blow which struck the village in the autumn and winter of 1944. And let's say not just Felsőzsolca, but the whole country round about: all Hungarians living in the Carpathian basin experienced it. The shifting front line, the battles, the deportation of civilians, the hell of the P.O.W. camps (and many other horrors of that time) are disclosed in the pages of this book. On a still more dramatic note, those wounds which have scarcely healed − which the dictatorship serving foreign interests for forty years wanted to make the people forget with high-sounding phrases − are reopened with elementary force. The local patriot teacher and the research historian deserves respect for reminding us of those times, for exposing the cover-ups of the past, for making us conscious of our loss and of the sufferings of our parents' and grandparents' generations, for bringing relief after the years of fear and for healing the serious wounds of the community. Respect is due to the author, and to the reader.

Dr. Lajos Für
Former Minister of National Defense
Republic of Hungary

INTRODUCTION

Hungary

Hungary, living and flourishing for 1100 years, is situated in the middle of Europe in a diverse environment surrounded by the ancient range of the Carpathians. For more than a thousand years one of the influential contributors to Europe's economy and culture lived here and defended Chris-tian Europe against recurring attacks from the East over the centuries. But they also had to fight against Austrian and German invaders as well.



The country came under the influence of the Mongols, later the Turks, and then in the later centuries Tsarist Russia and the Austrian-German Powers. Hungary lost one-third of its population and two-thirds of its territory after World War I, then during World War II, Hitler's Germany and the Soviet Union both set their sights on it. In this book we would like to give a true picture of the Soviet occupation on the basis of the memories of long-suffering villagers and of documents newly brought to light.

We entered World War II in 1941 on the side of the Germans against the Soviet Union, after what was said to be a Soviet air raid over our historic city, Kassa. After the early

successes the battle position changed, and the Soviet troops forced the Germans and their allied forces back to the lower slopes of the Carpathians. The Carpathians had provided a very strong defense for the country for centuries, and it was hoped that the Russian troops might be stopped there. But one of the allies, Romania, suddenly withdrew from the war and surrendered its territory to the Soviet troops. These then took the opportunity to go round the Carpathian range and so, with quick armored and cavalry divisions, to get behind the defending Hungarian troops. In this way they eventually arrived in Felsőzsolca.

Fifty years ago our village underwent tragic events. In November 1944 the battle reached our village, or, as they said at that time, the front arrived. Throughout our history, due to our geographical position, either we were a prospering village – like nowadays – or conflicts and wars reduced the number of inhabitants and their possessions. We often suffered from wars, but the devastation, the losses of 1944, can only be compared with those of Turkish times. Among the several disasters probably the most tragic event was that the incoming Soviet army straight away collected together about 200 civilian males and carried them off to the gulags.

Among them there were my father, some of my relatives, and friends like András J. Fodor, András Csarni, Gyula Tóth, János Simárszky. Only a few of them returned home alive.

For more than half a century no accurate account was given of the Soviet attack in 1944, the warlike events of those days, and the Soviets' outrageous deeds. No one was allowed to speak about them.

What happened? How could it have happened? How many people were carried off? Why were factory workers in

particular targeted? Were they betrayed? Was it an act of revenge on the part of the Jews?

These questions that have not been voiced out loud, just whispered privately for half a century, and the absurd explanations and answers given to these questions have made even the grandchildren suspicious – because the past cannot be wiped out. This is shown by the recurrent Holocaust memorial services, held all year round. They commemorate loved ones who were killed and set an example to all of us of our belonging together. In their rightful pain they are united in mourning.

The holocaust memorial services gave me the final incentive to collect the memories and the few documents of survivors and, on this basis, to find the answer to the question: what happened in Felsőzsolca fifty years ago?

Felsőzsolca

Sándor Zsiros
Editor Örökség

1. THE PAST OF THE SETTLEMENT

According to the excavations carried out in recent years, we can say that people have lived in the region of our birthplace, in Felsőzsolca – with some breaks – for 3500-3600 years, since the Bronze Age.

Findings from the Bronze Age

This land has continuously been the scene of lively cultural and economic life since the Hungarian Conquest, for 1100 years. In the earliest period of the adoption of Christianity, the first Christian church was built during the reign of our saint and king, István. On joining Christian Europe, the first anointed Hungarian king requested that every large settlement build a church. That happened in one of the biggest settlements of Borsod County at that time, in Felsőzsolca.

The village lay on the left bank of the meandering Sajó River opposite a big town, Miskolc, at the meeting point of important commercial and military roads. The geographical position of the village attracted both merchants and troops. It was a flourishing settlement during the Middle Ages until the Turkish invasion. The recurring Turkish attacks, domestic warfare, and epidemics had totally destroyed the village by the end of the Turkish occupation of Hungary. The Turks either killed its people, reduced them to slavery, or they ran away. [1]

[1] According to the statistics of 1940, 52 people spoke some Slavic language in the village.

Life came back here only in the first decades of the 18th century. Approximately half of the villagers were Ruthenians, that is Hungarian serfs from Ruthenia, in the Carpathians. These were settled here on the deserted fields by the landowners of the village. For two centuries its population increased very slowly. A faster increase of the population began at the end of the 1800s.

It happened that in the second half of the 19th century certain of the peasant farms that became independent as a result of the abolition of serfdom could not keep up with the conditions of the more and more liberal economy. They were bankrupted for one or two decades. Meanwhile the domains were being 'modernized' at a rapid pace. In our village the landed proprietors encouraged intensive farming; they bred and fattened pigs, and on the major part of their land they grew sugar beet, tobacco and maize.[2] To do this, not as many hands were needed as earlier on the peasant farms. So in the villages there were a lot of redundant workers whom agriculture couldn't employ or sustain. 'Fortunately' capitalist industry started to make rapid strides at the same time. The industrialization of Miskolc fitted into this process. It became an industrial city at the time of the millennial celebrations. Small- and large-scale industrial works and factories came into being, and the railway was built. These enterprises needed a lot of labor.

So crowds of these redundant people from the villages of the county and even from other counties flocked to the town.

They were looking for and could find jobs in the factories and workshops of Miskolc. They could get work, they had work places, but not living places. The town had little

[2] In 1940 about 2700-2800 people lived here, 73 of them Jewish, who as merchants, tradesmen, and landowners lived scattered in the village, mostly in the districts of Vám and Falu.

accommodation. So these people, having work but no living places in the town, flooded into the surrounding villages.

More and more of them looked for lodgings, houses, and building-sites. The village tried to ease this desperate situation and made a good bargain by parcelling out the orchards belonging to the Szathmáry-Király Family and the Szilvás, lying to the north of the village. In these streets, some of the railway and factory workers who had been driven out of agriculture bought cheap plots. Building up this part of the village continued up to World War II. For the most part factory workers, who were working in Miskolc, lived in these streets, in contrast to the older parts of the village where people working in agriculture lived.

From the point of view of the events of 1944, it is also remarkable that the majority of the people moving to this new 'settlement' and building houses were Roman Catholic. By the time we arrive at the years of World War II our village consisted of different parts, both geographically and historically.

In the 'village' lived the smallholders, who subsisted mostly on agriculture. The descendants of the serfs, who had moved to the village in the 18th and 19th centuries, lived on the former units of land held in peonage.

I have previously mentioned that 200-250 years ago an almost equal number of Hungarian and Ruthenian (Slavic) serfs settled in the village. So in the 19th century both languages were spoken. By the 1940s only some old people spoke Slovak, and they could later make themselves understood by the occupying soldiers of the 2nd Ukrainian Front.

With regard to their thoughts and feelings, everybody in the village honestly considered themselves to be Hungarians. These families had no idea about their ancestors. Of course they could not have had any idea about them, since during the

previous two hundred years there had been so many mixed marriages that nobody was able to tell the origins of their forebears. In the village everybody was everybody's close or distant relative. And the main point is that the culture, the opinions, and the values of the people were homogeneous at that time.

'Who is Hungarian?' This question has been asked many times this century, and different answers have been given. Probably the truest and most acceptable answer was given by our great poet, Gyula Illyés: "These people are united by the common past, the similar troubles and the air of one country, not by similar physical bodies. Hungarians are those whose mind and tongue is Hungarian."

So heart and mind were fully and undividedly Hungarian. Only surnames and, to a certain extent, religion could show the nationality of the settlers. (The descendants of the Ruthenians were mostly Greek Catholics).

In the 'village' two churches, the Roman and Greek Catholic, were built: the Greek Catholic in the main street and the Roman Catholic church in the parallel street. In the main street mostly Greek Catholic families lived and in the 'Roman Street' Greek and Roman Catholic families lived in roughly equal numbers.

The *Vám* was the centre of the village, and it still is today. At the time that area – according to its social relations – showed quite a mixed picture. People here lived only by agriculture, but there was also a pharmacy, some pubs, an inn, a butcher's, an oil-press, a barber's, a grocer's and a huge coach-yard.

In the area of *Szilvás* only factory workers and railway workers lived, those who earned their money in Miskolc.

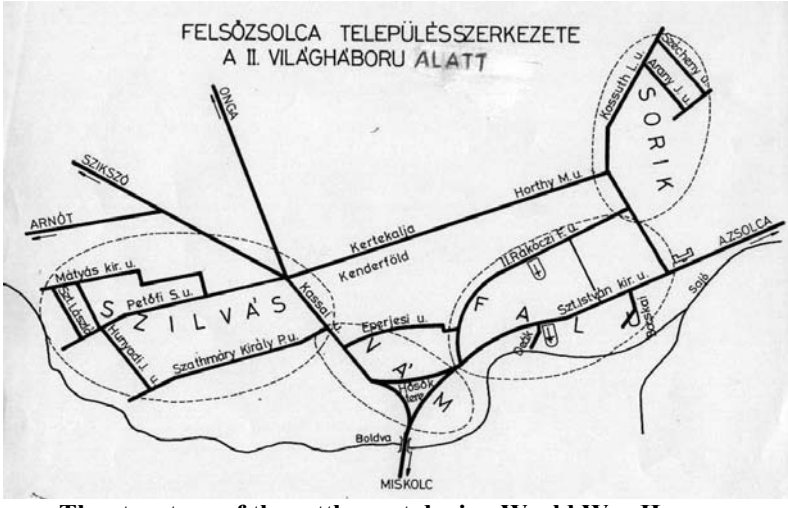
In the area of *Sorik* mostly agricultural workers lived.
It is interesting that the majority of people who built their houses here were Roman Catholic and according to some

views the leader of the local church played an important role in ensuring that there were fewer Greek Catholics among the people who were taken away. The Greek Catholics belonged to the eastern church, whose liturgy had been Russian not long before. The abovementioned church leader, Dr. Béla Bodnár, spoke good Russian: as a result, he was able to make close contact with the officers of the invading Russian troops.

Are these suppositions justified, or are they baseless? I would like to make it clear later.

The battles that had been fought on the territory of the Soviet Union up to that time were continued in the foothills of the Carpathians, and then in the interior of the country. The tragic events that followed are known by everyone from the history lessons of the last fifty years.

I wonder whether it happened like that. How did people live through this period?

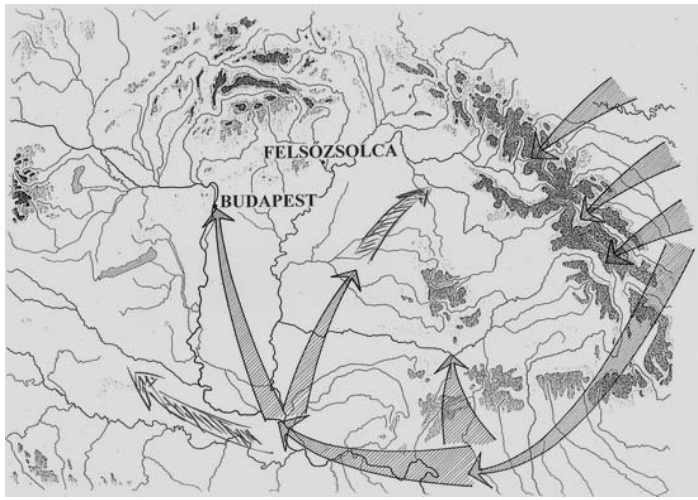


The structure of the settlement during World War II.

Uncertain situations

In spite of the gloomy omens – to the best of memory – people living here believed and hoped that the front would not advance through the Carpathians into the interior of the country. It might stop, get stuck somewhere or, if not, then the war might end or some miracle happen.

Owing to the switching of sides by the Romanians in August 1944, in the first days of September 1944, the 2nd Ukrainian Front broke into the country at the southern border, from Romania. Desperate fear came upon the people, especially after the radio and the newspapers gave news of the cruelty of the Soviet troops and of their looting. They carried men off to Siberia and fell not only upon the German and Hungarian troops but on Hungarian women as well, and with great vehemence.



Soviet attacks, autumn 1944.

Then when refugees from the southern territories confirmed the news, bewilderment and fear conquered the villagers.

A question arises: despite these facts, were there people in Felsőzsolca who welcomed the Russian troops? If so, then they could have assisted the Russian troops that occupied the village. This question seems to be justified because some of the people who live here say that even local people played a part in carrying off nearly two thousand civilian men. According to certain people, those who welcomed the Soviets were the local communists.

The number of Social Democratic Party members grew especially at the beginning of the 1930s due to the economic crisis and unemployment. In 1932 it had 232 registered members in our village. That is: nearly every worker and certain of the tradesmen belonged to the party. As we have seen, the factory workers settled down mostly in Szilvás and Sorik, and they supplied most of the membership of the local Social Democratic Party. This community, during the period under discussion, the autumn of 1944, hoped against hope that the news broadcast in the Hungarian media during the war years about Soviet life, about conditions in the Soviet Union (the mess-tin system, common kitchens, collective farms, backwardness) was not true, or if it was true, that it would work better among us for the benefit of the workers.

They hoped this, they trusted in it because everybody agreed and knew that if the Soviets came here they would restructure the social and economic system according to their taste.

These hopes were reduced dramatically by the news brought by soldiers who had returned from Russia and which was then spread in families and among friends. They had personal experience of the Soviet conditions. They said there was real backwardness and poverty, and not just because of the war. They did not even see animals, or stables or sties, around the houses. In many places there was no electricity or radio, there were no good roads and churches, and if one or two

remained somehow, they were used as common stables or barns during Soviet rule.

But we should not forget the effect of Soviet propaganda, which came through the Hungarian language programs of Radio Moscow. In Felsőzsolca at that time there were radios in nearly every house. It is also true that the Soviet stations, including Radio Moscow, were received with higher-capacity (so called 'world receiver') radios.

Taking these facts into consideration, we can say that there were families who waited for the Soviets with hope. They could have been those people who later, at the beginning of 1945, founded the communist party in the village. There were 8-10 people (heads of families) who declared themselves communists at the village gathering on 1st May 1945. (The others, if there were such, were already inmates of Soviet prison camps by that time.)

But in autumn 1944 we can talk about these people at most as sympathizers who, though they awaited the Soviets and were glad when they heard of their battle successes, could not act on their behalf or did not dare to.

Similarly, neither the Hungaricist movement nor the Hungarian Nazis who genuinely proclaimed the fascist ideology were organized.

Just because these 10-20 people, one-thousandth of the villagers, sympathized with the occupiers, either the German Nazi troops or the Bolshevik Soviets, we cannot say about the village and its people (as politicians later said, in reference to the whole country) that: "broad crowds of workers and peasants waited for the Soviet relief troops with respect and love." It is simply not true!

We were innocent. We were neither accomplices of the one side nor of the other. The same untruth was told by the Soviet advance guard which broke into the country in October

1944, and it was spread all over the country on posters, in newspapers, on the radio, and by megaphone on all fronts.

Among other lies it was written:

> *Hungarians! The troops of the Red Army, while in pursuit of the enemy, have entered Hungarian territory. When the Red Army enters Hungarian territory its purpose is not to occupy any part of it, or to change its present social system. (...) The Hitlerist robbers and their Hungarian paid agents keep terrifying you with the entry of the Red Army into Hungary. You should not have any reason for fear. The Red Army comes to Hungary not as an invader, but as the liberator of the Hungarian people from fascist subjection. (...) Stay where you live and continue your peaceful work. Workers and tradesmen! You can continue your work in factories and workshops without any fear.*
>
> (handbill and poster, 1944) (4)

Unfortunately it was only political propaganda, designed to deceive.

II. THE APPROACHING FRONT

After Romania switched sides on 23rd August 1944, the Soviet troops reached the southern border of our country without any fight. The name of the fighting troops who broke into our country was the 2nd Ukrainian Front.

They occupied Makó on 26th September, then, in the vicinity of Debrecen, a serious tank battle took place between the German and the Soviet tank troops.

In the first days of October the units of the 2nd Ukrainian Front reached the district of Debrecen and here on the large plain they concentrated the easily movable and effective cavalry and the mechanized armored troops. Thus, after occupying Debrecen and Nyíregyháza, attacking in the direction of Csap, they were able to surround the successfully defending Hungarian and German units who were fighting in Transylvania. In an attempt to prevent this, the Germans brought strong armored troops into the vicinity of Debrecen where, between 9th and 20th October – according to experts – one of the biggest tank battles of World War II was fought.

This war situation induced Horthy, the head of state of Hungary at that time, to ask for an armistice secretly from the Russians so that Hungary might quit the war.

On 15th October 1944 this proclamation was read on the radio. He spoke about the fact that Hungary had drifted into the war as a result of its geographical situation and under pressure from Germany. He blamed the Germans for having sent the troops into action far from the country, in spite of his intentions; when he had objected, the German response had been to occupy the country, with the consequent loss of Hungarian sovereignty.

So, the attempt to abandon the war had been a failure. It could not have been successful in that military and geographical situation.

Although, under the leadership of their officers, 20,000 Hungarian soldiers joined the Soviets in the Carpathians, it was Horthy's proclamation that led to the disintegration of the Hungarian army. The reason that we have to speak about it is that party politicians here at home and in the neighboring countries persist, right up to the present, in applying to us the degrading 'last satellite' label, so as to justify the treatment which the Soviets meted out to us during and after the war: the forced removal of citizens, the sufferings of the Hungarian prisoners of war, the reparations, etc. And our neighbors, the Romanians, the Slovaks, and the Serbs, seek to rationalize the deportations, the mass murders, the deprivation of civil rights, and the confiscation of land by the terms of the Trianon Treaty, which they perpetrated against the Hungarians.

That it is unreasonable to pronounce us guilty on these grounds is made obvious to anybody who compares our situation at that time with that of the other 'satellite' countries, or of those which were oppressed by the Nazis. In Romania, in 'neutral' Bulgaria, little German military force was brought to bear when they abandoned the war – indeed, Bulgaria as a territory was of minor importance to the Germans. We were occupied by a strong, efficient army and the German troops beyond the Carpathians had only one route after the sudden conversion of the Romanians: to retreat across Hungary.

This territory was of vital importance for the Germans, then. We could also ask why the Austrians, Czechs, Danes, Belgians were not 'turncoats'? They at that time resigned themselves to German subjection without any resistance.

It is also alleged – as our sin – that Hungary attempted no real military resistance against the Germans. But they forget or do not know that it was blocked by the Soviets.

As early as 1943 the Hungarian officers and soldiers in Soviet captivity made a request of the Soviet command that they should organize fighting units from the prisoners of war

which would work within the Red Army but independently as well. They repeated the request in the autumn of 1944, after the failure of the armistice call, when 20,000 armed soldiers joined them. The answer was: 'No.' Later, when in December 1944 the Temporary Government signed the armistice and tackled the immediate setting up of eight divisions against the Germans, the Soviet command stalled and kept putting it off. First they permitted the setting up of road and railway building units, and then they allowed the organized 6th division to fight near Vienna but not in Hungary. So in East- and Middle-Europe Hungary was the only country whose own people could not take part in liberating their own country from fascist rule. I ask why? (5)

The answer is that it would have been inconvenient for the Soviets. They were with us as well as with the Poles. They did not want us to have our own independent army. When there was an uprising in Warsaw, the Soviets stopped at the gates of the city and waited until the Germans destroyed the city with its one million people together with the partisans. In the end, the Soviet Union satisfied the insurgent Czechs by incorporating Sub-Carpathia into their nation, and the restless Romanians by giving them Moldavia and Bessarabia, just as they 'compensated' the Poles with German territories for the East-Polish territories that the Soviets appropriated for themselves. [3]

[3] Those who still argue for the 'last satellite state' idea, and explain the unsuccessful pull-out from the war and the postponement of the armed resistance exclusively by reference to Horthy's attitude and indecision, should think of the events of Hungary's more recent past, like 1956. I wonder why Imre Nagy could not 'pull out' from the socialist side? Or think of 1968 when János Kádár -though unwillingly- sent our soldiers to Czechoslovakia. Why did he do that? Because the Soviet occupying army was here.

Damage and martyrs

Below, I write in detail about the events of the 'liberation' and about the important events of the previous day. Unfortunately, not much written material remains about this period so I have to rely on the memories of the surviving eyewitnesses. As a child, I too saw and experienced much, so I have used my personal experiences where they have been confirmed by other people's opinions and memories.

As a preliminary, let me tell you my experience with the words 'liberation' and 'setting free.' These words were certainly known in our village, but at the time of those events and for a long time after they were never used in connection with the Soviet troops occupying the village. (The situation in the whole country was probably the same.)

Most often the expression 'when the Russians came' was used. It is very interesting that, even nowadays, fifty years later, these are the words that are used when those times are spoken of. The soldiers of the Red Army are never called Soviets, always just 'Russians.' It is true not just in the spoken language; the official documents of that time also refer to the 'tombs of the Russian soldiers killed in action' and about 'placing the Russian soldiers.'

The terms 'liberation' and 'setting free' are of political origin. The people of the village did not understand the Russians 'coming' as liberating but occupying them. Probably those 20-25 Jewish inmates of labor camps who were hiding in their homes fearing for their lives could feel – with reason – that it was a liberation.

How did inmates of labor camps get here?

During the big tank battle near Debrecen (or a couple of days later), the German high command started to build the so-called Karola defense line at the foot of the Mátra-Bükk-Zemplén mountains. Part of this was a network of trenches

which surrounded Felsőzsolca from the east and the south. To build this, a group of inmates of labor camps arrived at the village. They were placed in 'Kisszilvás' (Petőfi Street) on the Ritters' farm. Their life was painful. [4]

Members of the skeleton staff escorted them to the fields to dig the trenches and to take them back in the evening. They did hard physical work for weeks, day in and day out, which exhausted them. (The village also had to yield up civilians to dig the trenches every day. They were "Levente"-aged young men, 14-20 years old. Their situation was better because they lived at home and got used to the hard physical work.)

The front was quite near by the time the inmates of labor camps finished the trenches, so they took advantage of the opportunity; the company was falling to pieces, but some of them stayed here. They hid with the farmers and tradesmen of the village until the Soviets claimed them.

I will write more about this below.

Felsőzsolca had a key position in protecting Miskolc. In the first chapter I mentioned the fact that important roads meet in our village. These helped its development, but they attracted troops during the war.

The same thing happened in World War II. In our region, this settlement suffered the most. As a proportion of the number of its inhabitants, this village suffered the greatest loss of men.

During the fighting, artillery shells killed ten civilians and about fifty died of those who were deported. The direct victims of the fighting in the village were those civilians, children and adults, who were killed later by the explosion of

[4] Their life was similar to the life of those young men of Zsolca who were taken to the army in the 1950s as politically unreliable kulaks. They 'were fighting with a shovel' for peace, too. They were building barracks, drill-grounds, etc.

artillery and munitions found here. Their number was between six and eight. And we should also mention those soldiers who fell in the battle for the village on both sides. Seven Hungarian and eight German soldiers lie in unmarked graves. More Germans than that died here and were buried locally by their fellow soldiers or the villagers. [5]

About 50-60 Soviet soldiers also died here. There are no exact data about it: only memory retains this number. The fallen Russian soldiers were buried in 'Epreskert' opposite the palace at the request of the Soviet command. (About half a year later the remains of the Russian soldiers were taken to Ónod by the Soviet Army.)

In the first days of January, the leaders of the village made the civilians collect the bodies of the fallen soldiers and bring them from the fields by horse-drawn cart. Those, that is, who were found there.

On 30th January the parish clerk wrote the following to the local chief constable:

> *I report that in the majority of the cases both human and animal remains have been collected in the area of the village. Probably in places there could be corpses but finding them is not possible because of the snow. Only after the snow has melted will it be possible to collect and bury them.{...}Waste removal encounters*

[5] Probably even more civilians fell: those who lived here but who did not come from here, so nobody recorded them. A Jewish labor camp inmate who was hiding at Sándor Tóth's farm was so seriously injured by a fragment of a mine that the farmer's son-in-law took him on a cart to the Russian military hospital in the neighboring village. The farmer's wife took a young man fleeing from Transylvania called Dénes, who was seriously injured on his leg and groin, on their wheelbarrow to the same hospital. Nobody knows what happened to them.

serious difficulty because of the lack of carts or rather the few existing ones are used by the Russian army. [6]

It also shows that it was impossible to define the number of the fallen soldiers.

The material loss the village had was also huge. At the end of the fighting in the southern part of the village there were no houses left intact; all of them were hit. Most of their roofs were seriously damaged.

The two churches also suffered from the gunfire; especially the higher of them, the Roman Catholic church, suffered many hits. In the tower of the Roman Catholic church German gun spotters were hidden during the battle, so the Russian artillery regularly fired at it for ten days. It was hit by 6-8 bullets but a very big bullet totally damaged the sacristy, another one made such a big hole in the southern nave of the church that a big loaded cart could have gone through it. A huge hole laid open the northern wall, which had been made by a German cannon after the Russians occupied this part of the village.

Beyond the damage to the buildings the villagers suffered immeasurable loss of their personal belongings and property. Even the German and Hungarian soldiers who

[6] Here, due to the fighting near the Roman Catholic Church, , Tamás Sagáth and István Németh died in Russian gunfire; so, too, near the Kastély in Szent István street in the Bujdos-Domonkos' stone houses, did Mihály Balla and Mrs. István Juhász, who fled here from Sorik; from among those who stayed at home, the younger László Hoór and the child András Heiszmann also died. The besieging Russians shot Béla Steforoczki to death in his own house in Kossuth Street. Pál Szolga, who lived in Sorik, was shot by the Germans in Kisszilvás on his way to his fiancée. They took him with them, seriously wounded, but he died in Putnok in a hospital. From the north of the village we know about the death of only two people, Mrs. Mihály Takács and younger Pál Papp of Kisszilvás. Both were killed by Russian gunfire.

defended the village commandeered animals and food. That is: they 'legally' took these items away from their owners, giving them some money or the village paid them from the public purse. During the fighting they did not bother with formalities. People had to give them what they asked for. But they tried to handle the situation 'peacefully.' Lajos Fodor told me that he regularly came into the 'village' on behalf of those Hungarians who were hiding in the cellar of today's Pokol Csárda to buy some food for them to supplement their small provision.

József Molnár, who lived through these days near the trenches, remembers the same thing. He said that as a lad he often went into the 'village' at the command of the Germans to buy milk, eggs and wine for them.

The Germans' requisitioning was nothing compared with the Russians'. There was not a single family who escaped the devastation, pillage, the searching out of hidden food or the looting of houses.

The Russians particularly ransacked those houses where people did not stay at home. However, the proportion of those families who stayed in their houses in these difficult days was about 15-20%.

After 19th November, when the Russians bombed Felsőzsolca for the first time, those who could, children and adults equally, fled to the cellars or 'bomb shelters.' As safe cellars were very few in the village, mostly under stone houses, people who left their homes hid with their families in these houses. According to the size of the cellars, 20-30 people were crammed in, in some cases 50-60 or even more. (In Balázs Bujdos's cellar 70 people huddled together, they say.) They tried to live through those 10-12 days while the fighting was going on at the southern edge of the village.

Many people left Sorik, which was nearest the trenches. People who lived there saw clearly that if there was fighting in Felsőzsolca then terrible days would come. As people

remember, no more than four or five families stayed there and got through the hard days in their homemade air-raid shelters. Those who left Sorik tried to hide somewhere nearby, with their relatives or with friends living in Rákóczi or Szent István Streets, or they concealed themselves in the cellars of the bigger farms. They did not guess that these parts of the village would suffer terrible fighting and that most civilians of Felsőzsolca would die there.

Hundreds or even a thousand people left their homes and their village on 29th and 30th November. The in-coming Russian troops emptied the village. They did not force anybody out, but they were urging the inhabitants to leave the village because of the heavy fighting to seize Miskolc and the resistance of the Germans.

We cannot really say, even today, whether the Soviets truly believed that large German forces stood against them in Miskolc or whether there were other reasons behind it.

Before the fighting 10-15 families fled to the north (Pálfala, Vámos, Edelény) to their relatives to avoid the battle for Miskolc. About 200-220 people – 40-50 of them women – were press-ganged into building roads, bridges and battle positions right at the frontline. The others were carried away from the village, so 80-90% of the houses fell easy prey to the invading forces.

Thousands of Russian soldiers overran the village; there were horses, carts and bullets in the gardens. Cupboards, chests of drawers were thrown out and horses were fed from them with the crops found at the houses. The soldiers explored with mine detectors and dug out the hidden food. Houses were turned upside down; everywhere there was senseless devastation and destruction.

Fighting in the vicinity of Miskolc

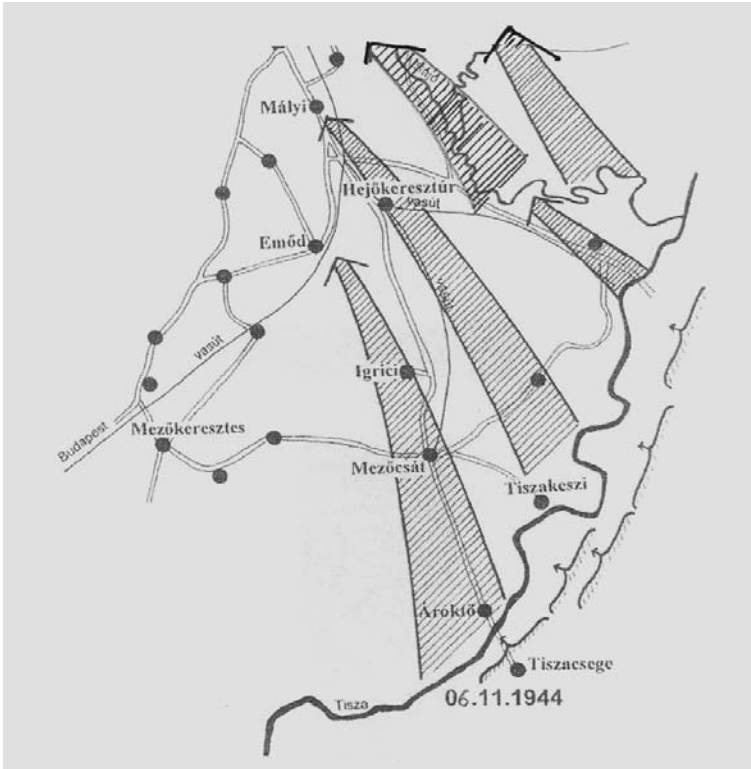
The Germans fought successfully around Debrecen. They prevented the Red Army, which exploited the strategic advantage of the Romanian withdrawal, from advancing in the direction of Nyíregyháza-Csap. The Germans managed to surround huge land forces in much the same way as at Stalingrad.

The 8th German and the 1st Hungarian Armies were fighting in the Carpathians and in Transylvania, and they would have found themselves encircled. Their success cost the Germans too much: they lost 12,282 soldiers in the battle at Hortobágy. Weapons and vehicles were damaged and at the same time the reserves were also destroyed. [7] So the German-Hungarian troops were withdrawn behind the line of the Tisza, where they tried to regroup. So the war arrived in the southern and eastern parts of Borsod County.

In the first days the 27th November Light Division and the 9th Border Guard Brigade of the 9th Hungarian Army Corps defended the land behind the Tisza at the line of Tiszakeszi-Tiszanána at the border of the county. To the south flanked by German armored troops the 25th Hungarian and the 76th German Foot Division took up position. To the north of Tiszakeszi behind the river stood the 3rd German Mountain Infantrymen Division.

Opposite them on the left of the Tisza three Russian divisions were preparing for further fighting. The Russians had also suffered big losses at Hortobágy, both in human terms and in battle equipment. Their loss of troops was about 12,000, and they did their very best to replace them.

The 53rd Army and the 7th Romanian Army Corps lined up to the south of Tiszafüred on the 2nd Ukrainian Front. Between Tiszafüred and Polgár the 27th Army and to the north of Polgár the 40th Army (strengthened by two Romanian Army



Corps) were preparing to cross the Tisza River and attack to the north. The task of the 53rd Army was the occupation of Eger. The 27th Army was strengthened with a quick motorized cavalry, the so-called Plijev-group. The task of this army was to occupy Miskolc, attacking it from the valley of the Sajó, then to move further in the direction of Rimaszombat. The 40th Army had to start the attack in the Hernád valley towards Gesztely, and in the north towards Sátoraljaújhely. The German-Hungarian troops were at a huge disadvantage, not merely because the Russians were highly organized and more in number, but – according to the reports – the Hungarian-German infantry had only 100-200 soldiers. The number of the

Hungarian army was reduced not just by the fighting but by the desertions that followed Horthy's proclamation.

From among the Russian armies, first the 27th at Tiszakeszi-Ároktő, then to the south the 53rd Army crossed the Tisza on 6th November and made a gap in the frontline of the 9th Hungarian army. In the first days they widened this bridgehead to 80 kms, but they could only advance very slowly because there was heavy fighting with the strengthened Germans (armored troops were sent to the South-Borsod Mezőség).

The turning point came when the 27th Army, at some cost, occupied Emőd on 15th November and, by so doing, they cut the main road and railway between Budapest and Miskolc. The German chiefs of staff, to prevent the fighting soldiers in Mezőség and between Miskolc and Polgár from being surrounded, withdrew these troops to the previously built 'Karola' defence line. As I have already mentioned, this network of trenches was built at the foot of the Mátra-Bükk, then later at the foot of the Zemplén Mountains. It ran in the vicinity of Miskolc, Hejőcsaba, Szirma, Felsőzsolca, Onga and Szikszó. The German-Hungarian troops were withdrawn here. These units handed over this territory without much resistance; there were just some rear-guard skirmishes.

In this way, from among the surrounding villages,
the 27th Russian Army took over:
18 November: Sajólád, Sajópetri, Kistokaj,
19 November: Alsózsolca, Görömböly
20 November: Hejőcsaba, Szirma,
and the 40th Russian Army took over:
18 November: Bőcs, Hernádnémeti,
19 November: Hernádkak,
20 November: Gesztely, Alsódobsza, Újcsanálos.

Fighting in Felsőzsolca for Miskolc

If we have a look at the map we can see there is a half-circle around Miskolc and in its most southern part there is Felsőzsolca, where the most important routes ran from Debrecen-Polgár, Szerencs-Onga, Kassa-Szikszó, Edelény and Arnót. It was only possible to get to Miskolc through our village.

At this line the front stopped for one or two weeks. There were some minor skirmishes but no bigger attacks. This static warfare lasted about ten days in our village.

The Russian troops entered Sajólád and Sajópetri on 18th November, and Alsózsolca on 19th November. From these places and from that time on our village was regularly bombed so everybody who could do so hid in cellars and air-raid shelters. Meanwhile German troops also entered the village. The units of the 3rd German Mountain Division were here, mostly Austrians.

Their artillery was located in the northern part of the village; the guns and the artillery were placed between the Vám and the Szilvások. Their infantry was insignificant in number; they stayed south and east of the village and in the nearby houses and other buildings. It seems unbelievable but the eyewitnesses say their number was not more than 30-40. The rest of the Hungarian battalion, similarly weak in number, defended the village together with the Germans. The commanders stayed in the cellar of the present Pokol Csárda at the Vám.

This much-reduced force defended the 3-4 km long line of the 'Karola' network of trenches, which lay at the border of the village. I have said 'network of trenches', but we can't really speak about a 'network'; it was just a one-line trench at the southern end of the village. It started to the east from the bank of the Sajó River under the manorial palace. It passed the

manorial agricultural buildings, then crossed the Vitézi lands and Kossuth Street at Sorik and it passed the farthest house, the Krizsó family's house (the house itself lay between the two firing-lines).

From here it turned to the north and passed the Szathmáry family's crypt and the Bulgarian Simon's market garden up to the Mocsár fields. Here it ran into a deep, several-meter- wide tank-trap.

From this point the trench turned to the east crossing the Kispart on the Ongai road, and near the Halmok it went up to the slopes in front of the Turul monument, and continued its way in the direction of Szikszó. (At the present village it would pass Rózsa Street, the gardens of Széchenyi Street, Zöldfa Street, Táncsics Mihály Street and Kazinczy Street at the cemetery.) In the course of my research, I met a lot of people who lived at Sorik in 1944 but nearly all of them moved to the inner part of the village with their families because of the fighting.

But they mentioned two young men who lived through these hard days near the frontline with their families. They are the Bulgarian Simon's son and József Molnár, whom I have known since my childhood, but I came to know that they were near or 'on' the front, only recently.

I talked to them separately, then together we went to the place, to that edge of the village where the frontline was, where their houses stood. The house of the Simons was on the left at the end of Kossuth Street, about 20-30 meters behind the trenches; József Molnár's house was on the right of the street, 50-60 meters from the line of the trenches.

From the place where we were standing, the Russian frontline could not have been seen, but from the height of the roofs the view would have been better.

Each night, the Russians continued their violent onslaught and regularly tried to break through the German-

Hungarian frontline with the infantry. These operations were accompanied by louds shouts of "urrá" and the firing of the infantry's guns here and there from Sajó to Halom, but mostly near the roads leading to the village (Simárd-Sorik, Vasútállomás-Falu). This frightening din of battle made people fearful, so they abandoned Sorik and hid inside the village. [7]

József Molnár, whose house was the third one north of the Krizsó house, remembers these days with István Simon. István Simon's house, opposite the Molnárs, was on the Mészáros land where his father, as a Bulgarian tenant, did market gardening. Both of them lived through these hard days just about a hundred meters from the front line.

They could not have lived in cellars and in shelters dug into the ground without coming – at least the adults – up to the surface. Feeding animals and looking after their families forced them come out into the daylight. As there was not constant rifle fire they could come out in the intervals, but it was impossible to know how long the silent periods would last: for minutes or for hours. It caused the death of many civilians. People had to live even near the frontline.

The following events - characteristic for the whole area - are from the memories of István Simon and József Molnár:

"My brother – with whose family we were cowering in the air-raid-shelter - said, 'Brother, try to cook some caraway-seed soup, I really don't know how long it is since we ate cooked food.' (My brother, who had already been on the front,

[7] "My parents made an air-raid shelter in Glück-court, but because of the riflefire and the fighting that came nearer and nearer each night, we went into the Falu next to the Roman Catholic Church and into Annuska Bujdos's cellar. My father and brother stayed there for one more night, but then they also came into the village. This was lucky for them on the third day, after the men left it, their former shelter received a direct hit and collapsed." (the widowed Mrs József Németh is still living in Kossuth Street.) Mrs. István Bujdos is the owner of one of the stone houses opposite Kastély: "In these houses, in their cellars more than seventy people of Sorik hid themselves."

was much more frightened than me. Although I was nineteen, I did not feel danger.) Well, all right, I went up and made a fire with some scrap materials. I poured water into a pan, but it was not even lukewarm when I heard 'boom' close by. I quickly ran under the bed in the first room, but suddenly the second bomb came. It exploded in the kitchen, totally destroying the chimney, but thank God I was not hurt. Then when there was silence I put out the still flickering fire and didn't cook anything. I went back down.

"Next time our stable was hit by a bomb, one of the cows was hurt seriously; it broke its leg, but we couldn't even bring the cow out because the second bomb came and it hit the straw roof of the stable. So we left the three cows and they burned inside."

István Simon: **"**The same thing happened to us, our two horses, which were in the stable near our house, died because of a bomb, but the pigs died as well. We didn't really know where and when they had gone.**"**

"The Germans took them, didn't they?**"** I asked.

"Oh, they were 'gentlemen' in this respect; they had money and paid.**"**

József Molnár remarks:

"But they shot the hens in our yard and didn't pay for them.**"**

"Because the soldiers also struggled with supply problems.**"**

Lajos Fodor tells about these days:

"The German commander occupied the house of Molnar Juhász, whilst the Hungarians were in Andor Juhász's cellar (earlier of Hajdú) and pub, here in the neighborhood. One day the Hungarians asked for some kilos of flour from them as their food had not been brought from Arnót. Their kitchen was there, but the cooks either escaped or couldn't come over from Arnót to Zsolca. In short, my wife cooked

something in a 20-liter pot for twelve officers, the neighbors, the postmaster and the four Jews in the cellar. Meanwhile there was such a lot of gunfire around, that…"

István Simon and József Molnár confirmed that for the Hungarians lying in the trenches (around Ongai Street, Kispart and Halmok) food was brought by motorcycle and sidecar, if it was brought at all. They were very few, approximately 20-30. They could hardly see Germans on the frontline. Both of them state that there were German soldiers only every 40-50 meters. After they fired, they changed their positions in order that there would seem to be more of them.

"It is said there were about 32,000 Russian attackers while only thirty Germans defended Zsolca**,"** remarked József Molnár.

We do have to make this point. It would be good to know how many Hungarian and German soldiers were stationed in the village at that time. This question has great importance because until now a scandalous untruth was generally believed about why certain Hungarians were dragged away. The story goes that the Russians 'did not believe' that the handful of Hungarian and German soldiers could hold up the glorious and undefeatable Red Army; that was the reason why they collected 200 men from Zsolca, accusing them of helping the soldiers.[8]

Unfortunately their number is undefined. The papers/documents from the war – if they survived at all - are unobtainable now. So we can rely only on the memories of the

[8] This absurdity definitely originated with the Russians. More people remember that István Margitics, who became the "professional" interpreter for the Russians, also cited it frequently as the explanation for the behavior of the Russian officers. It happened also when at the beginning of 1945 GPU officers confronted the leaders of the village again, when they wanted to drag away more people of Zsolca with German names (Ludvig, Stefán, Szeifert, Stíber, Luterán) to the Soviet Union.

people living here and the estimation of some army books dealing with the fighting in Borsod County.

According to these sources, between Halmok and Mocsár there were about 20-25 Hungarian soldiers, who were replaced by others from time to time, and there might have been the same number at the headquarters of the village, mostly officers. The number of the Hungarian soldiers was altogether under 100. The number of the Germans was estimated to be not much more. In the trenches between Mocsár and the Sajó there were not more than 30-40 foot soldiers, who were regularly changed, being sent to relax inside the village. Their number was also under a hundred. But the German troops that defended the village had heavy guns, cannons, and trench mortars. Their number in the village could have beeen about 20-25. The number of their support staff, leaders, and the German Headquarters themselves altogether could not have been more than two hundred people. Add to these the two armed Germans who stayed in the village until they had bombed the bridge. Altogether not more than about one hundred Hungarian and three hundred German soldiers defended the trenches from the Sajó to Halmok, embracing Felsőzsolca in a half circle. [9]

Presumably they were the remains of one or two battalions. It seems to be proved by a study [8], which estimates the number of the 'battle-weary' German battalion at 100-200 people and there were even fewer in the crumbling Hungarian units. However, those Hungarian and German units which were assigned here to Felsőzsolca had, after the battle of Debrecen, carried on a desperate struggle in the Mezőség in southern Borsod with the Russian troops who had broken through the Ároktő-Tiszakeszi area.

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[9] Behind Petőfi Street 21, where our family sheltered in the cellar, two type-120 mine-layers worked. 8 people operated them; they also towed them and the open jeeps which were used for carrying munitions.

The third German mountain brigade belonging to the 23rd Army Corps and the remains of the Hungarian 9th Border Guard Brigade fighting in the units of the Hungarian 9th Army Corps came back here. (Before that these troops were fighting in Northern Transylvania and the Carpathians.) They were retreating to the north in the Sajó valley in such a way that on both banks they closed the roads which ran parallel with the Sajó River (Polgár-Miskolc, Muhi-Felsőzsolca-Edelény, on the other side the Pesti Road-Miskolc-Sajószentpéter).

We know a little bit more about the Russian troops drawing up against them (though the operational documents are still inaccessible to researchers). We know that the highest Russian commandant was dissatisfied with the advance of the 2nd Ukrainian Front [9]. After breaking through the Tisza on 6th November in South-Borsod, they were able to win some territory but they suffered big losses as well.

The more advanced units were falling apart; their supply and direction were irregular. They followed the German–Hungarian troops which were withdrawing behind the 'Karola' line, but before reaching them, on 19th-20th November their momentum was spent. The frontline was continuous from the Bükk to Sátoraljaújhely. (It is beyond question that the German-Hungarian troops supported by the civilians held up their advance. And the Soviet commander knew it very well.) On 20th November Commander-in-Chief Malinovszkij stopped the attacks in order to strengthen and rearrange his troops. Malinovszkij, the commander of the 2nd Ukrainian Front, gave his new order, in which he appointed 29th November as the date of the general attack.

In this order he determined new tasks and attack formations for the troops and armies under his command.

> *The 27th Army together with the 51st rifle-corps, with at least the strength of five rifle-divisions, should break*

through the enemy's defense line on the sector of Onga and Miskolc on 29th November. Deal the main blow in the direction of Boldva and get round and occupy Miskolc from the east before the evening of 29th November. Before the evening of 30th November reach the sector of Kopaszföld, Alacska, Varbó.[10]

This was the command, and in obedience to it the Red Army swooped down on Felsőzsolca on 29th November 1944. What did this mean in effect? How many soldiers, with what sort of armed force started this attack on Miskolc, on the road leading through Felsőzsolca-Arnót-Boldva in the Sajó valley?[10]

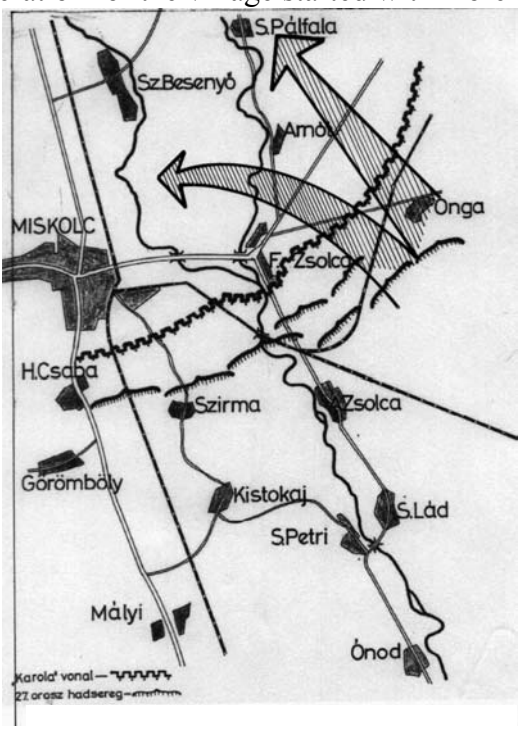
An 'Army' consisted of about 50,000 soldiers. The strength of the 27th Army was at least as much as this since, in order to compensate for the war losses up to that time, they were given the 51st Army Corps, and at the same time a mounted and a motorized unit, the so-called Plijev Group, worked there as well. It is true that the army was in possession of a wide frontline from Hernád (Hernádkak) through Hejőcsaba to the villages situated on the southern slope of the Bükk (Kisgyőr, Borsodgeszt). Now, in reference to the general order, they withdrew some of their forces fighting at the southern foot of the Bükk in order to concentrate on the new direction of the attack in the Sajó valley. Corresponding with the command of 26th November, they placed five divisions on the frontline between the Sajó River and Onga.

How many people were they altogether? According to the opinion of military historians, the strength of the foot

[10] This command also determined that the neighboring troops should start an attack in their own belt also on 29th. So the 40th Russian army, which was strengthened by four Romanian divisions, was to start an attack between Hernádkak and Sátoraljaújhely, of which the main direction should be towards Aszaló, Hangács, Borsodszirák. The 53rd Army on the left wing had to start an attack together with a Romanian division south of Mezőkövesd in the direction of Eger, Sirok, Gyöngyös on 29th November.

soldier (rifleman) division was about 6000-7500, but by the end of November they had lost 1500-2000 men by divisions. So on average each of the five divisions lined up here had at least 5000 soldiers. It meant about 25,000 soldiers were facing 3-400 Hungarian and German soldiers fighting in the trenches from the Sajó to Halmok and in the village.

The Russians had a huge superiority in artillery gun-power, too. We know from a different source that Malinovszkij determined the density of guns at 300-320 per kilometer along the front to effect a breakthrough. It means that for this 4-5 km long frontline, in the neighborhood of Felsőzsolca, Alsózsolca and Sajólád, they concentrated about 1500 guns, trench mortars and Katyushas. The 'liberation' of the village started with more than an hour-long pounding at seven on Wednesday morning, 29th November 1944. If we consider that in one hour from every barrel at least 20-30 shells hit the trenches and the 4-500 m long area behind them, we cannot say that people who remember these days exaggerate when they claim that there can hardly have been an area thirty paces square where shells did not fall. It is no exaggeration either when eyewitnesses say



Attacks on 29. 11. 1944.

that during the attack the Russians were teeming in the fields and in the village gardens like ants, as there were several thousand armed soldiers in gray uniforms.

The first days of the 'Liberation'

The book entitled *The Documentation Department of Modern History of Borsod County* states that:

> *On 29th November the 2nd Ukrainian Front, after only a one-hour long artillery preparation, started an attack in the direction of the town between the Sajó and Hernád Rivers (that is, in the direction of Miskolc). On the day of the attack the Germans - calling up all their forces – still resisted, but next day the Russian troops broke through the German lines on a six km long section.* (11)

"How did you live through these hours here 'at the front'?" I asked József Molnár and István Simon, with whom I visited the scene of the events that happened fifty years ago. We stopped in front of the still-existing Krizsó house in Kossuth Street where the line of the trenches was running.

István Simon: "I remember the sky was overcast on those days; it had been raining before, probably the first snow had just melted and there was a lot of mud. In the early morning terrible gunfire started and it went on for an hour. Then suddenly it became silent. There was a twenty-thirty minute long silence. Dead silence, I thought I had gone deaf; and then the Russians started from here with a big 'hurrah'. (Showing the bend of the hill 50-100 ms away with his hand). They were as dense as my fingers, next to each other and behind each other. There was no gunfire then. There were no more Germans."

"It was about between 7-8 in the morning," continues József Molnár, "when for about two hours we had so much artillery gunfire that the noise of the explosions converged. There was not even a $1m^2$ place here where shells had not fallen. Then the Russians came into the village. As I have already said, the air-raid shelter where we were hiding was not more than 100 meters away from the trenches. Its entrance was a 'Z'-shape, our dog was lying in it – and the first Russian came in with a grenade in his hand. He wanted to drag the dog out, but the dog did not want to go out. At that time we stuck out our heads. 'Nyemszki Jeszty?' (Are there any Germans here?), he asked. We explained to him in despair that there were none; there were only civilians there, so he did not throw the hand-grenade in. It was our good luck; otherwise we would all have died there. Then I also remember that we came up from the shelter and looked towards the Simárd and I could hardly see the ground for the Russians. They were as many as ants. And then I drew water from the well in Babus's yard for the Russians soldiers for at least one hour, because they were just coming and coming. They were all thirsty and they all had a strong palinka smell. Then I went over to Pista."

"Do you remember? There was a Russian who was chasing women."

Pista Simon: "Yes, things like that happened, but suddenly one of their officers came…"

"This officer came on horseback, he could have been a GPU, and he stopped right in the yard," continues József Molnár. "The Russian chap, noticing the officer, ran away towards the garden like a shot. At that time I saw – the front of the Russians had already reached the village – that from the direction of the trenches 20-30 Hungarian soldiers were approaching towards the straw-stacks which were on the common corn-floor. They were coming without guns, but I do not remember whether they were escorted by the Russians. At

that exact moment a rifle started to shoot at them from one of the farther straw-stacks - there could have been Germans or Russians hiding there. They hid themselves next to the straw-stacks."

"What happened to them and the Germans?"

"I don't remember now what happened to the Hungarians, probably they were captured, if they had not been captives before. The Germans were escaping and running but the Russians shot them. They did not surrender themselves."

István Simon: "I do not remember that, but they could have been Germans, because there were German soldiers there even on that day. He was dead, we took his boots off."

József Molnár: "Yes, yes, that's right. I put on those boots instead of my bad shoes. They were big, but later they prevented me from being taken to the 'Gulág'. I'll tell you about it later. There were some dead German there; the Russians took their boots off and turned their pockets out."

István Simon: "Later, the Germans were collected. They could have been about eight. But Russian corpses were even more numerous, mostly in front of the approach trenches. On the previous days many Russian soldiers had fallen here, both by day and at night when they wanted to come into the village. The Germans let them come close, and then they chased them with hand grenades and other different weapons. The Russians took their fallen and injured soldiers along. Yet we found about forty soldiers here and there in the fields in January when we had to collect bodies and put them on carts so that they could be buried in a common grave in Epreskert. Those Germans who survived and stayed in the village withstood the attacks. The Russians were able to reach the frontline between the two churches at about noon."

Andor Fodor (a resident of Zsolca lived in the USA) writes:

"Some German trucks – with open tops – came back from the direction of the palace shortly after noon; meanwhile I saw two Russian soldiers at the corner of Bialkó's barn. It could have happened that a German soldier was shot at the northern corner of Cservenyáks' barn. He is buried in a four-meter-deep hole near the barn, which was on the neighbor's land.

"We were waiting in the cellar for the fading of the rifle-fire. For a while, in front of the entrance of the cellar, Russian soldiers were talking about grenades. My father went out and he also stayed there.

"A Russian soldier came down to us looking for a 'Nyemszky soldat' (German soldier) and leveled a pistol at me because I was the first standing opposite the door of the cellar.

"I stood up, he scanned me from head to foot. Then, as grandmother Cservenyák, gathering all her 'tót' (Slovak) knowledge said in desperation:

"'He is my grandson and he is a schoolboy.' It appeared to be enough to spare my life."

This sequence of events is well rounded off by two statements that were given independently of each other, but in concert, by Andor Mátyás (who lived at that time opposite the kindergarten in Szent István Street) and by Elemér Halász (who used to live in Szent István Street, and who now lives in the USA, in Seattle):

"A German soldier was lying flat on one side of the street, half-way along St. István Street opposite the kindergarten, and with his gun he held the whole Főutca (Main Street) under fire up to the Kastély (Palace). He was still firing when the Russians were already in line with him in the gardens of the Bialkós and Cservenyáks)"

"There I saw 25-30 soldiers," says A. Mátyus, "when the German soldier was moving from the street through the gardens. I could not follow him with my eyes, from the place

where we were hiding – but of all the continuous battle noise, we heard the shooting and shouting coming nearer. Later we saw the corpse of the German soldier near the barn so I think it could be the same person who had been lying firing with his gun in the street. The noise had barely subsided near us, when a German armored tank rattled from the Vám towards the Kastély; but it did not go up there: it stopped near the village hall in front of the Lusztig house. Soldiers jumped off it and hooked up the German cannon left there without a tractor, and they rattled back to Vám. It was surprising that they were moving 200-300 meters on terrain close to where Russian soldiers might be in the gardens."

According to Andor Mátyás's memory, in a little while the Russian soldiers drew a smaller cannon into Fő utca (Main Street), they turned its barrel towards the Vám but they didn't fire from here. It could have been 2 p.m. when the Russians appeared in the Vám, too.

Lajos Fodor talked about it: "The two German tanks stopped in the street in front of the houses and with their barrels they fired towards the gardens. It could have been 2 o'clock when the two tanks passed through the village towards Miskolc on the Boldva Bridge. Soon after this they blew the bridge up."

The Russians reached Szilvások at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, at least the part where we (the author's family) and others, about thirty people, were crowded in Pali Horváth's cellar. The Germans were firing from the two big rocket launchers which were right behind the house. In the morning a shell blew up very close to them during the gunfire; it knocked over the two artillery pieces, but did not do much harm to them. There were no commanders near them. Then they were just lined up and they were made to work until the afternoon. It could have been about 3 o'clock when the explosions were

over and the commanders, whom we knew to be Austrians, quickly left.

We children saw it very well through the window of the cellar. They loaded the two small vans with their accoutrements, hooked up the two rocket launchers and started off for Nagyszilvás through the gardens.

They would have made a move, but the two vans could not get a grip on the sodden, muddy ground. Therefore they quickly threw off everything, thinking they would come back for it later. They leaned against the van with their shoulders and agonizingly they pushed the vehicles, which held the rocket launchers, through the muddy gardens.

As there was silence nearby, it was only from a distance that the crackling sound of the Sten guns could be heard. We children, young boys (Gyula Tóth, who was a bit older, Imre Márton, me and perhaps Andor Lénárt too) clambered out from the cellar to the yard. We could see from here, between the houses, the gardens, and the meadows, where the Platthy kindergarten is now. What we saw was astonishing. That picture can never be forgotten. On that patch of ground, beside which we could see a little streak of the garden, and the meadow from between the two houses where the football pitch is today, moved thousands and thousands of pike-gray-clothed figures. Next to each other and one after the other they went, and the Sten guns of those who stood in the front lines went on for hours. We ran down into the cellar, terrified that the Russians were there! But we had to wait tensely for a long time, perhaps a quarter of an hour, before we could hear stamping in the yard. They stopped in front of the entrance of the cellar and said something in a foreign language. The host, Pali Horváth, gathered all his language knowledge, which he got during his imprisonment in World War I, and tried to explain. Obviously, he said, there were no soldiers there, only civilians, women and children. Two Russian soldiers came

down, but they just looked around and they were off already. Then we watched, again from the cellar window, as they dismantled the German equipment left behind the house. They emptied the sacks, took out the breech plugs from the guns, etc. Not a long time had passed, but it was already getting dusk when Russian soldiers appeared in the cellar again. They brought in a telephone wire and a camp phone, into which then the signaler, who came along with them, kept shouting, repeating: 'Kafkáz, Kafkáz, Kafkáz!'[11]

It was evening already when they left and moved on. Everyone was relieved. We had gotten away with it; we had escaped – so we thought. I believed this was already the end of the war. We did not even guess that that night and the following few days we would really suffer the war. We still did not know at that time that they had already started from the southern part of the village; and that evening they carried on collecting the men and women together in order to 'give' them identity documents. That's what they made them believe.

At Wartime Work

However, this was what happened next. Those who were captured at the beginning by one of the supply systems were quite lucky. Though they had to build a bridge through the night and even the following day, dig bunkers or build emplacements, at least they were not at home, in the houses or in the cellars during the big 'collection'.

These are István Simon's and József Molnár's memories, which I left half finished after the discussion of the events in the morning of the first day. This is how they continued:

József Molnár: "It was late afternoon, not yet evening, three armed, young Russians collected us. Who? Almost all the

[11] "Kaukázus, Kaukázus" could have been what was meant

men who were at Sorik at that time. There were six of us. My brother, me, Józsi Mihály and his son, Jóska, who was about fifteen at that time, and Pista."

István Simon: "Yes, me and that Ruthenian boy as well, who worked with us in the garden during the summer, but he got stuck because of the fighting. His name was Marinkó, I think."

József Molnár: "Then we were led here, to the manor, the Millhouse. At the end of that, where usually the tobacco was knotted, a big camp kitchen was set up. Some food, potato and meat, was cooked. We were fed. We were hungry so we ate well. When we had finished, spades, hacksaws, axes, and saws were put into the hands of every one of us, and 'davaj' (come on) we were told. There was atrocious mud and I could hardly lift my feet in those huge boots we took off the German soldiers. But we were marching through everything: gardens, the village, and two gardens of Szilvás. We were following a telephone wire, which a Russian soldier held in his hand, all the time.

"We crossed the Boldva after we had passed the neighboring village, Arnót, then we reached the boundary of Miskolc, next to the Sajó River. It was a dark evening. We were afraid, because the tracer shells were bursting near us. That evening, there was great cheering and firing in Arnót, which we had passed, as far as the town farms and the haystacks, where the gravel-pits are now. We stumbled along a row of acacias, which ran parallel with a ditch. Suddenly, the Germans began to shoot at us, from a hill in Miskolc called Puskaporos, or at least at the place where we were going. The ground was covered with mud and water, but we and the Russians threw ourselves down on it. When the attack was over, all of us ran back into the ditch at the acacia grove. We took a rest there and we decided that we wouldn't go any farther.

"But what did they take us for?

"The three Russians stood up and said 'davaj,' meaning 'come on.'

"We were unwilling to go on, but immediately they leveled their machine guns at us, so we had to go on. We passed Arnót and reached the Sajó River. We were at the front line, above Miskolc, on this side of the Sajó. Then the Russians showed us what we had to do. There was a ditch and there were acacia groves on its both sides. We had to dig a bunker in it. It had to be as big as a room. According to Pista Simon, that was the general headquarters because the telephone line was installed in it. We chopped more than ten thick acacias down to cover the bunker with wood and soil. We believed that we had finished, but we had to bring some straw from the haystack. Around us the Russian soldiers were lying in the gun pit which was dug into the earth. The haystacks were on the other side, beyond the line, on no man's land.

"It seemed in the darkness that the Germans were shooting at them with tracer shells again and again. No one was willing to go there. But the Russkies were quarrelling about who would come with us.

"Pista Simon translated this for us; he could understand their language because he was Bulgarian. Józsi Mihály collapsed; he was anxious about himself and his son's life. He withdrew to the bunker and cried; he repeated again and again that he wouldn't go anywhere. Everyone was afraid, the Russians were afraid as well. First he urged my brother, then Józsi Molnar spoke to me - he remembered – 'Young man, you haven't got a family yet.' So I went with one of the Russians. We brought straw, as much as we could carry in two folded canvas tents. We escaped luckily, but while we were away, those who were in the ditch almost died."

"Yes, because the Germans from the hills in Miskolc aimed their mortars at the ditch," István Simon continued. "The

first scored a hit right next to us, but we didn't wait for the next one. We and the Russians withdrew to the bunker. It was a huge bunker."

"Day was breaking when we covered the bunker with straw," continued József Molnár, "and then we and the Russians, scared out of our wits, noticed that a group not far from us was arming a military boat. 'How did they get there?'[12] we asked ourselves. Our companions didn't like it, either. If the Germans recognized that they were preparing to cross the river, there would have been big trouble. Then our companions hastened to leave. We hurried with them, hoping that, if possible, we might run home; it was about four kilometers. It was morning when we caught sight of our village."

"So, you survived military service luckily," I was bringing the discussion to an end.

"Yes," answered József Molnár, "but the greatest good fortune came after that. When we arrived home, our house was full of Russians. In the evening they quartered themselves there; they were sleeping. We were very tired and exhausted.

"My brother pulled himself up to the attic, but my legs hurt a lot, because the big German boots had blistered them. They bled, too. Two older Russian soldiers helped me to ease the pain in my legs. I explained to them where I had been, what I had done. I saw that they were sorry for me. I lay on their place, on the straw.

"'Let's go!' they ordered me. But the two old men spoke up for me, arguing with the officer. I didn't know what they were saying exactly, but it was enough for them to leave me there. I found out only later that these people, or others like them, had assembled the men to be interrogated that morning."

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[12] We know from Lajos Fodor that on the first evening, coming from Simárd on the Sorik, on the Roman Street, the Russians were carrying camouflaged boats through the village. If that was true, certainly they had been transferred from the Hernád River to the Sajó at Arnót.

What happened to the two boys (József Molnár and István Simon) wasn't unique. Their memories feature here because they gave me the most detailed and vivid account of the war work, and the same things happened to both of them. Now they brush up their memories, and complete their account of the things that happened fifty years ago.

At the same time and also in the following days, a lot of other men and women (!) were assembled and taken away to do war work in the immediate vicinity. It is possible to estimate the number of the people taken away. Some of those who were displaced (András Mátyus, András Fodor, József Kassai, Ferenc Kemény) said that on the day before assembling they were forced to work with others. We know that, for example, on the second day and night there were 10-15 men from Felsőzsolca and 8-10 women (Aunt Seregélyes, Mrs. András Fehér and others) who worked hard on a bridge, which was near the destroyed one, and which was made of poles cut down from the streets of the village, waist-wide branches of trees and stones.

This wasn't simply cruelty, but also gross injustice. International agreements, including the convention signed in The Hague in 1907, make this quite clear:

> *The inhabitants and belligerents remain under the protection of international law, which comes from the customs, humanitarian policies and requirements of conscience* that were established by the civilized nations. (12)

The agreement signed in 1929 in Geneva makes arrangements for the treatment of civilian inhabitants and prohibits their being coerced into fighting.

What we didn't mention

We cannot avoid speaking about the violence done to the women living in our village by the Russian soldiers. Besides the uprooting of people, this cruelty threatened the village with the greatest degradation and anguish. There were those things about which no one was allowed to speak, and not only for political reasons. In the nature of things, I will not recount concrete events, not even without mentioning their names. We have to respect the memory of those who were violated and degraded, the majority of whom died.

I have to say this to those grandchildren and readers from a later time who have doubts enough without reading about concrete incidents with names. In my book *The History of Felsőzsolca* I wrote only one sentence about it: "The Soviet soldiers committed 6-8 atrocities that cannot be talked about and then forgotten."(13). I have to amend this number in this book, because these incidents were only those that were known to me in the circumstances of the war. Since then I have gathered a lot of information which compels us to say that the number of violated and degraded women from Felsőzsolca was much higher. There were more than one hundred people who suffered this persecution, but because of their good fortune, or resolution or other circumstances, escaped the worst of it uninjured. As a matter of fact the trick the Russians played was that they went to each house with a pocketknife and a potato, and with this they showed the women whom they had assembled that they were there to peel the potatoes. To get their trust they assembled four or five women, in some cases they allowed them to be accompanied by their relatives, or by two or three children, until they arrived at an empty house in the darkness of night, then they let the crying and threatening relatives run away, only one or two having to go in the house. And some of these managed to escape at the door or through a

window from the house or shed. Others did not. And this continued for days and weeks. Later, those Romanian soldiers who went missing from their platoons also committed such violations.

We know that on the first night of liberation armed Russian soldiers withdrew to the cellars and in that place, at the entrance of the cellar, in front of everyone committed sexual assault. Right beside a father's dead body, four Russian soldiers raped a miserable orphan girl. There were several other brutal cases besides this.

That's why excuses of the sort that can be heard nowadays are unacceptable: "It happens in every war."

It is not true! On the one hand, it's true that sexual assaults were committed against women, not only in war but during peacetime; on the other hand, so unhindered, and in such large numbers as in the case of the Soviet soldiers, there hasn't been even one example in Europe in the last two centuries. We did not hear a single word like this either about the British or the American troops fighting in Europe - not a single reference. Although in the case of German soldiers there was some testimony to this effect, it didn't involve masses of Polish, French, or Soviet women being raped.

In Hungary, in 1944, when they were here as occupiers and fought here, this charge wasn't even mentioned. Let's stick with our village, from where we have the largest amount of information. In addition to the violence of the Russians, we know about that of the Romanians.

In 1919, when Czech troops occupied us – not in a friendly way – and fought in the vicinity of the village, there wasn't any document or memory relating to such charges. We know that the Czarist Russian troops, in 1849, robbed and burned down the village but there's no information about the Czarist soldiers behaving like this with women or civilians. We have got to go back to "Turkish times" to find behavior similar

to that of the Red Army. The Turks had everything under one roof: food, prisoners of war, civilian men, women and took them away to the middle of their country for slave-work. The Muslim Turks killed us as "infidels" because they had another culture, sociological structure, religion and moral beliefs.

Maybe that is the answer to the behavior of the Russians? Their thinking and morals were not European.

The Age of Big Lies

German troops blew up the two bridges in the village: the bridge carrying the railway from Sátoraljaújhely and Kassa to Miskolc and the very old stone bridge, better known as Boldva Bridge. They demolished the Sajó Bridge between Miskolc and Zsolca, but this wasn't in our district. Probably the Germans' destruction of bridges caused more damage than the loss of the village to Soviet troops during and after the war. Yet the latter touched the people more deeply because the Russians caused a great deal of damage to houses and personal property.

According to the contemporary registry of the village, this damage (damage to buildings, lost or stolen animals) should have been reported to the chief constable's office by the leaders of the village. (91/1945. I…24 issue) Unfortunately the file itself, or the copy of it, is not to be found either at the village library or at the chief constable's office library. This is a pity because with this information we should have had an idea of the damage (thousands of damaged buildings, dead animals, pigs, horses, cows and the food consumed), but there wasn't any compensation.

When the battlefield moved, the Red Army's commanders regularly – and now in a formal way – held the village to ransom. A few months later, in the village's registry, we can find references verifying this fact.

Collecting foodstuffs. Collecting foodstuffs for the Russian base hospital of Miskolc. Catering for the Russian army. Catering for the Hungarian prison camp in the village, etc.

But this is just one part of it. There is nowhere any talk of the destruction and damage to personal wealth, houses and equipment by the Russians. (In everyday language it was called looting, with the help of the Russian word known then). The forward troops were followed by thousands of carts and horses which covered the whole village, and when they went on after one or two days, their places were taken by newcomers. The gardens and yards were full of fodder. Hay and straw filled table drawers and wardrobes thrown out of houses, the animals scattered half the crops and the flowers in full bloom. They were not spared because there were a lot of them at that time.

It seemed that there was no solution to the problem of catering to Russian troops. Every smaller unit catered for itself and cooked for itself, of course from foodstuffs which were found locally. They ate everything up. The hidden and buried food reserves were also discovered. The furniture and fences were smashed and cut, and they cooked and heated with them (For example, they made the obelisk for their common grave in Epreskert from the furniture of the neighboring house). They took everything they wanted. They put the things which were worth something to them on the cart: vessels, shoes, tools, and the alarm clocks, too. This looting lasted for days in the whole village and especially in those houses where the tenants were not at home. And they carried it out on their own initiative. Not only did they immediately start assembling people able to work, who were immediately led away, but at the same time they called upon the inhabitants to leave the village at once, because there would be a great battle soon. On the first day, people in cellars were called upon to evacuate to another part

of the village. Hundreds of frightened people, mainly women and children, left the village on foot to seek shelter in Alsózsolca and in Sajólád. What was the reason for this? What was the main aim of it? Why were only the people from Felsőzsolca evicted? For it was not done in the countryside, in Alsózsolca, Arnót, or Onga. The Russians would not have known that opposed to them now there were only weak German troops stationed in Miskolc. And how could they cross the exposed bridges if they could not get there with heavy weapons?

(According to the writings of a team called the Mokán-komité in Diósgyőr in Miskolc, they had been in touch with the Russian headquarters since 20th November and they gave them the exact placing of German units and guns in Miskolc which were drawn on the map. On the basis of this the Russians fired on the area. The power of the Germans can be deduced from this. But Captain K. Ott, who was caught in Hejőcsaba, told them that in that area of Hejőcsba-Szirma only his reduced battalion of about 3000 people protected Miskolc. (According to József Borus)

It may be concluded that the civilian population was removed from the village not out of any fear of a major battle.

The German destruction of bridges was meaningless; it was of little tactical significance in the end. It simply meant that the Russians captured the city not on 29th November as they had planned, but four days later. If we can speak about any advantage in connection with the destruction at all then the demolition of the two bridges was good only for the population of Miskolc and the city, in that the 25-30,000 Soviet forces advancing in the area of Zsolca did not reach them in the middle of the fighting, so their houses were not set on fire, and they escaped from the atrocities and violence that accompanied

the battle. What happened to Miskolc? It was quite different from what was said in the communiqués. We have to speak about Miskolc and its liberation not just because the fighting in Zsolca was for Miskolc and the roads leading to Miskolc, but because the accounts of the capture of the city and the reports of fighting help to explain why almost 200 men from Zsolca were thrown into captivity.

The Russian unit that had seized Felsőzsolca by the evening of 29th November 1944 was proceeding on the left bank of the Sajó River alongside the road leading to Edelény.

On the night of 29th November and during the day on the 30th, they seized Arnót, but with this the offensive came to a standstill. This was certainly not what the commander in charge of the front had assigned to them to do.

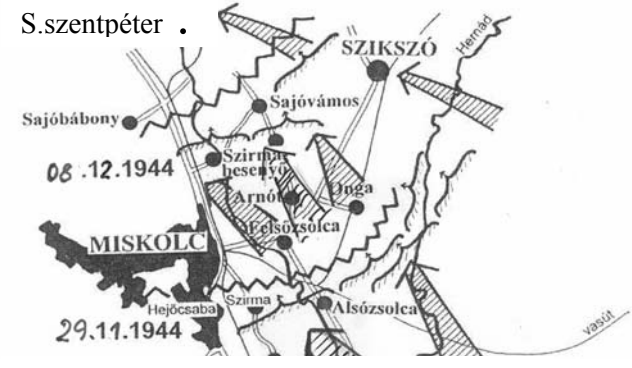
> *(As early as 26th November the unit received the order to reach the region of Alacska, Sajószentpéter and Sajóvámos by 30th November during the course of the offensive to be initiated on the 29th. With this operation they would have been able to surround the German forces positioned in Miskolc. Finally they managed to occupy Alacska and Sajóvámos on 11th December and take Sajószentpéter and Varbó on the 12th)*

The occupation of Felsőzsolca and Arnót provided an opportunity for the Russian forces to reach the Sajó River at Szirmabesenyő and to prepare to cross the river there. Afterwards, they were able to block the railway line connecting Miskolc, Sajószentpéter and Ózd. (As mentioned earlier in the recollections of József Molnár and István Simon, civilians from Zsolca also participated in these preparations under orders from the Russians.)

Russian forces had been present since 20th November to the south of Miskolc around Szirma and Hejőcsaba, and

smaller scouting forces (160 strong altogether) appeared from the direction of Emőd, Kisgyőr and Tapolca on the edges of Diósgyőr (Tatárdomb). These forces threatened the road to Eger (Eger was seized by the Russians on the 30th anyway), but the occupation of the road connecting Sajószentpéter and Ózd would have meant that the Germans were trapped in the town.

Seeing this, the headquarters decided to remove its forces from the whole area of the town and its neighborhood through the 'gate of Sajószentpéter' on the night of 2nd December (the next day a smaller German unit left Diósgyőr, which was a separate town from both a territorial and an administrative point of view, going through Parasznya)(14)



Attacks after 29. Nov. 1944

On Sunday, 3rd December the Russians saw that were no Germans remaining in the town. First their scouting units and later, at around 9 a.m., the tanks rolled into the city of Miskolc which was occupied without a shot being fired. On the same day (3rd December) the Russians took Szirmabesenyő as well. Finally they reached the road leading to Sajószentpéter, but by that time there were no Germans 'within the circle.'

It is rather interesting that if the German forces, which were outnumbered by the Russians fighting in the area, had wanted to keep Miskolc at all costs, the city would have had to undergo the same suffering that was experienced during the siege of Budapest. Fortunately this did not take place.

But what do the bulletins, and the recollections of the commanders have to say concerning the 'situation in Miskolc'? General Friessner, the Commander-in-Chief of the Southern Army, presents the following excuse for giving up Miskolc without resistance:

> *There were 20,000 rebellious workers in the industrial town, while the fighting was raging in front of the gates and the soldiers of our allies, most of whom were workers as well, were risking their lives. The workers of Miskolc presented a menacing attitude towards the army.....In the industrial town the army had a number of armories. Some of the workpeople rose up in revolt against us.....*

But from our point of view the Soviet routine order issued in Moscow, signed by Stalin himself, is of more interest. It states that on 3rd December:

> *The 2nd Ukrainian Army of Marshal Malinovskiy has taken Miskolc by force; this was an important centre of the Hungarian wartime industry supplying the German and the Hungarian Army. The Germans did all they could in their defense. They even decided to arm the workers of the town, who later deserted the Germans, taking their weapons and joining the ranks of the Red Army.*

This routine order was published in the *Néplap* of Debrecen on 5th December, alongside an elevating editorial about the glorious victory, praising the example set by the workers armed by the Germans who decided to join the Red Army:

I. évfolyam, 10. szám — Ára 30 fillér — 1944 december 5. kedd

NÉPLAP

DEMOKRATIKUS NAPILAP

Miskolc példája

Malinovszki hadserege rohammal elfoglalta Miskolcot

Elesett Sátoraljaújhely, Dunaföldvár, Tamási és Baranya-szentlőrinc

Összeomlott a német védelem Budapesttől délnyugatra -- Az amerikai csapatok átlépték a Saart

Dalmáciában

Jugoszláv

A nyugati hadszintéren

A dunántúli arcvonalon

Az elzászi arcvonalon

A középső rajnai arcvonalon

Az 1944. december 5-i Debreceni Néplap tudósítása

"Disgusting, evil hands distributed guns in vain. The workers did not defend with their own blood their deceitful overbearing masters, the Nazi army fighting in its last agony…The workers of Miskolc have got rid of the shackles of

fear. They have turned the guns on their masters and so hastened the end," writes the *Néplap* enthusiastically.

It is appalling what absurdities are being uncovered in these formal or semi-formal reports. Let us think it over. There were 20,000 armed workers in Miskolc, most of whom worked in the gun factory and they were – according to the Soviets – armed by the Germans. The Soviets state that even though these workers took part in the fighting against the Russians, they nevertheless decided to join the Soviet forces. Despite all this, or maybe because of this, Miskolc had to be taken by force.

The sad thing is that all these falsehoods and lies were transferred uncritically to the writings and books produced in subsequent years that related the military maneuvers in Northern Hungary and the 'liberation'; even our history books mention the presence of an armed resistance in Miskolc.[13]

But why did the Russians come up with such wild absurdities?

We saw that the Germans, Friessner and his group, were thus trying to justify their own behavior. And the Soviets did the same. It is obvious that the headquarters in Moscow issued its reports and its orders on the basis of those reports received from the commanders in charge of those combat troops and scouts. The commanders of these troops were motivated to represent more and more heroic acts, and they were also obliged to explain the stalling of the offensives in the region and the slow progress they had made.

And the resistance being strong, they had to prove it with the large number of hostile forces who were captured.

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[13] See József Borus' study published in Borsodi Szemle. These are published in a representative book under the supervision of the County Council, which contains the history of B.-A.-Z. county in the modern age.

Admittedly this was one of the reasons, probably the most important one of all, for the *'capture'* of almost 200 men in Felsőzsolca during the siege of Miskolc. One cannot help but think how curious it is that two propaganda and war machines as well established as those of the Germans and the Russians, which kept contradicting each other during the war, finally came to agree with each other (that there were thousands of armed workers in Miskolc who took part in the fighting.)

Is it sheer coincidence? Or did they just exaggerate unimportant events, which affected neither the outcome of the war nor the operations in the region, for the sake of their own interests?

What happened in fact was that in September, while the Russian forces were only engaged in Southern Hungary and at the foot of the Carpathians, a group of discontented workers organized an anti-war rally in Diósgyőr. According to contemporary sources, this event was attended by approximately 1500 to 2000 workers, who demanded peace and were shouting anti-war slogans. And that was it! Then later, in the course of October and November, they did actually try to prevent the machinery from being taken away to Germany, but not by means of guns. What they did was slow down, or 'sabotage' operations.

At this time only a few thousand people worked in the factory, this number decreasing to a few hundred by the end of November. Simultaneously, in October, 12-15 people met in a wine-cellar and decided to form the Mokán-Komite, obtain weapons and help the Soviet troops. Finding weapons at that time was not a difficult issue; it was not necessary to go to the gun-factory for them. Weapons that were lost or left behind

marked the way of the Hungarian forces in retreat all over the area.

This group of 10-15 people increased in number to 80-90 by the end of November, but only about twenty of them took an active role in the resistance. Their most important achievement was that around the middle of November, they contacted the Soviet vanguards appearing at the edges of Diósgyőr advancing from the direction of Tapolca and Kisgyőr and they visited them on a regular basis.

Upon request they showed where the German command posts and artillery units were positioned on the map. Allegedly they managed to prevent the detonation of two bridges in the town, and what was even more significant is that at the end of November, and during the first days of December, they printed handbills at the Fekete print shop in town, and they covered Diósgyőr and Miskolc with graffiti against the Germans and the Hungarian Nazis.

This was significant in that they gave rise to the belief among the inhabitants and among the Germans that there was some kind of very important resistance there.

But they never, not even once, fought against the Germans with weapons. While doing their illegal work, though, two of them were injured: one of them was shot by the Germans near the position of the Russians, the other (Lajos Szabó) was seriously injured by a Soviet mine while he was riding his bike quickly to Felsőzsolca.[14]

In the end they lost two people. But not while they were fighting against the Germans. One of their leaders, Ferenc

[14] The ''Resistance of Miskolc'', the activity of MOKÁN has been written up by a lot of authors in different books and studies. From among them the most reliable and the most objective is the book entitled 'Resistance at the foot of Avas' by Fekete Mihály. I regard his data and statements as authentic.

Barbai (today a street in Miskolc is named after him), was captured in the street after the Russians entered; he had no gun on him, and he was shot in the yard of a house. The other leader died in Budapest on 9th May; they say it happened accidentally while he was fighting. (17)

That was all that there was to the story that was included in the Soviet communiqué, which they exaggerated enormously. The members of the MOKÁN-Committee possessed identity cards they had made themselves, but after meeting Soviet scouts, identity documents made by the Russian commanders were made available for their own members in order to protect them from what happened to Ferenc Barbai later. (17)

This is what must have given the idea to the Soviets, according to János Bárczy, that under cover of giving documents, they could persuade people, soldiers, and civilians to leave their villages – even in Transdanubia – with the excuse that they were taking them to medical examination centers. "It is just administration.

We will just check your identity, and make out the document of your discharge. Those who have 'documents' can go freely anywhere they want," they said. (18)

Many of them believed it. (19)

III. The Innocent Ones

As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, almost 200 male civilians who had been collected and taken away as prisoners of war from Felsőzsolca right after the battles by the Russians, met this fate because the officers and commanders of the Red Army wanted to use them to enhance and validate their military success. The fact that the inhabitants were taken away, that civilians (men and women) were made use of for military work right at the front line, that women were raped, is unforgivable, yet it is understandable, given that war is uncivilized, that civilians should have been taken captive like slaves or hostages.

We couldn't speak about it for four decades. The correct thing to do was to be as silent as the grave. Since we were short of information, we supposed that everybody thought that this 'Zsolca-case' was unique; it was only the fault of the commanders of the units fighting here. We knew that one or two months after the fighting was over, the German-speaking (but Hungarian!) people were gathered from the area and taken to the Soviet Union for 'a little forced labor.' But it was not correct to talk about it and we did not know much about it. Only now, almost fifty years after the events, when political pressure and fear have eased, have newspaper articles, essays, and books about it been published. From these it emerges that in January – before the deportation of the German-speakers – during the battles in the Trans-Tisza region, Northern Hungary and Sub-Carpathia, the Russians regularly took captives. But they did this elsewhere in the country, too. We know from still very incomplete data that the number of those Hungarians who were captured during and after the battles in the country, might be about 250,000. The majority of this large number were civilians, who were gathered from the streets. (19)

Some data: in Nyíregyháza 2000 male civilians were captured on 2nd November. The 27th Army, which occupied Zsolca and later fought in the valley of Boldva and Sajó, often used this method of cowing the population. From Csermely – a village near Ózd – 45 males were carried off on 26 December and a further 30-35 from the villages of Kelemér and Serényfalva. (20)

And there were even more from the Hungarian villages which today belong to Slovakia. From Abafalva – which is near Bánréve – 65 people, from Vámosbalog (Velky Blh) 200 people were deported, but it also happened in some other Hungarian villages: Sajószentkirály, Tornaalja, Sajólenke, Kövecses and Hubó.

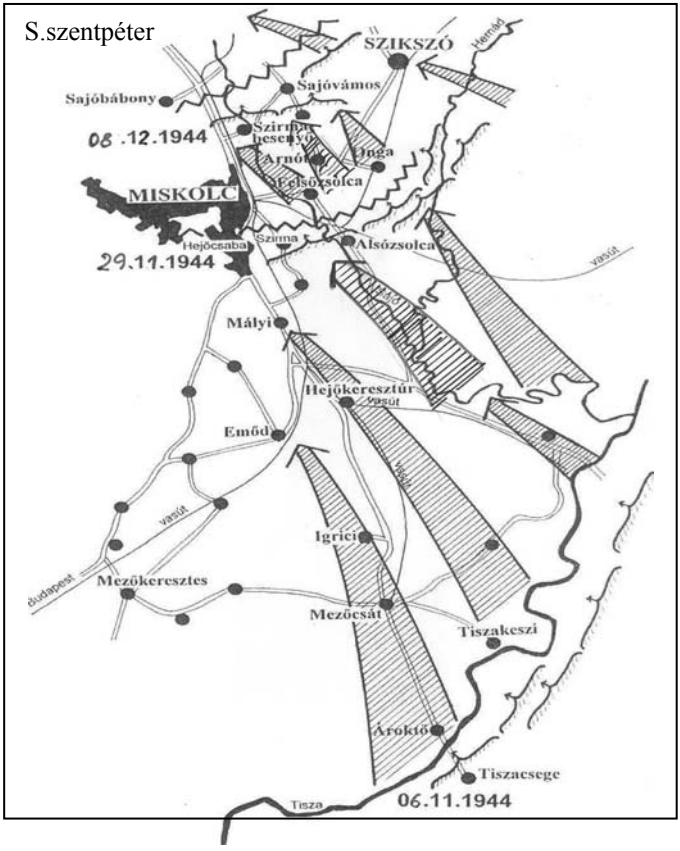
Here is a revealing boast about Borsod, which was published in the 27th June 1946 issue of a Hungarian paper. With the help of the Hungarian Communist Party *"40,000 civilian prisoners of war from the region of Miskolc have arrived from the Soviet Union"* (my italics – S. Zs.) (21)

These shocking numbers – even if we include the German–speakers – preclude the possibility that this was the fault of only a few officers. These numbers indicate that we can talk about the ideological actions of the Soviet army, supported by high-level politics. Despite the claims by the Soviet leadership and the front commander Malinovszkij that it was the military situation that had brought them to Hungary, that nobody should be afraid because everything would be fine, that everyone could begin working without fear, and that offices could also begin to function, etc., the truth was that the Red Army was following Stalin's guidelines – and this was revealed in Molotov's 17 June 1943 letter, written to the British Foreign Secretary:

> *The Soviet government thinks that for the help which was given to Germany by Hungary, the responsibility should be taken not only by the Hungarian government*

but to a lesser or higher degree, the common people, too. (22)

Molotov had forgotten that he himself had suggested that Hungary join the war in 1940 under the terms of the German-Soviet agreement. With these two nations we were supposed to attack Romania: we would get Transylvania back and those two would get Bessarabia back from Romania. In this case, giving 'military help' wouldn't have been a crime leading to revenge.



Russian military operations in the vicinity of Miskolc 06. 11. − 08. 12. 1944.

Prisoners of war in civilian life

Later on I'll try to clear up the issue of deportation, relying on the memories of those living POWs I could get in touch with and the memories of relatives dead POWs. Reading these lines, many of those carried off will probably be surprised by some facts brought to the surface, facts which were previously unknown. I met some POWs on 21 June 1994 to follow the road to Debrecen by car which they had taken on foot fifty years before, in 1944; I was surprised, and some of the prisoners of war, too, when it came to light at our departure that they had not been captured at the same time. On this basis, I record their memories in groups in chronological order.

Group 1

I'm talking with Andor Csarni, and I ask him how he remembers the time when the Russians reached Kisszilvás (Petőfi Street) where his house was and how the people were collected.

"As far as I remember, it was late afternoon. It was so long ago and I was just fifteen. My memories have faded. We were in our cellar and as far as I remember, our neighbors, the Jeneis were there, too. It was late evening when two Russians came down there.

"I can assure you that it was late in the evening. I know that we were in Pali Horváth's cellar, almost opposite yours at the other side of the street. I remember it was getting dark when the Russians arrived and many hours had passed and a lot of things had happened before the two young Russian officers came down into our cellar. Earlier, a young woman living in Zsolca ran through the gardens from the neighboring street and told us in a weeping voice what had happened to her and about her escape. She hid among us but everybody was afraid that they would come for the women so, though there were about

twenty of us, we kept silent so as not to be noticed. When the two officers came, we thought they wanted to collect the women but they looked and pointed at us with their electric torches and showed with their hands who had to join them. They picked men only. We were relieved, especially as the host, Pali Horváth, used his knowledge of Russian from World War I and tried to translate the Russian words: 'You have got to go for certificates and documents.' Of course, Horváth was taken away too with my father, Sándor Zsiros, the neighbors Józsi Márton and, if I remember right, Lénárt and the young Gyula Tóth, who was only around 20. They all went.

"From our company, my father, András Csarni, Pista Jenei and I had to join the officers. First, the destination was in the same street (Kisszilvás), to Józsi M.Tóth's house. We were in the stable. Others from the same streets were brought here and when a large number of people were gathered, we were escorted through the gardens and beside the barns to the Roman Catholic church, and into András Tóth's house. We spent the night there; there were about forty of us. Till that time we hadn't been guarded too strictly, but why should we have been, as we all hoped for documents that would give us safe passage.

"The following morning four armed Russian soldiers came and escorted us towards Alsózsolca. But at that point we didn't expect the worst."

Mrs. Lajos Ligetvári (widow):

"It was 5 p.m. when the Russians reached us. Sounds of a gunfight could be heard from the direction of Simrád, sometimes from a short distance, from the Kispart, sometimes from afar, but it was 5 o'clock when they came into the center of Szilvás, where we lived. My father, József Lúci, understood their language, because he had been in Russian captivity for three years. He talked to them, then two Russian soldiers came down shortly with my father to the cellar where we were, and

they told the men to go with them, because – as my father translated – they would get a certificate. They went with them. I never saw my husband again, and it was only after several months that I saw my father again. He returned from Focsani some time in February as an old, very ill man. He was 51 years old, and my husband, Lajos Ligetvári, was only 33 years old. I was left with my old mother, 15-year-old son, and I was two months pregnant with my daughter. [15]

"When my father came back, he told us that first they were taken to Jóska M. Tóth's house. They were there for a while, as men were gathered together, then they were taken to the Roman Catholic church. From there they were taken to Z. Tóth's house, but I can't remember now how long they were in the yard.

"Do you remember who was taken from here, from the neighborhood, on that evening?" I ask.

"From the house opposite ours they took Imre Varga and his son, but they also took Balázs and Jóska Németh, but they managed to escape in time."

István Kalas:

"We lived here in Hunyadi Street at that time too, but when there was a lot of shooting, we went to Kisszilvás, to the Ritter house nearby. In the cellar there were a lot of people. The Stibers and others. It was about 4 p.m. when they came in, and they took us from here later that evening. Three Russians came down and said: 'Cselovek jeszt?' (Are there any men here?) Well, we were there, weren't we? 'Davaj dokument

[15] Lajos Ligetvári died in the middle of January in Focsani because of the terrible circumstances. So she brought up and educated her children, János and the late Mária, in great poverty. Marika, Mrs. János Cservenyák, who never saw her father, became an excellent colleague of mine. Unfortunately, she died young while giving birth to her second daughter, so her daughter never knew her either, and was brought up by her grandmother, Herminka, who suffered a lot.

polcsaszet!' (Come to get a certificate, you'll be back in a half an hour.) So we went."

"Who was taken from that cellar?"

"Wait a minute, they took Jani Stiber, and maybe Sanyi Franczúz too, who later died. We went next to the Roman Catholic church, and we were in Andris Tóth's house. Then we went together. We went with them, because we thought that if we had a certificate, we would walk in the street peacefully, we wouldn't be afraid."

Ferenc Kemény:

"I was born in Gombos, which is now called Bogojevó in Yugoslavia. It is a village at the riverside of the Danube. I went to elementary school there. We learnt the Serbian language. Then I went to school in Muzsák, which is a small ethnic German town, but you had to speak Serbian there too, whether you liked it or not. There was a time when we could only speak this language even during the breaks. Therefore I knew the Serbian language perfectly, and when we got back, I was taken to the army, and I was transferred to the Don River. I easily became familiar with Russian.

"When I returned home from the front, I got to know my wife – my bride then – and I stayed here with her relatives in Felsőzsolca. I waited here for the front. When there were battles, we all lived in the first house in Nagyszilvás, at the Ludvigs'. It was afternoon when they came in there. I came out first, as I spoke Russian, but I brought the little Imre Ludvig in my arms, in order not to be picked on. They asked if there were Germans down there. I told them there weren't, we were all civilians. Then the whole group came up from the basement. Then they took me to work, to dig gun-emplacements."

"On that day?"

"Yes, because they collected the people the day after. Or, just wait a little, how was that? So much was happening in those days that I am not a hundred percent sure about the exact

dates. Perhaps that evening or even in the afternoon they took us to dig firing positions in Klusovszky's garden. They took lots of people from that street to the bridge or to dig firing positions. I remember when I came home they just wanted to take the women for 'potato-peeling.' The only reason that it did not happen was that – as I spoke Russian – I told them that I would tell their officers. Yes, I remember, then another Russian team came, but they weren't the frontline officers. Others. They told us to go and get certificates. Everyone would ask to see our papers, so they would give us new passes, some sort of identification cards, or passes that would give us freedom of movement. They told us that we could leave. I even helped them: I translated for everybody the order that we would have to go. We got to Laci Bujdos's, and from there they sent us to Kisszilvás. We were waiting in a house there, but as I only had a small coat, I asked the Russian soldiers to let me go home for a winter coat. I came through the gardens, but what I saw when I got home was that once again they wanted the women… I told them again I would report it to the officers, so they left swearing. The women were begging me to stay with them until the next day, as I spoke Russian. I stayed, so I went for the papers the next day, but by that time they had already left. I went after them to the Sorik, but I couldn't find them there either. I remember that rocket launchers were standing in a line on the hemp field."

András Fehér:

"It was about half past five on 29th November, when they collected us in Nagyszilvás. They took us to another street, probably to Bernát's house, then that evening next to the Roman Catholic church, then into Gyula Tornai's house, and after half an hour they drove us to András Tóth's house. After that through the courtyard of the Roman Catholic church to the courtyard of the Greek Catholic School. On 30th November they took us away from here. We just walked and walked."

Imre Kércsi:

"The Russians came at a quarter past three."

"Wait, Imre, you were a soldier, but you had already come home. But where were you at that time? In your parents' house in Nagyszilvás?"

"Yes, of course, as a civilian. I don't know what time it was, but they took me to Jani Pásztor's garden that afternoon, where we had to dig a cannon into the ground. We had finished by about half past eight, so I came home. Then came the Russians with a Ruthenian who spoke a little Hungarian, and told us to go to the headquarters in Mátyás Ujj's house in the other street to get a certificate. They took us through somewhere in Takács's garden. We found ourselves at last in Kisszilvás, in Józsi M.Tóth's cowshed. From there we were taken through the hemp field to the Római Street, first into Z. Tóth's barn. At that time the village was under German fire, and even the Russians were afraid, so we hid in András Tóth's house. I remember even there we could hear the clattering of the bullets on the roof tiles. Next morning – as Bandi Fehér has already said – we went to the Greek school. There we got some food – I don't know what, because we had no plates or spoons. Then they gave us a loaf of bread. At last I got some, and then I left for Alsózsolca."

Group 2

Andor Mátyus:

"I was collected on the second day for sure. On the first day I was only brought to Andor Tóth's; even Jani Cservenyák was there."

"Wait a minute. Where were you living at that time? At your parents' house?"

"Yes. Opposite the Greek Catholic chuch. I was brought from there to Andor Tóth's in the afternoon. The Russians reached our place during the battle at about noon."

"So, in the north part of the village, where the plum trees are, there was still gunfire when you were collected?"

"It could have been like that, but on the first afternoon I was just brought from Andor Tóth's to the Vám to clear away just one dead body, but the others had already done the job, so we returned with the Russians to Andor's. Then they came for me once more, this time to peel potatoes. I cannot say for sure about what time this happened, on the first day in the evening or the second day in the morning, but what is sure is that the second day I was peeling potatoes the whole morning with the others in the Swarc's house. This house was right opposite our house, next to the kindergarten. Berti Tóth was also there, the brother of Imre Tóth, just like others such as Jani Cservenyák, Andor Fodor, Géza Lukács, all the men from the neighborhood. Even Jóska Macsuga was there. At about noon a Russian soldier came for us, and took us to the house of Pali Pásztor. This house was also near, it was the fourth house from the Greek church, behind the house of Józsi Domonkos. We were waiting there, standing there for a while, then new men were brought here, men from Zsolca and even strangers. They seemed to be Labor Servicemen, Jews and a few men from Arnót, but we were all civilians. As soon as they arrived in the afternoon, we were forced to start to Alsózsolca."

Andor Fodor writes:

"After this, the officer and I went to the house of Pista Franczúz. Nobody was inside. He had a look and told me to go with him. He brought me to the kindergarten, where I had to peel potatoes, then a creole-faced soldier (aged 25-30) told me in Hungarian where to go for potatoes. Meanwhile I could hear the whiz and explosion of German artillery shells near and far. I followed his instructions and went for potatoes. I went through the yard of the kindergarten. Even the palings around the yard had been added to. I had to go to the house of Jóska Ádám Tóth; I had to pick up the sack of potatoes and return to

peel the potatoes. I talked to the creole. He told me that he was from Romania but could speak Hungarian and even French, that is why he translated for the Russians. At least twice I went for potatoes to Jóska A. Tóth, then a Russian soldier brought me to Pali Pásztor's garden, where there were at least seventy men, even my best friend Géza Lukács. When there were more than a hundred of us, we were forced to start for Alsózsolca, where they told us we would be given the documents that would set us free."

János Mezei:

"We were at my mother-in-law's, at the Vám. The Russians collected us there. They brought us to the house of Pali Pásztor. Then we went on foot to Debrecen. I went with the bigger group. Then we met at Igrici. I remember that on the way I was with Lénárt, Jóska Rigó, Miklós Szolga, the old Dobos, Imre Varga, Imre V. Tóth. Yes, and from Russia, Pista Lénárt and Balázs Balatoni."

Mrs Balatoni Balázs (Ilus Szabó, age 74):

At my request, she told me in July what she knew about her husband's deportation. They were living in Sorik, in Kossuth Street, but her husband was a soldier on the front line. When the front line reached the border of the village, they took shelter in the center of the village. They survived the fighting at their relatives' house, at János Domonkos', in a cellar opposite the castle. When the Russians arrived, they told them to leave, because they already knew that there would be heavy fighting there and they would die. So, they left everything and started out for Alsózsolca. Finally they settled with some friends at Sajólád. They were found here by her husband, who had escaped with lots of other people from Alsózsolca. So they all met up again.

They were together, but her husband couldn't keep still, and said he was going home to see the house and what was happening at home. He left and Ilus never saw him again and

knew nothing about him until Professor Sallay came home to her from Focsani in the spring of 1945; and he related that her husband had been caught somewhere here in the street near the Zsolca Station, and was forced to join the same 'prisoner-of-war' gang of which he, that is, István Sallay, was a member. This happened at least one week later – the deportation of the men of Zsolca. The husband died in a prison camp near Nikotovka, as Balázs Balatoni and then John Mezei related.

Imre Tóth:

"We lived at the Sorik, but during fighting at the front, we were staying in Római Street, almost opposite the church. We were staying at one of my uncle's, in the cellar of Jani Szeifert's house, who was renting it. The Russians might have arrived at about noon, but this happened so long ago that I cannot even remember exactly when we were picked up. Maybe, it was that night. As far as I can remember, we were first brought to Pista's house. We might have been here all night long; Pali Kopasz and Géza Lukács had been there as well. It was such a long time ago. I cannot remember exactly how it happened. Next morning, we departed from here to Ónod. We were told we would get a certificate there."

József Kassai:

"The same day, we were employed at the bridge. We were constructing a gangway at Csikó pond. We put the pylons there we had sawn off. We were informed that we had no nails. So I said I would bring some. I thought I would stay at home and would not go back. I prepared the nails, though, and laid them down as if searching for more. We lived at the corner of Temetőköz (Cemetery Lane) you know, and from there you could have a good oversight of the streets. Then I saw that three lads and a Russian were coming. 'Wait,' I said, 'I am searching for the nails,' but the Russian only said: 'Davaj, davaj!' **(Hurry up, hurry up!)*

"So I returned to the bridge. I was finally allowed to go home, and at home, straight away, an arrogant Russian-Jewish officer turned up. Such officers were called GPU (State Political Department) at that time. He told me to go with him. I explained to him that I had been working there for some time. The officer just looked astonished and wasn't sure what to make of me, but he left. He returned in ten minutes: 'Davaj'; by that time, there were some 10-15 men. I had to go. We were going to the Pásztor's house and Imre Á. Tóth also came with us as interpreter. He wrote something in the Pásztor's house, but he only released Feri Szolga, seeing that he was sick. He was a tenant there of some sort. The others stayed there. Imre Tóth released no one else. From there we then went as far as Alsózsolca. Jóska Figeczki and Balázs Németh decamped there."

Lajos Fodor:

"It was 29th November when they entered here. Beforehand, there had been a great deal of gunfire; then they came."

"Did you, Lajos, live here at the Vám? What was the time when they arrived here?"

"Who cared about time then? We didn't watch the clock… the Russians, they did," and Lajos chuckles. "When they came in, noon had passed, and I hurried out, brought a flagon and offered each officer wine. They asked if I had German wine and I said no. I had no wine but four Jewish boys who were concealed in my cellar had some. These boys stayed with me at the time when I manufactured slippers with wooden soles. Yes, this was a slipper factory. (Lajos was a joiner.) I asked for the four workers from the Hungarians, they helped me and then stayed here. Even the Germans thought that they were my workers. There was one among them, Samu Jew, who spoke nine languaegs. He might have been a furniture

tradesman from Nagyvárad or the neighborhood? His name was Lefkovics, perhaps…"

"Where were the Jews'? What happened to them?"

"Samu became an interpreter. He straightaway sought connections with the Russians. The next day he sent for me to go to Commander Brezhnev to the Sorik in the Hegedűs' house…"

"What happened to the three guys who remained?"

"They were taken away as well, but not with us. Later I met them on the road and they gave me some tobacco. Balázs Juhász had become their leader or something."

"What happened to you after you had offered wine to the Russians, Lajos?"

"Those Russians went away and others came. Finally we were put out of the house, so we went to the Füzesis. They were relatives living next to the Greek church. Next morning I went home alone to see what could have happened. As I arrived I was told to make a coffin because Zoli Novák's wife had passed away. I had a coffin, so I gave it to them. First I took the top of it, then the other parts. On the way with the coffin I passed a large squad of marching Russian troops. They were heading to Arnót. They asked me which way led to Arnót. I showed them, but I was afraid that I would have to go with them. When I came home the GPU was waiting for me. He didn't have a weapon and he was polite. He asked me to go with him to the commander. Brezhnev was the commander here. I had met Brezhnev's officer before. He was that Hungarian man who wrote that book: From Miskolc …er…"

"With Fazekas, with György Fazekas?"

"Yes, yes…because in his book..."

"Thank you, Lajos. Let's not talk about Brezhnev and Fazekas. We will discuss it later, because it is worth talking about them…"

I feel it necessary to make some comments on Lajos' statements so as not to be thought untruthful by anybody. At the time of our interview he was 89 years old and, thank God, mentally he was fine and he had a very good memory. He could recall quite detailed and vivid memories. He gave me a lot of information that I was able to use for this and for my previous works.

I was glad when I noticed how reliable his words were. However, Lajos had a problem placing events in time. In his memory events sometimes blended. Now he combined experiences from his life and from a book he had read.

Did Brezhnev ever visit Felsőzsolca as a commander? No, but it is irrelevant. What György Fazekas wrote in his book was more important.

Fazekas went to the Soviet front as a journalist from Miskolc. There he was captured and he was taken to a political school. In the spring of 1944 he served in the 18th Squadron of the Red Army, which advanced through the foot of the Carpathians in Ukraine. He did political and propaganda work there.

The political team of the 18th squadron was called the "Polit Odgyel" which was led by Leonid Ilyics Brezhnev. György Fazekas was assigned to a subdivision called the VII Odgyiléna. It dealt with Hungarian prisoners of war and espionage, and presented propaganda to the Hungarian corps fighting against them. Using handouts, sound amplifiers and radio, they encouraged Hungarian units to stop fighting and desert. So, every squadron had a political team with a group which 're-educated' the prisoners of war and people. In the summer of 1944 the 4th Ukrainian advanced guard was strengthened with Hungarian intellectuals who had deserted and been retrained. It was long before the Romanians changed sides and the Soviet leadership thought that this would be the alignment that would break through the Carpathians and reach

Hungary first. Fazekas worked here with Zoltán Vas, Vlagyimir Oldnyer, László Gyáros, József Szendrő (an ex-actor from Miskolc), István Hunya Ferenc Mérei, Béla Lévai, and Béla Illés. Later on everyone (who was still alive) was given a significant position in the Hungary of the 1950s.

Having got across the Carpathians in late November 1944, the 18th Squadron attacked the area of Sátoraljaújhely at the beginning of December. György Fazekas wrote at this time:

> *"On the 3rd of December we got news of the liberation of Miskolc. Lieutenant-Colonel Levin knew that it was my hometown and permanent residence as well. One day he summoned me:*
> *"'Tomorrow morning we are going to Miskolc…'*
> *"Next morning at dawn, we were already on the way to Miskolc through the Zemplén hills, and then on the roads of Borsod. We had already reached Zsolca, but in the distance the chimneys of the Vasgyár also could be seen. 'My heart was beating in my throat' Only a few burnt, ruined pieces of the Sajó Bridge could be seen. So we had to go an extra 30 kms, the long way round, and we came close to my hometown from Hejőcsaba."*

So he could not have met János Fodor here, because at this time – 4th December – he had been kept under supervision with a lot of other people in Debrecen. But if we compare his memories with the book of György Fazekas, in which we can read the statements about the army's political departments and methods – then we can surely say that the same group and headquarters of "Polit Odgyiléria" had settled down in the village of Sorik and/or had settled next to the Greek church on the evening or on the night of the 29th November. They tried to get information and to make contact with the inhabitants. But let's go on with what else Lajos Fodor says:

"I set off with the officer," continues Lajos, "in front of, Sándor Erdős, and many other people from the streets stood next to the Lutheran church. I remember Laci Tornai. We had another Russian officer with us, and he wanted me to go with them – that's why he quarrelled with my officer. He must have said that it was his task to take me to Brezhnev, his commander. We went to Hegedűs's house on Kossuth Street in Sorik – he was a fine old fellow, Hegedűs – two houses further along from Szolga. There was the political department. There was my acquaintance, Samu, but he didn't look at me… Then they asked me where the officers were. 'Well, what kind of officers: Hungarian or German?' 'But tell us where they are…. And tell us the truth, because if you lie you will be sent to Moscow…' Finally they set me free…. I made to come home alone. I headed for home through Kertekalja. The rocket-launchers were on the hemp fields and farther on the artillery. So I thought I wouldn't go that way, because something awful might happen. What would a civilian be doing near the artillery? They might think I was a spy. I went to Rákóczi Street. There they immediately said: 'davaj'!"

"Where, where from, when?"

"In front of Pál Kiss in Rákóczi Street – almost in front of the house of András Tóth."

"Just simply on your way in the street?"

"Yes, in the street, sometime in the afternoon. They took me to the garden of Pál Pásztor's house. I had only a jacket on me, because in the morning when I came from the Füzesi's place, I thought I would just pop home to see what had happened. I was hungry, as well."

"Didn't they give you food and take you and the others to the Greek school?"

"No, they didn't. We didn't get food, either. Then they brought people from Arnót and others and moved us on. We were about fifty. We went to Alsózsolca up to the Rózsa's

house, and we slept in their barn. As we were going out of the village I saw machine-gun nests and next to them there was a dead German who was killed by a tank. He lay in the street in front of the house of Bujdosó." So to sum up, on the basis of the memories, the capture of the civilian men of Zsolca happened in the following way.

The first day of the 'Liberation'
29 November 1944 (Wednesday)

In the evening, the first stage of fighting by the Russian troops took place in the area of the neighboring village, Arnót. The Germans occasionally bombarded the village, so the inhabitants of our village stayed in the cellars, even after ten days of fighting. Six to eight Russian soldiers, most of them officers, had started tracking down and collecting the civilians in the Kis- and Nagyszilvás (at the Petőfi and Szathmáry-Király Pál Streets). They went from the corners of Kassai Street to the north end of the two streets. They checked every house systematically and went down into every cellar. They called the men out with the promise that they would get "document" (a certificate).

From this area, about eighty civilians from Zsolca were collected altogether. The youngest was fifteen years old (Andor Csarni), the oldest were fifty-three (János Guba, Péter Halászr and Ferenc Herneczki) and the fifty-nine year old Mátyás Ujj. All of them were escorted to the household of József M. Tóth in Petőfi Street (Kisszilvás) and from here through the hemp fields to the houses of Z. Tóth and and András Tóth, which were near the church in Római Street (Rákóczi Street).

Second day
30th November (Thursday)

The group was taken to the Greek school in the morning where they had lunch, some kind of soup and bread. Then they were sent to Alsózsolca.

Still that morning or at noon, a group of Russian officers (maybe those who inspected the Kisszilvás the previous night) walked through two inner streets of the village, the Szent István and Rákóczi Streets and the smaller streets leading to them like Deák Ferenc, Eperjesi Streets and some parts of the Sorik and the area of Vám. From there, one group of the men was collected from the houses, the other group was simply caught in the streets; but civilians who were working – like at the Swarc house, where the troops were stationed in the village, and the 6-8 potato-peeling men in the kindergarten – these were all stood to attention and marched away. The explanation was the same as in the Szilvás. They had to go with them for a certificate, for documents. This group was gathered on the building plot of Szent István Street 31. At that time Pál Pásztor, a craftsman shoemaker, lived in that house. They did not get food, however, and they started after lunchtime for Alsózsolca.

The number of this group was bigger than that of the day before. More civilians were collected from a larger area. They collected everybody they came across as well but among the men of Zsolca there were Jewish Labor Servicemen, hidden in the village, and some soldiers dressed as civilians. They also press-ganged some locals and some civilians collected in Arnót.

Summing up

In January or February 1945 a record was put together, at the town hall of the village as it then was, of those men who had been taken into captivity by the Soviets on the 29th and 30th of November 1944.

This list only contains the 133 names and personal data of those who were taken farther than Debrecen. Those who were collected but returned home from Debrecen or other places, either because they were able to escape or because they

were released due to serious illness, are not on the list. The number of these is unknown but it is estimated at between twenty-five and thirty.

The number of Jewish workers and civilians dressed as soldiers, who had been hiding in the nearby houses for two or three weeks, ranges from twenty to thirty. They were also taken captive. Civilians from Arnót were also taken with those from Zsolca.

In total, perhaps 180-220 people were rounded up within just two days. It's a large number from a population of 3000. If we focus only on those 133 men who were taken farther than Debrecen (and 47 of them died somewhere on the journey or in the prisoners' camps), we can say that the population of Zsolca was decimated.

This number is even more appalling when we compare this figure to the number of people from Zsolca who died during World War II.

Forty-nine men from Zsolca died at the front; forty-six Jewish men and women lost their lives as a result of deportations; fourteen or fifteen civilians died due to bombing, explosions and artillery fire; and between forty-seven and fifty men died who were involved in fighting.

Why on earth did they have to die? What was the reason, the true reason for the death of about 200 civilians? Was this action planned by the Russians? Did some local people help or direct the action, perhaps betray them?

The people of Zsolca, including the relatives of the lost, have been searching for answers for over fifty years now.

Neither the leaders of Zsolca nor those at state level wanted to hear or know of those who were taken prisoner, who were taken to death camps or prisoner-of-war camps, and those who had German names. There was complete silence as if it was something that was not talked of and did not even exist. Neither an apology nor a single answer was given to the

question as to how this could happen, who was responsible for it and who committed a crime.

Many explanations were found by the people of Zsolca, both rational and irrational.

As they were short of documents, but had sufficient knowledge of details and facts, the following explanations seem to be plausible.

The Russians had carefully planned and carried out the capture of the people of Zsolca.

It was not the spontaneous action of the soldiers who were directly involved in the clashes on the front line. The likelihood is that the decision to carry out this operation was made at a higher level, such as by commander-in-chief and political leaders at the 'Polit. Odgyel.' They had to organize it within a few days and attack in five groups in order to collect a reasonable number of POWs. Only those at the commander-in-chief level knew that the Hungarian and German soldiers were far less in number than had been claimed.

They decided on who, when and which parts of the dwelling to search. It is unrealistic to assume that the soldiers and commanders in charge of collecting people would place the POWs in just one house – that of József M. Tóth – and then to take them near the Roman Catholic church through gardens and plough-lands not used as roads by the locals, unless this had been organized in advance. The people were taken over to the other great orientation point, the school near the Greek Catholic church, the next morning.

Even more people were collected at the house of Pál Pásztor near the Greek church, from other directions and regions. They were told the same lies on both days; they were to follow the Russians voluntarily and to appear for identification.

It is also possible that two attacking units at higher levels carried out the operation separately but covertly. As we

will see later, this implies that the captives taken away in two groups underwent the first check in Sajólád and Ónod, which were behind the front. There were general headquarters of divisions there. However, this does not rule out the possibility that this happened without the knowledge of the military and political leaders of the 27th Army. The captives during the four-day march from Debrecen were only given food once, in Igrici, where the gathering camp of the 27th Army was located. The first selection took place here as well. The commander of the camp separated the elderly and told them that they would be released, but this plan was foiled by a political officer.

Did someone collaborate or show the way? Did some of the locals help the Soviet officers drag the people away?

We can definitely say no, at least not in the first two days.

The gathering was not done by the Russians in an undiscriminating way; and there is not even the slightest evidence of a foreign helping hand. Why was it mostly Roman Catholics and workers who were captured? Because the majority of the village then was Roman Catholic. According to the 1940 census, 1842 Roman Catholics and only 797 Greek Catholics lived there. The difference between the number of workers and farmers was the same for the first group. If we add that the plum orchards of mostly Roman Catholic workers were combed, with some being taken some from each house, various people were collected from within the village, e.g., from the Sorik.

The suspicion arose in many that the so-called interpreters who knew Russian and Slovak well helped the Russians. We can definitely disprove it. Imre Á. Tóth, Ferenc Kemény and János Kuripla were involved as Pilate was when deciding whether to release Barabas or Jesus. They were well intentioned: when they interpreted, their purpose was to help the locals. Like many others, they truly believed it was for a

just cause. As a result, they and their whole family were sucked into the quagmire. There are positive and negative suppositions about the Greek Catholic priest Béla Bodnár as far as taking away people is concerned.

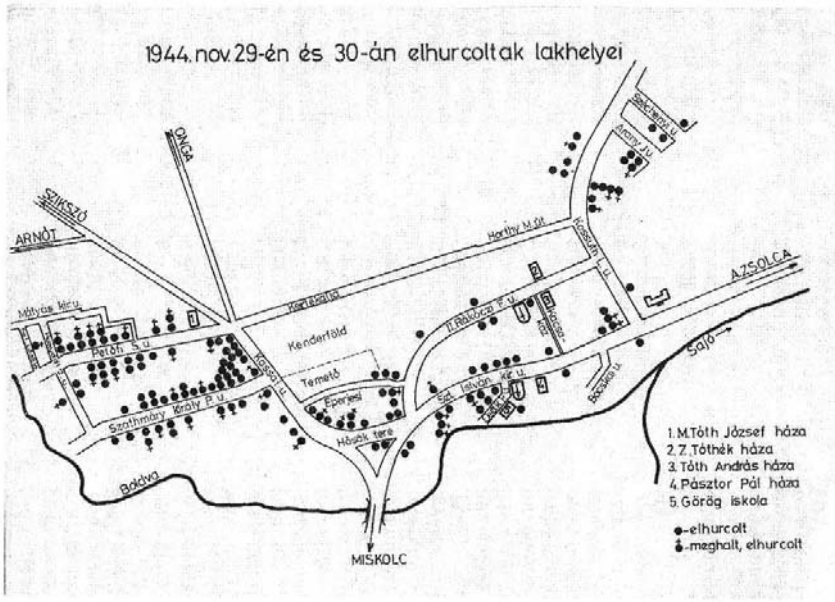
Many are of the view that fewer Greek Catholics were taken away thanks to the influence of Bodnár. We can see that this is not true. Others suggest that it was the intention to have the Greek Catholic priest and teacher Ferenc Kisida and the Roman Catholic priest István Sallay taken into captivity.

But this happened later, and I will talk about this below, just as I shall about István Margitics, who later became an "official" interpreter. The population of Zsolca knew that the priest mentioned above, who had been the priest of the Catholic district for decades both before and after the war and spoke many languages, was intelligent and strove for good relationships with the Germans during the war and later with the Russian invaders. So far we believe information that he used these relationships in the interest of the district and its people. We know that he helped the left wing of the village, and he was acknowledged by the Poles for his assistance to refugees. He was the one who had seized the initiative to bring back those who had been captured, who took part in the work of the national committee after the war, etc.

As he undertook public duties as well, his deeds were wrong in the eyes of many. However, we have no reason to suppose he would have wanted to take part in having his believers abducted.

One reason for taking people away was to confirm the glorious deeds of the Russian army, or more precisely, that of its leaders, who themselves were fearful of the Stalinist political leadership. In order to survive, they had to produce results by occupying cities with blitzkrieg tactics and to show that tens of thousands of workers had sided with them.

Can the revenge, the wish for retaliation, and making people do slave labor without payment be explained in other ways than that? Probably. But I will go into this later after further consideration of the memories of Zsolca inhabitants of the journey, the POW camps and the daily life there. To provide a better understanding of the events mentioned here, I attach a map on which you can see the streets of Felsőzsolca in 1944. I have marked the streets and house numbers to show how many people were taken from each house by the Russians.



The dewellings of the people taken away on 29th and 30th November 1944.

IV. Like Cattle

As we have seen, the captured civilians from Zsolca were marched to Alsózsolca in two groups. The road was full of Russian units, military vehicles, cars transporting reserves and wagons sent to the forward ammunition depot. Next to the road lay the corpses of fallen Russian soldiers and the carcasses of horses.

On the abovementioned map I have marked, according to the streets, where and how many people were taken by the soldiers

They marched in the ankle-high mud among broken electric cables and felled telegraph poles. Cavalry was moving in the same direction. Many thousands of horsemen from the Piljev group were evacuated from the area of Miskolc. Those captured went on with a stronger and stronger armed escort, but they still marched with the thought that they would get the promised identity papers and certificates in one of the neighboring villages.

Being more familiar with it, I follow the way of the two groups led by Imre Kércsi and Andor Mátyus. They were with me on the trip organized this year (1994) when we followed by car their march of fifty years ago.

The afternoon and the evening of the second day

The first contingent, the group including Imre Kércsi, reached Sajólád by noon. They spent two hours there. According to their memories, people were driven to the courtyard of a one-story house. It stood in a side street closed off by the Russian army.

Now, fifty years later, after some searching we found the long farmhouse (Sajólád, Jókai Street 15) with a large stone-vaulted cellar in the courtyard.

"What did you do here?" I asked.

"We stood here waiting for the demand for our papers. Then we were told to take everything out of our pockets," remembers Imre Kércsi. "Frisking, prison-style, was to come."*

"We were searched and everything was taken away," completes András Fehér. "Everything was seized: watch, pocket knife, money."

"I had two combs, they 'adopted' one of them," explains Imre Kércsi. The cellar is memorable for Bandi Fehér. That was the punishment room.

"What? What was there?" I wonder.

"Yes," responds András Fehér. "There was a sort of headquarters there. We were all asked – though not seriously – about our professions and such. Me and Pista Papp were selected, brought down to the cellar, and were hit."

(It can be seen and felt that he is filled with painful memories.)

"Say no more!" I say. "It must have been humiliating."

"No! Let's go down to the cellar."

So we went down and looked around.

"But why? Why only you?"

"For nothing. I don't know…, maybe just because I had trousers on, I was thought to be a bourgeois. Pista Papp was brought there too. He was a linesman in Miskolc at MÁV; he was staying with us during the battle; he and his family escaped to us from the bombing. Now he was also brought down and also beaten. Maybe because I was thin and he was fat," said Bandi Fehér sadly.

"Who was here at that time?"

"My two brothers, Pista Szűcs, your father, the old Sándor Zsiros, Jancsi Pásztor, Jani Hernádi and everyone from Szilvás," Imre Kércsi counts them out. "About two hours later

we started out, though we did not even know where to. We were treated like the Jews, driven hard like cattle.

"We also set off in cars, but in Sajólád in front of the house, in the main street at number 10, Andor Mátyus asked us to stop. Though he came with the second group, he told us that they also had to stop in Sajólád and wait here at this house for two hours. They were not searched, though, here. But anyway, if they stopped here there must have been some headquarters in Lád. It might have been in the side street which was closed off to traffic. Imre Kércsi and the others said that they were followed by young guards as far as Lád and here they changed, so from here on other, older guards followed them.

"Between Ónod and Muhi we got off this road and continued our way towards Miskolc and Mezőcsát. On our way we stopped in Hejőkeresztúr.

"Now we are discussing why we had to turn off the road which goes directly to Debrecen through Polgár. Why did we have to take a roundabout way? Maybe because the 27th Army which 'captured' them had the line-of-communications area there, as earlier they had attacked in this direction. In the Tiszacsege and Ároktő region they crossed the Tisza River. From here they went on towards Miskolc.

"We stopped in Hejőkeresztúr because by the end of the second day Kércsi and his group had reached this point. They spent the night here in the attic of the village hall. In the morning they departed from the Greek school in Felsőzsolca. They spent two hours in Lád and by night they arrived at Keresztúr.

The second group was Andor Mátyus's group.

On the same afternoon, on Thursday afternoon when they were all collected, they started towards Alsózsolca. On this day they did not get far, because they were taken to a house in the main street of Alsózsolca."

Andor Mátyus:

"So our identities were looked into here. As far as I remember they asked for our names and jobs. Old Imre Á. Tóth was the interpreter."

Lajos Fodor:

"Imre Á. Tóth was the traitor, the salesman. He did not help anyone; he just took down the names. He was angry with me too. We slept here in this place. I was in the barn; I was hiding in a bale of straw. Jóska Figeczki and Balázs Németh lagged behind here."

Mrs. Demkó, (Veron Tóth):

"The previous day we went to Alsózsolca because the Russians had told us to leave straight away, because there would be a great battle. We were in Géza Lukács's cellar. The children and the women had left. We put up in old Józsi Magos's house. Next day all the men from Zsolca were said to have arrived; they were brought by the Russians. Mrs. Lajos Tomai was also with us. Someone told her that her husband was to come too. But her husband, Lajos, was very sick. The poor man suffered from tuberculosis and he became sick in Alsózsolca. In the neighborhood there were two Russian officers, one of them was a Hungarian who had stayed there in the war of 1914. They were taking charge of two huge cars; they said that there was medicine in them. No one was allowed to go into that yard because it was guarded by two officers. Yet these two Russian officers were very kind to us and to the others too. Later they allowed Lajos Tomai to stay there in Alsózsolca with his wife.

Andor Mátyus:

"Next day we set off early in the morning."

Third Day, 1st December, Friday

(On the occasion of the following conversation we are standing in the town-hall yard in the village of Hejőkeresztúr.)

"We stopped at that point where you had arrived the previous evening and you had stayed here."

Imre Kércsi:

"This house could be the same as at that time, too. We were chased up to the attic through this gangway. The roof was bad; it was shot through in many places. It was cold; we were cold. I remember that it was also drizzling. I can recall that I was freezing. Where was I to get a blanket from? I found some kind of papers, files or something like that, so I tried to put those on myself."

"Did you get anything to eat?"

"Nothing. The last time we got something was in the Greek school when we started from the village of Zsolca. In the morning the residents of the village of Hejőkeresztúr gave us what they could, through the fence. But how could they do so for so many people? I remember that here where we are standing, there was a garden next to this yard and from there a relative of Jani Paptót from the village of Zsolca, his father-in-law or brother-in-law, brought and passed through some white coffee in a basin or pail. Whoever it was passed to drank. Others brought something else, too. I only know that this decent man passed through a good piece of bacon to my brother, Laci."

"Did you continue on your way then in the morning?"

"First we were searched again," complained András Fehér. "As we were coming down from the attic one after the other, there were some Russian men standing next to the stairs, and if someone had something warm, furry or leather on his clothes, they took that off."

"Unbelievable… they… the liberators?" I blurted out.

"Plunderers, that's the word. They took off the fur and cut off the leather from the coats with scissors," Imre Kércsi said.

And it was like this: the truth of it is proved by what Herminka Ligetvári said on another occasion, citing her father:

“When they were coming down from the attic, everybody was searched. My father says that my husband’s winter coat was opened. There was a sheepskin waistcoat under that, which was taken off. The collar was cut off from his coat because it was also made of fur. His boots were taken off and bad heavy boots were thrown to him, and he had to tie up the soles with string. My father claims that by the time they got to Debrecen, blood was running from my husband’s feet. Unfortunately, he perished there forever.”

“Starting from here, we went in the direction of Mezőcsát and we walked to the village of Igrici without a further stop. On this day, this group marched ‘only’ 15 kilometers.”

The second group, Andor Mátyus and his mates.

“This day was very long for us,” says Andor Mátyus. “We set off from the village of Alsózsolca in the morning. We stood for about two hours in the main street of the village of Sajólád. We were directed to the village of Ónod from there. Here, behind the castle in a side street (today it is Mező Street), we were taken to a house where we were searched again. It was the same as with the previous group in the village of Sajólád. We had to take out everything and they took away from us everything they found: purse, money, pocketknife, watch, every object. My glasses, which I held in my pocket, were also taken away, though they were so specially prescribed that nobody else could use them.

Lajos Fodor:

“We took out everything. An officer came along. I had a lot of money with me, hundred-forint notes. The officer was delighted with them; he was waving and turning them over. I also had my glasscutter with me, as I am a joiner. I had it with me, so the officer was looking at it and looking at it. I told him he couldn’t use it for anything, it was no good for him – ″nyekarasó″ (in Russian). Whether he understood or not he

went away, but after a while he came back and took away the glasscutter, too. I said to myself, 'damn you'."

"We continued our way from the village of Ónod," continues Andor Mátyus. "We walked through the village of Hejőkeresztúr but we didn't stop there. By evening we arrived at the village of Igrici where we met the other group from the village of Zsolca. Then we went on from here together.

The Village of Igrici

This village is located 3 kilometers from the Csát road. The road did not lead anywhere and doesn't lead anywhere even now. Perhaps it was the collecting camp of the 27th Army because they were already expected. They got food and not only was the group from Zsolca village here but also others as well. They were soldiers. When my father, Sándor Zsíros, talked about this road he never left out the village of Igrici. Here he finally gave up hope of getting a certificate when he saw that they were mixed up with soldiers. He understood he had become a 'prisoner of war,' though he had never been a soldier in his whole life.

I am talking to my fellow travelers at the yard of the village hall, which was the location of the prison camp. In our company there is the Mayor of Igrici, Kálmán Bordás, who guides us with pleasure when he gets to know why we are here after 50 years. He tells us that this room was also a village hall and the elderly people of the village can remember clearly that a prison camp operated here. He shows us the fine monument of World War II, which is evidence that Igrici commemorates and thinks of the victims with respect.

"What happened here, what do you remember?" I ask my fellow travelers.

András Fehér says:

"There was also disinfection here at the yard. László Kércsi and Berti Tóth clothes' were burnt. László Kércsi had had a greatcoat on, one of its sides was burnt off and the other side hung down when he went."

Andor Mátyus says:

"The clothes were doused in a cask full of petrol and set on fire. I remember exactly that we got bean soup and bean goulash to eat. It was quite delicious because I was very hungry."

Imre Kércsi says:

"A very decent Russian army officer made the old men from among the people of Zsolca stand out from the line. These people were János Kuripla, Mátyás Új, Jóska Lúci, András Dobos, Imre Varga and Guba and Szuhogyi from Nagyszilvás. There were seven of them. János Kuripla and Jóska Lúci spoke Slovak and Russian, so they told them what had happened. They were very happy because this major who made them stand out from the row was a decent man. He promised them they would go home but while they were standing there another younger officer came who belonged to the so-called State Security Authorities or something like that, and he asked the old men why they were standing out. The oldest one told him that they were old, that's why they should go home. 'Nyet, nyet!' shouted the officer and the poor old folk had to stand back in the line. They went to the village of Focsani but most of them died there. Mátyás Új and Kuripla perished in the war there.

Lajos Fodor says:

"There were so many of us in the yard in Igrici that the rose bushes were cut down to make more room.

"After a while there was more lining up. The army officer measured me with his eyes and called me out. Well, I thought to myself, the rose bush would have a job. Now I'm telling you it as a joke but at that time I was really threatened. We went into the house. The army officer asked me if I was

Like cattles....Hungarian POWs driven by the Soviets
(In: II. Világháború képekben. Európa K. p. 206)

with them. We went to another room. One of them gestured to me to sit down on the couch. Then she came to me and showed me that I should take off my boots. And she took off her shoes

as well. ‘My trousers, too?’ I asked and pointed to them. The 'bárisnya' ('Bárisnya': woman- in Russian) signaled that I should do it ...

“Oh, my God, what was going to happen? Then my boots, my nice black boots, were taken away. But they couldn’t use them because the boots were too small for them. None of the women officers managed to put them on because of their thick legs. Then the officer came and indicated that I was to leave my boots just there, and he threw down heavy boots full of holes and they didn't even allow me to lace them up. A pair of bad sapper trousers were given to me that I couldn't button up. I swore like a trooper at the Russian man in my rage. ' Your mother's t..t must have been a chaff-cutter when you were born.'

“Meanwhile, the others from Zsolca set off from the yard. I ran after them with my laceless boots on my feet and my bad trousers which I had to hold up with my hand so that they would not slip down from my body. At that time it was cold, rainy and muddy. The others laughed at me as I looked shabby, but they also looked like down-and-outs. Not only did they take my boots but they also took away the good footwear, shoes and heavy boots from everybody. Even from Major Muhi and Ligetvári and perhaps from Mihály Szolga. A pair of woman's shoes were given to him instead of his nice red boots.”

“The husband of Böske Csorba, Mihály Kiss, got the same treatment as well.”

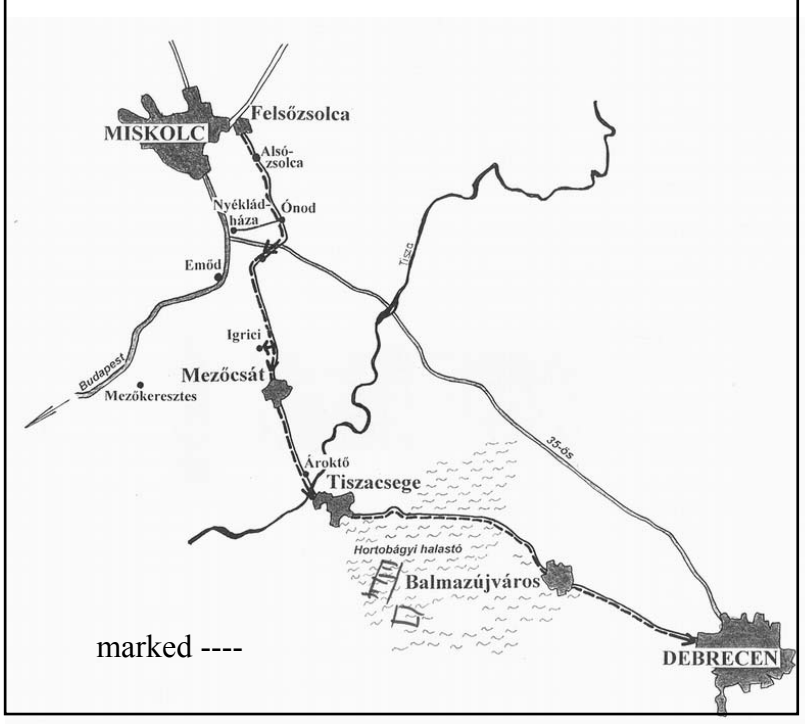
Third day 1st December, Friday
On the 50-km long road between Igrici and Balmazújváros

They agree that this was the worst day of their foot march. The principal reason was that this was the road on which they covered the greatest distance, and secondly, they were treated as prisoners of war. Actually, this road was covered by thousands of people and most of them were really soldiers or prisoners of war.

The guards and the infantry officers shot immediately if somebody moved out of the line or got left behind. Nobody knew if anyone on the march would be injured but all of them state that they used to shoot warning salvoes towards the soldiers (prisoners). They were tired because they were marching through the Hortobágy; it was cold, it was raining and the mud reached their ankles on several parts of the road. Next to the road there were the remains of the artillery battle, shelled tanks, and burnt-out vehicles. Troops of soldiers and vehicles passed by near them. They had to give way to the vehicles and sometimes stand in the muddy, wet ditch next to the road. The supervisors weren't understanding and humane at all. According to the memories of Imre Kércsi, the case of Miklós Szolga, which was also mentioned by Lajos Fodor, happened not in the village of Igrici but here on this road, but it is possible that Miklós Szolga's footwear passed away here, not he himself.

Imre Kércsi says:

"Setting off from the village of Igrici we were going over the Tisza River on a bridge in the village of Ároktõ. The structure of this bridge was moving, especially, when the



March to Debrecen

vehicles came alongside facing us. It was unnerving. After Tiszacsege, when we reached the Balmazújváros road, the Russian soldiers were coming towards us. One of them stopped the march, Miklós Szolga was called out and his boots were taken away. I remember it because at the same time they made my brother take off his heavy boots, but his feet were small so the footwear was also small for the Russian, that's why he gave it back. But it was different in the case of Miklós Szolga because he was given such bad heavy boots that he couldn't use them and after a few meters the soles came to pieces, the tops of them separated from the soles totally. Poor Miklós had to march the whole way to Debrecen. It was sleeting and the mud reached their ankles. He tried to march on the edge of the road but it didn't help at all: his feet were bloody and muddy when

we reached Debrecen. He had already been ill, that's why he was able to go only to the village of Focsani, where he died. We reached Balmazújváros in the evening; I remember that we were put up in a school because there were desks as well."

Others say: "And there was thick horse-dung."

"It could be; I don't remember that but it is still fresh in my memory that there was a pump in the yard, but I wasn't allowed to go there. We didn't get either food or drink anywhere on the road. My brother and Lajos Varga ate the bacon without bread, which they had been given by the civilians in Keresztúr. My brother was so thirsty that he drank from the puddles. In the evening I managed to get to the water. I remember from that that there must have been a pump as well."

Lajos Fodor says:

"The prisoners slept not only in the school. There was a barn or rather a granary near or next to the school because there those Jewish boys slept who had been in my house in Zsolca. They brought as much tobacco in leaves as they could. Here I got three or four packets of tobacco from them as a thank-you. I handed it out and I put the rest away as 'currency'."

The fourth day, 2nd December, Saturday

Imre Kércsi says:

"When we set off towards Debrecen the women were watching us but they weren't allowed to come to us. When one of them came forward to the line to give some food, perhaps sausages, because there was an acquaintance on the march, one of the guards chased her away with his rifle butt.

"This road was shorter than the one the previous day because they had to march only 20 kilometers from Balmazújváros to Debrecen, but they had been marching for four days and they covered the 100-kilometer distance under

bad conditions. They were hungry and thirsty because they got food only once, in Igrici. They got more and more tired. The older people, especially, could hardly bear the exhausting march.

"We were carrying Pál Horváth on our shoulders," says István Kalas. "He couldn't march so he dragged himself along and the Russian man threatened to shoot him dead. So we carried him as well as we could, myself, Jenei and István, who was his neighbour, but there were János Mezei and Jóska Rigó, too. I remember them but there were many of us.

"Finally, we reached Debrecen, the Pavilon Barracks next to the station, which was a prison camp at that time."

The memorial tablet says: 200 000 captives returned here from the Soviet Union. (No word is mentioned about the thousands who were taken away.)

V. POW CAMPS: DEBRECEN, FELSŐZSOLCA, FOCSANI

Debrecen, Military base Pavilon

After four miserable days, the people of Zsolca finally got to the military base Pavilon in Debrecen, which was the largest collecting camp operated by the Russians in Hungary.

According to the memories of the ex-captives, they stayed there for a week. They lived there under miserable circumstances, though better than the way leading there. They were given something to eat each day; corn cooked in water, carrot soup, and a little bread. This was insufficient to stay alive but enough to avoid dying of hunger. The camp was strictly guarded by Russian soldiers. The Russian guards fired without warning if they detected a captive trying to escape. (One man told me that one of them trying to escape was a civilian from Zsolca. But as this hasn't been confirmed by others, I am not revealing any names.)

The crowd in the camp was large. 1500-2000 people were put on trains to go to the Soviet Union and others, a similar number, arrived there from the northern and eastern parts of Hungary also on foot.

The camp was in this sense the country's largest collecting camp and transfer region. Most of the people were transferred from Debrecen to the gulags of the Soviet Union. This was the entrance to hell for many hundreds of thousands of Hungarians; from here they were taken to its depths for slave work lasting for years, and many died there.

When we were there in 1994, we could read on the wall of a renovated military base:

1946-1950
200,000 Hungarian captives returned here from the Soviet Union

This number is true but it applies only to the fact that the Hungarian Ministry for Welfare took over the affairs of the Hungarian captives from July 1946. But captives, soldiers and civilians returned from Soviet captivity before and after this time.

So how many of them might have gone there in total?

> *'According to the latest research in Hungary, the number of people taken to the Soviet Union was around 600,000 and on the basis of estimated data, about 200,000 might have returned home up to the summer of 1946. The records of the POW camp in Debrecen contain 200,920 names of those who returned between July 1946 and November 1948. In 1949, only 5055 people returned. Captives were delivered home sporadically in the 1950s – even in 1956 - but about 200,000 Hungarians never returned. They are the heroes of captivity.' as Peter Gosztonyi puts it.* [25]

Most of the 600,000 people were taken from Debrecen to the biggest Soviet POW camp in Focsani, Romania. More Hungarians were taken to the Soviet Union later as well but the most crowded railway line was that of Debrecen-Focsani, since the railway lines crossing the Carpathians were unusable due to German explosions. But the Russian railway lines with large platforms reached Focsani. That's why the military base Pavilon had become the centre for transferring POWs. They used large storage rooms on railway stations. The "material" to be delivered was stored here temporarily.

But whatever the number of prisoners, the capacity of the military base and that of the railway line was limited, so it was impossible to transport POWS in numbers of 100,000 or more in a short period of time. This was apparent when it came to delivering civilians of German origin from the Northern and Eastern parts of Hungary. In order to share the burden with the military base Pavilon, smaller and temporary storage places were set up to make room for the constantly increasing number of civilians and POWs in our county, namely, in Miskolc and in Felsőzsolca.

This circumstance is one of the reasons why I want to go into detail about the POW camp built in Zsolca at the beginning of 1945.

The POW Camp in Zsolca

Only "real" POWs were guarded here, and those of German origin were not deported. These facts are related, together with the fact that, for many reasons, people from Debrecen were taken captive. The guarding, feeding, health situation and general circumstances of those who had been held in captivity for months in Felsőzsolca strikingly resemble those in Debrecen. People with German names were gathered from the neighboring villages to do military work. High-ranking officers from the Russian headquarters showed up in our village. We have no reliable information as to when it took place. The military command 0060 of the Russian army was written on December 22, 1944, and orders the mobilization of all able-bodied males of German origin to do public work in the surrounding area. This is confirmed by the decree of the then-Homeland Secretary Ferenc Erdei signed in Debrecen on January 5, 1945. According to the decree, the Russian military authorities could take all Germans living and staying in Hungary to do unpaid public service.

I am quoting from a circular letter written and published in January 1945 by the Deputy Lieutenant of the county. The office for statistics was ordered to prepare a record in which the following were to be included regardless of sex and age: name, year of birth, name of mother before marriage and occupation. “The record was to designate in chronological order how many men and women had been born in the same year,” reads the command. [27] (The list of names hasn’t survived, though the chronological table has.)

We don’t know why this record was prepared, but we have good reason to say that people with German names could be collected on its authority.

According to survivors’ memories, the Soviet officers who had to carry out this operation appeared in the first half of January. But according to all recollections, the leaders of the village and the reorganizing “national committee” asked the Russians to free the people of Felsőzsolca from further deportations.

This happened, since in fact nobody was deported afterwards who was of German origin.

We don’t know precisely when POW camps were built in and around Miskolc (Sajóecseg, Szirmabesenyő, Alsózsolca and Felsőzsolca). A written record is available only from March onwards, but as memory serves, prisoners of war may have been kept in Felsőzsolca as early as January. A POW camp had already been established in Szirmabesenyő in the middle or the end of December. I know from the memories of János Demkó that he was escorted to Szirmabesenyő on foot after having been caught by the Russians before Christmas. He was guarded for two days at the POW camp which was set up in the castle. All this happened before Christmas, he said. He gave news about himself, was visited by his wife, taken to Miskolc, and marched to Poroszló, where the whole group was delivered by train to Debrecen. According to the memories of

his wife, “They weren’t there the next day because they had been taken. I don’t know how much time had passed but we were standing at the gate after hearing that captives were being brought home. We saw that Romanians were escorting a lot of Hungarians. ‘Oh, Lord, if only Jani were among them,’ I thought nervously. At this moment, a soldier shouted at us from the line, saying,

“Do any of you know János Demkó? “

“Yes, I do, I do,’ said I, ‘I’m his wife!”

“The soldier shouted that he couldn’t stop but we could follow him. He was taken to the courtyard where the cinema was. We were looking for him with my brother. We went through the courtyard of the Kerékgyártós and through the garden of the empty Krakovics house and managed to call the soldier to the fence. He said he was Dezső Benyus and served in the same division with Jani, but he was caught later and knew he was from Zsolca and that’s why he shouted at me from the march. We took him food each day because they were hardly given anything to eat. We wives thought they were given food by the locals.”

“Dezső Benyus still lives today in Pinc, Slovakia. I’m still on good terms with him.”

According to the records, the POW camps at the Glück-court, at the kindergarten, at the Greek Catholic school and at the cinema and its courtyard already existed in January. They may have closed these camps at the end of April.[16]

[16] According to the memories of the 77-year-old Mrs Lőrincz Csáki (Mária Bodnár), when she returned home to Zsolca on Good Friday in April 1945, the POWs were still at the court. The camp was demolished on May 6. There were also Germans there; she talked to soldiers from Halle. There must be a list with their names, since she had witnessed that a German officer working with the Russians wrote down all the data of the Germans, said Maria.

I came across documents at the regional office which give credence to the memories of Mrs Demkó. These documents were prepared in 1945.

"I am reporting that a POW camp is in existence at Sajécseg."

> *Regional office of Sajóbábony:*
> *I concluded that food supplies are low, the captives are full of complaints if they aren't given additional food by the locals, since the amount of food given wouldn't be sufficient for them to stay alive ..*
> *The address of the POW camp: Batal, 990-2*
> *15 March 1945, Sajóbábony, Deputy District Notary, illegible signature* [28]

The following is also reported by the Deputy District Notary from Sajóbábony: food was collected which the people of Sajóecseg had provided, in agreement with the commander of the camp; he asked the chief constable with all due respect:

> *Please, do me the favor of ordering the collection of food in the neighboring villages for the 3000 Hungarian POWs in Felsőzsolca.*
> *5 April Sajóbábony'* [28]

This number is probably an exaggeration since it was merely overheard.

Gusztáv Bátonyi, who was the notary of Felsőzsolca, reported roughly at the same time, 16 March 1945, to the Chief Constable:

> *"There is a POW camp in the village with about 1200 POWs. It is true", he adds, "...the prisoners' accommodation was crowded at the beginning, But now, due to the distribution of the prisoners this is no longer the case."* [28]

It may mean they were first at the cinema and then some were taken to the Glück-court and kindergarten.

The following was reported also from Szirmabesenyő on March 17:

> *... there is a POW camp in the village of about 400 people. As the commander notified us, another 1000 are expected in the near future.*

Finally, two more documents about camps in Alsó- and Felsőzsolca:
The Alsózsolca scrivener reports on March 16, 1945:

> *In Alsózsolca, according to GP Dr. Lajos Letanovszky, András Greznerics, President of the national committee, and Sándor Nagy President of the Independent Agrarian Party and on the authority of the POW camp headquarters:*
> *Food consists of dry vegetables (beans and peas), breakfast is not provided and 5-6 liters of oil and a small amount of salt is given every third day. Four people get a piece of bread weighing about 1.25 kg. The health of the captives is unsatisfactory due to a shortage of vitamins, and they are complaining.*
> *The accommodation consists of four larger and many smaller spaces. The rooms are crowded: there is no fresh air; some sleep on benches and some are placed one above the other.*
> *Medical treatment of the captives could be regarded as good, since Dr Ödön Pohl does his job conscientiously and the Romanian GP visits Alsózsolca periodically. However, the camp has no medicines or bandages. Nobody is reported to have lice, 4% of the captives have measles which cannot be treated due to a shortage*

of medicines. Though cleaning is in progress, further captives are expected to get measles. Despite disinfection, about 100 captives have symptoms of spots, fever or typhus and have been taken to hospital, but we do not know anything else. We can hopefully count on a decrease of fever and typhus.
Treatment is satisfactory, though about 200 captives have escaped so far, therefore guarding is strict: exercise is not allowed; their door is locked and the captives ease themselves through the window; they have to be undressed, therefore catching illnesses is possible. Sanitation is very poor under such circumstances."

Another, final document on the medical treatment at the POW camp in Felsőzsolca:

I ask the GP of Alsózsolca to make visits three times a week at the Felsőzsolca camp due to the large number of illnesses [in agreement with the commander]. Dr. László Márkus should assist as well. Furthermore, I ask the leaders of the village to get the necessary medicines and bandages. I shall send you a receipt to be handed over to Dr. Lajos Letanovszky.
13 March, Miskolc.
Dr Füster Chief Constable
Deputy Medical Officer [28]

These documents give a clear picture of the inhumane circumstances which were characteristic of POW camps not only in Zsolca but also in Debrecen and Focsani.

Although the camps were enclosed by a wire fence and no one could get in, helping hands passed food through the wire, and some inmates escaped from the Zsolca camps.

Alsózsolca község elöljáróságától. Tárgy: Hadifogoly tábor bejelentése.
376/1945 Hiv. szám: 686/1945

Főszolgabiró Úr !

Miskolc.

Jelentem, hogy az Alsózsolcán lévő 1000 hadifogoly elhelyezését Dr. XXXXXXLetanovszky Lajos körorvos , Greznerics András nemzeti bizottsági elnök, Nagy Sándor a független kisgazdapárt elnöke közbenjöttével a hadifogoly tábor parancsnokság előzetes engedélye alapján megvizsgáltatott és a következő megállapítás történt:

1. Az élelmezés száraz főzelékből, babból, borsóból áll, reggelit nem kapnak és 1000 fogoly részére 3 naponként kapnak 6- 6 liter ételolajat és nagyon kis mennyiségű sót. Egy kenyeret kapnak naponta négy személy részére, a kenyér kb. 1.50 kg. A kenyér élvezhető. A foglyok ellátása tehát, már a vitamin hiánya miatt nem kielégitő és a foglyok pabaszkodnak.

2. Az elszállásolás 4 xxxxx nagyobb körletből és több kisebb körletből áll. A helyiségek zsufoltak, levegőtlenek, részben fraplócsken, szalmán, egyes körletekben emeletszerüen vannak elhelyezve.

3. A foglyok orvosi ellátása jónak lenne mondható, tekintettel arra, hogy a fogoly orvos Dr. Pohl Ödön a foglyok vizsgálatát lelkiismeretesen végzi és a felsőzsolcai fogolytábor román orvosa időszakos látogatást tesz Alsózsolcán. Azonban a fogolytábor semmiféle gyógyszerrel vagy kötszerrel nem rendelkezik. A tetvetlenités jól megoldottnak mondható, mivel a ruhák részére egy beépitett gőzfertőtlenitő és a hőmérővel is felszerelt száraz hőlégkamra áll rendelkezésre. Ezenkivül a legénység részére konzerv dobozokból készitett zuhany és egy kádfürdő van. A szobákban a szalmát hetenként cserélik. Elitetvesedés nincs. Katonák bőrén exkoriációk nem láthatók. A foglyoknak kb. 4 %-ban rühös, amit gyógyszerhiánya miatt kezelni nem lehet, bár a fertőtlenitő eljárás folyik, további rühösödések várhatók. Mindezen fertőtlenitések ellenére 6 hét óta kb. 100 lázas kiütéses tifusz gyanus beteget szállitottak kórházba kiknek további sorsáról értesülés nincs. Reménylhető, hogy a kiütéses tifusz megbetegedések csökkenésével lehet számolni.

4. A bánásmód kielégitő, azonban ezideig kb. 200 fogoly szökött meg és emiatt az őrizet szigorubb, séta nincs megengedve, éjjelre az ajtót rájuk csukják, szükségüket az ablakon át öntik ki, ahban a körzetben pedig ahol kiengedik csak levetkőzött állapotban lehet kimenni és a megbetegedések veszélye fennáll. Ilyen körülmények között az avékszék viszonyok nagyon gyatrák.

Alsózsolca, 1945 március 16

jegyző

Dr. Lajos Letanovszky's report on the conditions of POW camps

The Romanian soldiers guarding the camp tried to supply the captives with additional food just like their masters, the Soviets.

There were two instances when some people, taken away by the Russians to Focsani at the end of November "fell into captivity" in their own village a second time. The 15-year-old Andor Csarni, who had been released from Focsani due to his illness and his young age, was captured by the Romanians at a checkpoint and put amongst the other captives. The same happened to József Sárosi, who had just passed seventeen. Obviously, they treated everyone the same way who came into their sights. The two boys sent news to their families with the women bringing them food and managed to get out of their second captivity with the help of the village leaders and others involved in reconstruction.

Some memories give an account of the event when two Hungarian officers were shot dead one night trying to sneak out. In the registry of dead people at Felsőzsolca, it is once mentioned: István Pintér was shot dead on 4th April 1945 by a Romanian guarding the captives.

The date is 4th April 1945 when Hungary had been "set free" and the poor young fellow was shot dead the same day.

The railroad workers

Those who lived in the same street, who were acquaintances, or who shared a workplace tried to stick together on their way to their captivity and also later in the camp, because they hoped that in these loose communities, groups might provide them with more security: they helped and took care of each other.

The largest deported group from Zsolca was that of the railroad workers. More than 30 railway workers were taken into captivity as civilians. In Debrecen almost one-third of

these workers were parted from the others from Zsolca. Two of them: Lajos Nádpataki and László Seregélyes escaped, while Imre Tóth, István Tóth, Imre Kassai, József Kassai and Pál Kopasz – all of them railroad workers – applied for workshop jobs. Every day they were taken from the compound in Debrecen to Balmazújváros. There was a machine shop which was utilized for tank repairs previously by the Germans and at that time by the Russians.

I am asking Imre Tóth, a member of the group, what was their reason for staying and applying for the job instead of making their escape.

"There was little chance of escaping, if any. Any attempt at running away was life threatening. If you happened to step out of the line, they just shot right away. I was an eyewitness of a case in Debrecen when a prisoner tried to climb over the fence of the Pavilon Barracks; they shot him like a dog and then they left him at the very place he was shot for days and a label was put on him with the warning on it: "The same will happen to all those who try to escape." In Balmazújváros, where we worked at the tank repair shop, a prisoner from Imre Kassai's group escaped. The Russians brought him back from Etyek, the place he came from; he was cruelly tortured and was held up as an example that the same would happen to all who ventured to escape. Later on the man from Etyek disappeared forever; no one knows what happened to him. Maybe his example was the very reason why our 'errands' were cancelled.

"What made us undertake this work? The only reason for this was the fact that we believed that it kept us from being deported to the Soviet Union and enabled us to stay at home. That is why my brother István and many others joined the newly formed Hungarian military railroad unit. József Kassai, Imre Kassai and Pali Kopasz also joined the unit together with my brother István. All of them are railroad workers. Actually in the

end I happened to be taken to the Soviet Union. Later in Debrecen I met István Sallay, the teacher, who was taken to the compound as a prisoner later. At the end of the month we were crammed into trains and taken to Focsani."

József Kassai:

"In addition to those seven people from Zsolca, there were others who worked in Balmazújváros at the tank workshop. There were eighteen of us altogether, repairing tanks and caterpillar tractors. Yes, it was my workmate who escaped to Etyek. It is not far away from Balmazújváros. He came from there. He told me that he would escape, but I was scared of the very thought of that because we had to keep an eye on each other. One day when he was sent to the other end of the workshop for an adjustable spanner he escaped. After this I did not dare to leave the Russian not even for the toilet; I stayed just a step away from him to prevent his being aware of the escape.

"In the evening when we were lined up I didn't have my workmate with me. That was the moment when the Russians realized the situation. We were lined up in pairs in the yard ready to leave but the Russians kept inquiring and threatening us in order to make us disclose his whereabouts, and whether he had hidden himself somewhere there. I myself was particularly under investigation because he was my workmate. 'We do not know, we do not know,' we said. I told the Russian that he should not forget that it was he who had sent him for the adjustable spanner. We were standing frozen in the yard for hours. But nothing happened. It was about 10 pm and they did not stop asking where he was and it went on and on. Finally we gave in and told the truth that he was from Etyek if we were not mistaken. We thought that finally the case was over and they would surely not go after him and if they would then he wouldn't be at home. Nearly a week later he was

brought back to the camp. I did not see him, but I heard that he was badly tortured.

"Then me and my brother Józsi, Pista Tóth and Pali Kopasz joined the railroad company back in Debrecen. We got to know there that such a company was to be formed. We left the country in order to clear a bombed railway tunnel.

"There I met Jani Demkó. He was from Zsolca, too, but he was a soldier. There were about 6000 of us railway workers there and my commander was Captain Gábor Gyöngyösi. This place was Vorenyenka. It could be anywhere in Sub-Carpathia. Afterwards I became ill: I was brought home and taken to the hospital at Sátoraljaújhely. I was treated as a Hungarian soldier. I can still say that there, at the digging of the blocked tunnel, I met Jani Demkó who worked there in that group just on the other side of the tunnel. I remember that I saw a man lying on the bank of the ditch surrounding Bustyaháza. Judging from his clothes, the man could have been Pista Tóth. His hat was on his face, a green hat that he used at that time; from this I think he was Pista Tóth, although I didn't see his face. He died, but I don't know whether there or somewhere else. I was sent home from the hospital at Sátoraljaújhely at the end of May 1945, and I didn't go back to being soldier any more."

"… And Imre Kassai? What happened to him?"

"He stayed there with the troops surrounding Rózsabánya (Rózsahegy) in Slovakia, he and Pali Kopasz. They caught typhoid and were taken to hospital somewhere there. Pali Kopasz died, Imre recovered and then joined the railway workers in Nyékládháza where they built the track for about two months. I met them, there."

János Demkó (he is 88 years old now), who was mentioned by József Kassai, was born in Zsolca. In response to my question, he said how he got to the main body of railway workers with those captured in Zsolca. He was called up on the 6th of October 1944. Before that, he had been a soldier only in 1928

when he did his national service. He got his call-up papers and, although the battle was already in progress, he went to Rozsnyó, as his call-up papers ordered. He was afraid to be at home. In Rozsnyó he joined the mountain rifleman battalion. Soon, they were ordered to a place near Ózd, the area of Uppony and Bóta to the front. He was taken into captivity here in December, before Christmas. From here they were driven to Miskolc on foot, then back to Szirmabesenyő where there was a prison camp in the castle. (Here his wife came after him from Zsolca).

In the camp in Szirmabesenyő he met a person from Zsolca, Barna Verbovszky; they marched as far as Debrecen together and then from Szirmabesenyő through Miskolc again, touching Harsány, they were driven to Pororszló. From here they all were brought to Debrecen by train.

"Here I met with Kisida, a teacher," he says. "We welcomed each other and embraced. I met there those people from Zsolca, the railway workers, who stayed back in Debrecen and together with me they joined the group of railway workers. I remembered the two boys, Imre Kassai and Pali Kopasz. We were in the same unit, but they were in another company. After two days the people who volunteered to be railway workers were lined up and taken to Maramarossziget, two days and two nights away by train. From there a suburban train took us to Bikszád and everywhere we got out, the inhabitants shouted rejoicing: 'Hungarians! Hungarians!' They were enthusiastic. A lot of Hungarians lived in farms and in villages thereabouts. We were still in army clothes. We were working there, too; then we were taken somewhere into Slovakia. We built that collapsed tunnel there. It name was Gyetvakriván. From here I could write a letter to the family. So, my wife visited me here, too."

Mrs. Demkó, Veronka Tóth continues the story:

"We went away and saw there from the top of the hill that down in the bottom of a large valley a lot of people were working. I asked whether they knew my husband. 'We know him but he isn't here now, he is inside the camp.' They showed where I had to go. A Hungarian soldier asked me what we had brought. I said, 'A hamper from home.' 'Did you bring civilian clothes?' 'No, we didn't. Did we have to bring some?' 'Oh no, God forbid, I just asked so that you wouldn't take them in if you brought them because your husband would have a problem because of this. Do you see these crucifixes here? On these hillocks? These are all those who wanted to escape.' I didn't go again because Jani was released from there."

"Where did they go? What happened to Jani?"

"I was taken to Losonc first and then to Pest. We worked there; we built the railway bridge over the Danube. We were there as convicts. We were not allowed to go home, though. In the end, however, I did. Imre Kerékgyártó was there once; he was a stoker. He brought home the train which was full of people; they were even hanging on the steps. I said to him: 'Will you take me home?'

"Yes, I will."

"So I dropped in on her and she immediately gave me bread and bacon to eat. This happened at around the end of July. I did not go back, but went to the factory in Diósgyőr to indicate that I was back.

In one or two week's time Kun Pista, who was a "people's policeman", turned up at our house. He said that he must take me to Miskolc because he had been told to do so. I went to prison for two months. So that is how my soldiering ended."

On the way to Focsani

People from Zsolca might have been in Debrecen for a week. They were waiting for their turn, but they were still hoping for a change for the better. It was about 10th or 11th December when a change came, and from Pavilon barracks they were led on to the railway station in the neighborhood and herded on to trucks.

Here in Debrecen the Provisional National Assembly (Ideiglenes Nemzetgyűlés) was being organized, inspired by the Soviets. On 30th November the Hungarian Communist Party announced its political program in which, among other things, the punishment of the war criminals, the calling of the Conventional Assembly and the establishment of the Provisional Government were demanded. Here in this city the delegates arriving in Soviet military automobiles established the Provisional National Assembly on 21st December and the Provisional Government on the 22nd.

By this time the prisoners had arrived in Focsani.

On 28th December we proclaimed war on Germany and the armistice with the Soviet Union was made in Moscow on 20th January 1945.

The prisoners locked in the cattle cars did not know anything about all these things, either at that time or later. It was better so, because they were placing hope in the absurd idea that the war might have ended in the meantime and they would be returned home. My father told me this when he came home.

And what if they had known that neither the parliament nor the new government mentioned the prisoners of war or their destiny? Moreover, the new Home Secretary agreed with the deportation of 'Germans,' i.e., those who bore a German-sounding name. If they had known all these things, they would have been even more hopeless. They had reason enough to be

desperate anyway. There were still the inscriptions from the Hungarian times on the sides of some carriages: eight horses, sixteen people. They were squeezed into these cars in groups of fifty. Horses could sleep standing up.

"There was straw in the carriages and we lay on that but a lot of people slept back to back or standing up like animals," said Andor Csarnai. "It was winter, cold and there was a lot of snow outside. Of course there was no heating. They were cold and going to the toilet was only possible inside the truck over a board that had been removed.

"We were given a little food once a day and some water as well. The journey was long; there were at least ten or eleven days of waiting, when we were shunted into sidings; but the windows and doors remained closed. Our morale was weakened day-by-day…"

"Uncle Varga comforted the others, mainly the young people" - this was put on record by Lajos Fodor. Uncle Varga said that we were not prisoners; we had been brought to Russia for training and later they would send us back because we could not be prisoners. Then I organized some singing, but many men shouted me down. Csapó also asked me how I could feel like singing? 'Well,' I said, 'if crying helped I would do that.' I would have a good reason for that: I had left my wife and two children at home.

"Géza Lukács and Andor Fodor, two young people, sang 'Rorate…' At that time I realized that it was Advent, when we were on the train, and I remembered Imre Kércsi.

"Bitterness was growing and some decided to escape from the train. Four of them did so in the end."

"We arrived in Focsani some days before Christmas," the ex-prisoners remembered.

Those who escaped

I have raised this question with everyone to whom I have spoken: why didn't you escape? The answer was always the same in every case: in the beginning there were many opportunities, but later it was dangerous because of the brutality of the soldiers – as those people who tried it found out.

I would marvel at the psychological sense of the Soviet leadership if this was appropriate. They took advantage of the people's trust and faith and swindled them with false promises.

Memory has it that only two or three armed soldiers guarded the civilians here in the village, with double-barreled guns, when groups were moved to and fro in the village. For this reason, people trusted the Soviets' words when they told them they had to go to be given a pass or identity check. I remember the explanation of my father who came from Focsani.

"We hadn't done anything that would have made us fear for our lives. So why would we have, when the SZILVÁSIAK were led from the house of M. Tóth to the house of Z. Tóth, which was near the Roman Catholic church."

They snaked in a long line followed by the Soviets, over the gardens, the hemp fields, hedges and ditches. And somewhere in the end there was a Soviet again who stood in the dark between the long snaking line and the trees and bushes. Beside the track anybody could have escaped but nobody tried it. I heard the story of old Mátyás, firstly from my father but later many people confirmed it, for example, his wife and his fellow prisoner. Mátyás asked the Soviet's permission to go home to take the house key home. So he went home while the group took off over the hemp fields. Later he kept his word and rejoined the group. Because a soldier keeps his word – he said this in prison. Then he died in Focsani. He stayed there, the proof of his honor, forever.

There are similar stories about people from the second group who went home and later rejoined the group. Things worked out more happily for József Figecki and Balázs Németh. Their stories were told by József Kassai. They hid in the attic in the sack and when the group set off on their way they stayed in the attic. They claimed that they were "asleep"!

After the first searches, in Ónod and Sajólád, people realized that they had fallen victim to the Soviets. But from this time they were led on by strong and brutal soldiers. The soldiers conducted a head count. The head count became their mania. This mania lasted the whole period of imprisonment. If somebody escaped then the Soviets, instead of the escaped person, captured a simple civilian from the street. When people realized what they were up against, the braver and younger people tried to escape.

(Novák) Lajos Nádpataki and (Stefán) László Seregély escaped from the gates of hell in Debrecen. They were both railway employees. They were captured in the street in their uniform to take the place of those who had escaped. They escaped in their turn when they were being led to the truck between lines of soldiers in Debrecen. People were shepherded to the trucks which went to the Soviet Union. When most of the people tried to climb up to the truck, they got through beneath the truck and pretended that they were railway employees. It was believable because of their uniforms, and they walked off the platform in the guise of wagon supervisors. So they escaped.

The escape

The greatest and most unpleasant escape happened to be the one from the train going to Fogasi. At that time old János Petrovics, Béla Csapó, István Muhi, and István Kalas

escaped together with four Transylvanians. The leader, István Kalas, will share with us what happened and how.

"We had been at the barracks in Debrecen for a week; we were given some millet porridge for breakfast, then we were told to line up. They did it to us a hundred times a day. But now, they were saying 'pasli, pasli' (move, move!) inside the wagon, because we were going back home.

"They lied to us again. We were going in two lines between two rows of armed Russian soldiers. 'It's not a good sign,' I thought. And I was right. When we got into the carriages they nailed down the windows and doors from outside. We had been going for a long time when I told old Imre Varga and old Lúci – they were my next door neighbors – that I didn't like the whole thing: we were being taken to the mines in Russia. I would escape, I said. 'Don't do that, son,' the old neighbors of mine tried to calm me down. 'The Russians are up there with machine guns, they will shoot us just like that. Son, we were in captivity in Russia in 1914 and we were all right.'

"'Okay, but it's not the same, I was at the front too in Russia and I saw what was going on,' I explained. 'I don't want that again.' We were in Transylvania, and heading for Romania and I couldn't keep still. 'When I returned from the front I married Mariska Hatala, whom I had been in love with for a long time. We hadn't even been married for two months when they took me away. My young wife is at home, whom I love so much. Who knows what is happening to her? I don't care, I will escape even if they shoot me.' It was as if death kept us apart. 'I don't care. Even if I die, I will escape; I'd rather die here at home, on native soil than somewhere else. Hopefully, they would find me.' That's what I was thinking about and I even told old Béla Csapó about it, who was also a friend of mine. Old Jani Petrovics and Muhi, the sergeant heard me too.

"'Do you want to escape? I would go too. But how?' he kept asking me.

"'Trust me! I've got the right window.' It was boarded up with nails, though. I told them to hold up old Béla's coat so that the others couldn't see what I was doing. (Some of the guys we didn't know might have called for the Russian guards). They held up the coat and I tried to get the board down. I was doing so, and they were holding the coat above my head. I wasn't scared, I was young, and in love. Finally the board came off. And then the train was slowing down. It stopped! And I was holding the board with one arm, hoping that it wouldn't fall on the ground.

"I said, 'Pista f…, they will shoot us.' Before we left Debrecen, there was a dead prisoner hanging on the fence. He tried to escape, but was shot and left there for days. They wanted him to teach the others a lesson.

"'Pista, that's what is going to happen to you too.' But luckily the train didn't remain still for long. They whistled and shouted, and slowly the train began moving. I said: 'At last!'

"We set off for the Transylvanian Carpathians. I removed the board and I looked out. It was at night. It was 13th December; everything was covered with snow. The snow and the moon gave light too.I looked out but couldn't see anything but snow, pylons and wires. When I removed the board, old Petrovics told me that he wanted to jump first, and asked me to help him. I did. He fell out of the carriage; I was watching him. He just lay on the ground. 'Oh my God,' I thought, 'he hasn't been killed**,** has he?' There was nothing else to do; I had to go too. Béla Csapó jumped next, but he was clever, he caught the lamppost, that's how he jumped. Despite that, it was still horrible. Then came the sergeant, Muhi. He was quite short; he managed to get out easily. I wanted to go as well, but I told Miklós Szolga to come and jump too but the father-in-law, old Imre Varga wouldn't let him and he wouldn't let his own son,

Imre, jump either. They stayed, and I had to struggle by myself; there was nobody who helped me."

"Jani Petrovics, who understood some Russian and Romanian, went with little Muhi, and I with Béla Csapó. Petrovics went ahead. We'd been advancing for a long time when we reached the Maros River. There was a bridge over it and up on that two Romanians. It was instantly clear to one of them that Jani was not Romanian. He wasn't perfect in Romanian, and he was covered in blood. But they were unarmed and didn't challenge us. We'd walked up to them by now with Béla. They didn't speak to us, so we entered Abrudbánya without further incident. We were talking about the border being only 15-20 km away. We'd easily be able to cross it, we thought. We calculated that we would arrive at the village by the Mocsár-dűlő (Marsh track) for the Christmas Service. But what were we going to say to the Russians at home in the village? Csapó would tie up his arm and I would bind up my leg so that we could say we had become disabled and they would let us go home because of this. Well, it didn't work. Before Abrudbánya there was a little village and within this village there was a rushing brook, like our Boldva River. At the bridge which we had to cross two men were talking, one with a flat service cap and one in a fur cap. Uncle Béla told me:

"'I can't bear this any longer, I will ask for some food.'

"'Don't do it. I will ask someone on the edge of the village where we can find a woman.' Béla had stopped and I trudged on. I'd been going along the road about one hundred meters when I looked back. I saw Uncle Béla conferring with the two men. He shouted: 'Pista! Pista!'

"What should I do? What should I do? Should I run away or go back? It's trouble anyhow. At least one of us will escape so that they will know at home what has happened to us. Finally I went back, but by that time the person with the flat

service cap had already gone. The old man in the fur cap asked me in Hungarian:

"Have you got a certificate?"

"Sure, I have one," I said. After all I still had my railway employee registration card. But this wasn't good enough for him; he wanted Romanian or Russian papers. 'I haven't got one.' I started to tell my carefully considered story, half of which was really true. I told the old man that when we had got rid of the Russians I had asked for documentation but they didn't give me any and they wanted to give me a kick in the behind, because we should be happy that we were free, we didn't have to drudge and we could go to our families.

"All right, follow me."

"We went. But I told Béla that this looked suspicious to me.

"We were going inside a vaulted house, where there was an extremely ugly old woman. The man in the fur cap told her:

"Bring them brindza and bread!"

"Shortly, she brought curded ewe-cheese and bread on a plate and put it in front of us. 'Let's devour it!' she told us. I later got to know that this was their habit; they said this instead of: 'Let's eat.' We devoured (also) it because we were very hungry. Meanwhile we were talking about this and that…. . The elderly man offered me some tobacco and I rolled a cigar in big rough paper from it. While I was doing this, the old man went out. I was lighting the cigar when the door opened, and the old man came inside with a double-barreled shotgun in his hand. It was loaded.

"Let's go, stand up, we're going to the gendarmerie. Don't try to escape because I'll shoot you**,"** he said. We started to beg him to let us go.

"Have you got money?" I had some, because I had preserved the money my wife and I had gotten as a wedding

present, sewn in my cap. This was no good: he needed lei or rubles. I also had my wedding ring and my wife's earring sewn in my trousers. But I wasn't going to give him that, because he would seize it and he would bring us anyway, and if not he'd shoot us down. We were going into the village, to the gendarmerie by the riverside. I whispered to Béla that we should take hold of him and drop him in the water.

"No, don't hurt him', he said. 'God will lend us a hand, we'll get home somehow'. Everything happened in that way, but not at that time, because he brought us to the gendarmerie and we slept there under the bed because that is where they put us. In the morning they were laughing at us because the bottom of the bed was full of oil and we looked like devils. We got tidied up because the sergeant, who didn't speak Hungarian, was decent to us. He sent a gendarme for mush and milk. After that we left for a new gendarmerie, and he brought us to another village. There he handed us over to the gendarmes; this all took quite a long time, because the procedure was that they accompanied us to the neighboring village, we stayed there, and the next day they took us onward. Just on the day of the Christmas Service we entered a village where there was a sergeant who said that he was also Hungarian. He was a very good lad.

"They did not want to help me because they wanted to avoid punishment. I managed to pull myself up to the window and then down...

"I fell down to the bank. Luckily, the snow was thick. As I had fallen down, I pressed myself against the snow. I did not dare to move because I was afraid of being shot at or being torn to shreds by dogs. I was waiting until the sound of the train could no longer be heard. When its sound had died away, I raised my head. I could still see the red light on the end of the train and then saw it disappearing. Thank God, I managed to get away unharmed. I had been waiting there for a while.

"What was I to do now, where was to go? The others who had jumped out from the train must be far away from me, especially Petrovics. I was walking along the rails towards the station from where we set out when I had broken up the board. Suddenly, I caught sight of a man in the snow-covered fields. I whistled, and he responded. He was Csapó. We had already been approaching each other. After a while, little Muhi was coming towards us, he heard our sounds. Now we were three, we had got away with the jumping safely. But what about János? What about Petrovics? We kept on walking back the way we had come. About a kilometer away we found Uncle Jani. He was badly injured. He was all bloody. He was bleeding everywhere. Well, what should we do now? Where should we go? Luckily, not far from the road we caught sight of a rick of straw. It was cold, so we slipped into the straw and we spent the night there.

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Now we must stop here in order to see what happened to the others who remained in the wagon after they had escaped. Things happened which everybody can still remember clearly today. Many people knew and saw as well what Pista Kalas and the others had done. In the following part, I summarize the story on the basis of Imre Kécsi's, Lajos Fodor's, József Lúci's memories (which were interpreted by Mrs. Ligetvári) and those of my father.

After the four men from Felsőzsolca had escaped, a dispute started among the rest about what they should do. Many of them were in favor of alerting and speaking to the Russian guard hoping that they could escape from the punishment in store for them in this way. First of all Kuripla: János wanted it as he was assigned to be "the commander of the wagon" because he was old and he spoke Russian a little bit. "Look after them so that they don't escape," they said as

they checked the number every morning. In the end they agreed that they would not say a word "because if the train stopped, they would shoot the men dead who had escaped." There were four men who jumped out of the window and escaped. They had been caught as soldiers. Nobody knows what happened to them.

Everything came to light in the morning after the numbers were checked.

"They flogged us with their rifle butts. We ran from one corner to the other, like sheep; everybody wanted to be in the center in order not to be beaten. I survived World War I, but I have never had such an experience," said Józsi Lúci.

Everybody got hit, first of all Jani Kuripla was beaten. He was beaten with a rifle butt as well, he was hit in the face, he was so badly injured by the beating that he died shortly after we got to Focsani.

But still it did not end. According to Lajos Fodor, "When the train stopped at the next station, about 8 or 9 Romanian soldiers were walking on the platform. They had built the Tisza bridge and they were going home having completed their work. Then two Russian men jumped down, pointed a gun at them and took them among us. In this way the numbers were made up. When they got to know where they were, they began to cry."

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This happened while István Kalas and his fellows were spending their first "free" night in the rick of straw.

"We slept till the morning," István Kalas continues telling the story of their escape. "When it dawned, we sat up. But where should we go and what should we do? We should not go all four together because it would be very suspicious. We divided into two..."

"Now, I'll shut you in the cellar, in the lock-up, but in the evening we will have a big feast, because it is a holiday today in Hungary, the birth of Jesus Christ."

"And so we did. We were dirty and everything, but we had a wash and a shave…

"I still feel touched thinking of that evening, so far away in a strange country, away from my wife…"

(I realized then that Pista's eyes were filling with tears, but soon enough he kept on talking.)

"The next day we were on our way again, and at last they took us to Nagyszeben. We stayed there for two weeks, in a nice little barracks. It was a smart place, corridors washed squeaky clean; there were just about 30-35 Romanians and few Russian soldiers. We were to be taken for spies. Do you understand that? The next morning the captain came. They then called out our names. 'Are the two Hungarians here? Well, come, the older one…' They called in Csapó first. Our only piece of luck was that we had discussed in advance what we would tell them, that we were not deserters, but civilians who were taken to a forward post 'forspont' by the Russians and there they let us go. What about the horses? They were confiscated. As a matter of fact this had some basis: my father was a railway man, he did have a horse and we were really taken away by the Russians. Well, right, they call me in, too. An elderly man with a Hungarian moustache greets me.

"Jó reggelt kívánok!" (Good morning)

"Hey man,' I said to myself, 'he's Hungarian, too." He tells me to sit facing him and says the following:

"Look son, tell me about your whole life from your childhood where you grew up, what you have done, what you've gone through, how you have got here."

"I told him all. At the end the man with the moustache said that we were going home and he would have both of us passed through the border. How happy we were! And then he

disappeared. I didn't see him for days, though I ought to have because I had to clean the corridors. Then one day I was standing there in the corridors and the mustached old man came.

"Are you still here?' he asked. 'I'll make arrangements."

"We cleaned up the wash-house, in which we stayed for two weeks and then the door was opened, and the Romanian said,

"Stefán de Kalas, Béla de Csapó vinom!"

"So we go, of course we do. And there on the yard they were standing with weaponry and the interpreter tells us if we attempt to escape we'll be shot. 'Jesus Maria,' I thought, 'then they are not taking us home!' They take some wires and tie my hands with Béla's and also the two Frenchmen's who were there with us. So we were off; we were taken to the station.

"As we turned round the corner the civilians, girls and women, looked at us in a strange way, as our hands were tied together. I started to ask the Romanian – already there at the station – where we were being taken to, but he just kept on saying: 'Káza, káza' (home, home). Then at one station they tell us to stand up, we are leaving. I glance out of the window and I can see it is Ploiesti. 'My dear God, where have they brought us? Here's the petrol, the oil and everything.' We were taken to a small town, I thought as it was night already or rather dawn. I saw soldiers with weapons and also wire fencing. Oh, we are just fine again! They took all my certificates and papers at the gate. My driving license and my ID remained in Romania. I was taken to some small premises, that's where we slept till the morning, topsy-turvy, because there were some others there as well."

"Where was this, Pista?"

"Szlobozsia, Szlobozsija. It was a concentration camp. That's where we were taken to. There were all kinds of people,

tramps and such, but also Swabians and Hungarians. We Hungarians were not harmed; the Swabians were taken to Kolovgrad, near the Bulgarian border to a railway building. What was life like there? Bad, but this was not the only reason why I escaped from there, but also because I was scared that I would be taken to the Danube. But not with Béla Csapó, because he wanted to escape with others earlier on, and he was caught. He had not told me about it, so I did not tell him either this time. I came with Feri Jasó, a guy from Petri, who had got wire-cutters from somewhere; we agreed that we would ask to be let out to the toilet. And so it happened. I checked that one of the guards walked to one corner, the other to the opposite one. And then my mate cut the wire behind the toilet, slipped under it, took a look around and signaled to me to follow him. And I hurried to do so. Luckily no one noticed us. Then a lot of things happened, we were hiding and people helped us, we were given food and at times we had to escape. So, to cut a long story short, we made it down to Arad; the border was just a couple of kilometers away. There we were caught again in a swamp.

"The trouble was that when we wanted to escape over the border, six or eight Romanians wanted to escape too. They were caught, and so were we. We were taken to Pankota. That was a real military compound. When we entered the compound, other prisoners in uniforms came to us. A boy from Miskolc came to us as well.

"What's your name, brother, where do you come from?" he asked. I told him that I come from around Miskolc, from Felsőzsolca.

"Kalas...? From Felsőzsolca...?' he seemed to be glad. 'Aren't you the brother of Jóska Kalas?"

"Yes, I am,' I told him. 'He is my elder brother." It turned out that he was a friend of Jóska, almost a native of Felsőzsolca, a relative of Jancsi Horváth and Mari Bozó. I

explained how I had got there. We became good friends. A couple of days later I told him that we should attempt to escape.

"Don't try it, brother, can't you see there are guards with machine guns every fifty meters? They'll shoot you." 'You have told me this, but I keep thinking,' I told him. I was looking around for four days, searching for chances. I saw that there was a fruit garden or God knows what. In the evening, a terrible storm struck the compound with thunder and lightning. I got out. I couldn't see a single Romanian, both were in the cabin, they were afraid of the storm. 'Well, Pista,' I told him, 'we have to use the opportunity.' I hid among the vines, crossed the road and ran away. It's as painful to have to explain this as it was to go through it. I got caught in a village, and was taken to Déva to the fortress. There was an 18-year-old Hungarian kid there. His father was the director of the prison in Szeged. His name was László Márkus… or János, I can't remember which. I fared well there; I had to buy things in the town for the Romanian soldiers. I got on well with an officer; he was a Hungarian from Transylvania.

"One day he told me that he had received an order that I must be sent back to Pankota, but he didn't want that to happen to me.

"He took a map and he explained everything, what was what, and the meanings of the signs. He had drawn it himself. He gave me the map and I thanked him. When I was sent to the market, I escaped. It was the end of the summer, I think, maybe it was autumn, because I had seen apples at the market.

"I didn't get very far. People could see from my clothes and on my face that I was no Romanian. I was transported to Földvár, next to Brassó. It's about 20 kilometers away from the town. Everybody was a prisoner of war there. Bombardiers (pilots), Hungarian bombardiers were there. In that compound, life was terrible, the situation was horrible. It was called a

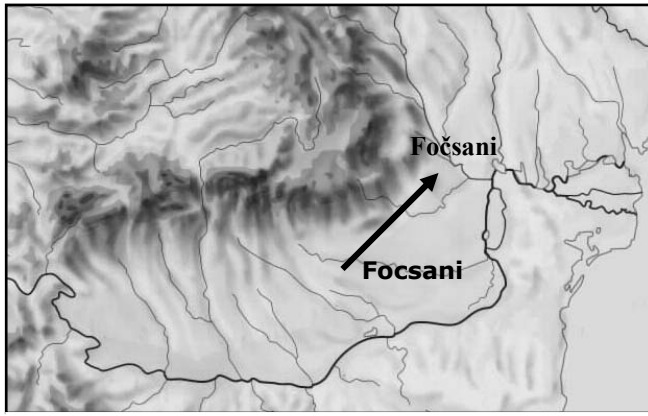
death camp. Indeed it was. There were beatings all the time; my body was covered with wounds when I got home. We were protesting against the rough handling and we wanted to come home. The bombardiers took off their red badges and collar-patches. I made sticks, we were protesting with those.

"Finally, our woes were over. It was the end of the summer, or maybe autumn, when I could cross the Hungarian border.

"It was a long story to tell; you can imagine going through it. I have suffered a lot but I never regretted it. God only knows what could have happened to me if I had not escaped again and again. Maybe I could have ended up in Siberia or in the delta of the Danube. I could have died as many others did who were the same age as me, many of them from Felsőzsolca."

V. FOCSANI

The city lies below the South Carpathians, but still on the plains, near to the river Szeret. It became notorious during World War II as a collecting and selecting center and for its big prison camp.



Little town at the foot of the Carpathians

Prisoners of war from every nation were transported to this camp from the southern part of Europe that was coming under Soviet occupation. More than a hundred thousand, or even a million people were brought here in order to be transported to Soviet camps, called Gulags, in broad-gauge trains.

Most of the people from Zsolca had arrived here with this horde. It is likely that much more inhumane treatment was visited on those people than in Debrecen. Here in these camps, thousands of people languished, some say that as many as fifty thousand prisoners might have been here. The overcrowding was tremendous. Though there were bunks in the two-story wooden barracks, most of the prisoners slept on the floor, because of the lack of space. If somebody could or was daring enough to go to the lavatory, he had to climb over the bodies,

which were lying on the floor.

Most of the prisoners were changing all the time, because the crowded trains were heading for the Soviet Union every day, at the same time, almost the same number of POWs arrived up to the middle of May.

I know this from many sources, but let's hear some details:

Andor Csarni:

"Here the food was nothing, we got only carrots, nettle soup and some boiled corn while we were there. When we arrived, there was a lot of sickness, and after that typhoid, dysentery and the terrible cold took more and more victims. My father also became very ill and his head was bunged up. They took him from us, and I never saw him again. The toilet was so horrible that....no, it was a latrine. 4 - 5 meters wide and 10 meters long, a pit with timbers across it, and it was very rare, for a man to be able to do what was necessary when crouching on them. A number of people, who were weak and dizzy, drowned, because they slipped and fell down off the urine-sodden timbers, and nobody pulled them out. That was the reason, why people didn't like to go there."

"How long were you there?" I inquired.

"Until January. It was in January when a political officer came and said, children and people over fifty had to line up.

"I was barely sixteen, so I had also been put on the list and after it we were given a list of names by counties, to be transported to the railway station and be sent home. I travelled as far as Transylvania; to be more specific, I could only stand the journey until Segesvár, because both my legs were frozen to the knees. There I was taken from the train, transported to the local hospital and was treated for a month. After that, a member of a women's charitable association took me to her own flat and treated me for two weeks, when finally I could

leave for home by train. It was March, when I got home.

"Here in our village the Romanians caught me. But I have already told you this story."

Imre Tóth:

"We were three brothers and we had been working in Balmazújváros for a while and were sent to Focsani later. We weren't with the people who arrived from Zsolca. My brother Pista, fourth in the family, had joined the railway builder squadron.

Imre Tóth with his brother -who was supposed to have been dead– in a POW camp in 1946

"We haven't heard anything about him since then. We did not stay long in Focsani. Once a commission came, sitting at long tables in front of the camp. We had to go there one by one; they examined us, our bodies, skin, muscles in order to investigate our physical state. Based on our state of health, one group of people were sent here, the other was sent there. On

this account my brother and I had to stand on one side, but my other brother Sándor was put on the opposite side. We didn't have much chance of saying farewell to each other. We have never seen Sándor since then. We don't have any idea what could have happened to him.

"It was a very cold winter. We felt very cold; we rubbed one another's back in order not to freeze.

"I don't know how long we had been marching for, but my brother Józsi began to feel some kind of sickness; his legs had frozen. His legs were so swollen that his trouser legs burst open. When he finally stopped to speak and to move, and when the train had stopped, my dead brother had to be taken into another carriage, where the other dead bodies were – lots of corpses. I had helped them to carry my dead brother's body. So I arrived in the Don basin alone. But I don't even like to talk about these things.

"Just talk about it, if it's possible," I tried to encourage the reserved and reticent Imre.

"I was sent to Rubezsnaj, where I worked in a brigade."

"Were any people from Zsolca there with you?"

"The old Pista Kristóf, but he came home a year earlier. There were also Imre Rabóczky, who had lived in Kassai Street, but I don't know what could have happened to him. It was every man for himself. I wasn't in the same brigade as them; they had been in Rubezsnaj earlier than me. It was summer when one afternoon I was called to the gate. I was very afraid because I thought that one of the civilians had made a complaint about me, or they had mixed me up with somebody else. I went down, and my brother was standing at the gate.

"It was my brother Józsi, who had been left among the corpses.

"It was unbelievable – I was dumbfounded."

"It happened like this… the reason why I do not like to talk about it is that people may think that I only a fantasy."

"What did your brother say happened to him?"

"They were believed to be dead but there were three in the wagon who did not die and who were making noise; at the next station they were taken off the train and were taken to the local hospital. He was cured, and when he got to me he was already fine. We came home together.

"The number in the huge camp was constantly changing.

"In the end, thousands were still left after several selections because they were thought to be unsuitable for further transportation."

"There were two kinds of fate for them," János Hernádi said about them. "Either they died or, if they survived the life there, sooner or later they were sent home."

It must have happened like this because we know that eighty of the civilians from Felsőzsolca who had been taken to Focsani were sent to a Soviet camp (forty of them died there), 6-8 men died in Focsani and around thirty young 16-18 year-olds, the sick, and people over 50 were sent home in smaller or larger groups in 1945, between January and August.

Lajos Fodor was kept in Focsani for ten months:

"When I got into a group that was about to be taken to the U.S.S.R. and the committee examined me, I peed in my trousers, and the old doctor who observed this touched my kidney; so I faked moans and I was taken to the hospital; this is the way I managed to escape. This was exactly the same as the other buildings; there were no medicines and bandages, nothing, but at least we could lie down and we got a little to eat. I made myself useful pretty soon and I even helped imprisoned Hungarian doctors. I distributed food and took care of people, so I stayed in the hospital. More people from Zsolca came there; I helped everyone I could. I got them more food and generally took care of them."

"Who did you meet there, Lajos?"

"Laci Tornai, András Csarni, Miklós Kiss, and Miklós Szolga were taken there."

"What happened to them?"

"They all died, and János Kuripla and Imre Varga died there in Focsani as well."

"And what happened to the dead?"

"There was a mass grave on the south side next to the fence but outside the camp. The guard could see it from the tower. They usually took 50-60, often 100-200, dead bodies there. The prisoners took them there; once or twice I had to do that too. We took the bodies on the forage rack. They were dropped in that big hole. I saw the teacher, Sallay, in the hospital; he was laid out like a frog. I picked him up; he was just staring at me. I took care of him and I took him to the officer's barracks."

"Was István Sallay, the teacher, in Focsani?"

"Of course. I took care of him. When he came home he gave me this present." (And Lajos showed me a carved wooden stick with a bonehead). "Kisida was there as well."

"Ferenc Kisida? The Greek Catholic teacher from Zsolca?" I asked him, surprised.

"Yes, he was there too. He was Vorosilov's interpreter so he could come home earlier.

"When Margitics came and they were shouting for people from Zsolca to come to the headquarters, I started to run and I found Margitics there who told me..."

(Here I interrupted him and asked him how these people got there. All three of them were well-known persons in the society of the village during the war years. Of course, for different reasons. The two teachers were interesting not only because of their profession but also because of their civil and political roles. I knew and I was pretty sure that they did not fall into the hands of Russians during the big 'gathering.' Then

how, which way and why did it happen? Did somebody denounce them in Zsolca?)

There are so many important things here that I asked János to return to them later on. Let's go on remembering.

"Then another march was organized for the ones who could come home.

"We were taken to Obodesti. We headed home from there. When the marches started, I saw a man lying on the ground like a rug. I went back. It was Balázs Jenei, your brother-in-law. He was absolutely crippled. I put him on my shoulders and took him home. He was very sick."

*"We all knew about Ferenc Kisida, the teacher; as a civilian he also worked for the counter intelligence, and during the war he was taken to the Russian prisoners several times because he spoke Russian fluently. Obviously he was not Vorosilov's interpreter, he only translated for the top officers.

"He did so soon after we arrived home. A woman at the station saw that I was carrying Balázs Jenei; she came to me and gave me three bottles.

"There was medicine for diarrhea in one of the bottles; in the second there was an analgesic and in the third there was a 'real' drug: pálinka. This is yours, said the woman then she pointed out where we should get something to eat."

"Was this a female Russian soldier?"

"No, she was a civilian; she has….somewhere else, too….at the station," the old man searched among his memories. "They carried the food to the train."

"And who came home with you, Lajos?"

"Balázs Jenei, Balázs Juhász, his son, Ottó Juhász, your father, Sándor, Imre Céklási, Andor Fodor, Cservenyák – as far as I can remember."

The two teachers and the 'Russian interpreter' in Focsani

The news that István Sallay, the Roman Catholic teacher, Ferenc Kisida, the Greek Catholic teacher, and Margitics, the first leader and secretary of the newly-founded local Communist Party (who was active as an interpreter in Zsolca from the beginning), were in Focsani came as a surprise to me because I knew that the two teachers were not among the very first civilians to be taken away. It appeared to me that there was a theory among the families who had become orphans fifty years ago that a man called Margitics was going to bring the citizens of Zsolca home.

No mention was made in the last half century of this or of the two teachers being taken captive. It's true that there was not any mention of this event.

There had to be one common thing in the fate of the three people. They were sent to Focsani simply because this was the Russians' plan. They went against their will, and although Margitics was fulfilling an order; he had to be in possession of military documents.

The question – if you like, the suspicion – is that István Sallay and Ferenc Kisida were not collected accidentally in the mass gathering, but they were picked out from among the civilians who stayed at home. Who among the locals in Zsolca, then, informed against them?

Without an informer, the Russians could not have found them in that confused time. Was it just luck? Were they collected from the street? Possibly, but it is difficult to imagine, especially in the case of Ferenc Kisida; not only because he spoke the Russian language perfectly but he knew well the 'customs' of this war.

I cannot give exact answers to these questions, but I put forward what I have got to know so far, in the hope that

documents, facts and information might come to light, which will finally clarify what happened there and whether anybody is to blame for the deportations.

Who were the three above-mentioned men?

István Sallay, a teacher at the Roman Catholic School, and Ferenc Kisida, a teacher at the Greek Catholic School, had lived in Zsolca for decades. Both were excellent figures in the village cultural and public life, leaders and members of the youth and social organizations. István Sallay was the founder of a choir which is still active today. He was disabled in World War I.

It is public knowledge in the village that he became a soldier again in 1943. He was in command of a Jewish Labor Service Company, but he was relieved as a result of his reportedly close relationship with the Jewish families. When the war came to Zsolca, he was at home – to the best of memory. It is just possible that he was in captivity somewhere nearby with the Labor Service men after all.

Besides Lajos Fodor, Balázs Balatoni's wife also said that Sallay was in captivity. She said that the first information about her husband being deported came from Sallay. Accordingly, following his return home from captivity at Focsani, the teacher informed her that the Russians arrested her husband at Alsózsolca, in a street in the environs of the Felsőzsolca station, and forced him to join that march in which they took István Sallay, too. In Mrs.Balatoni's memory it could have been a week after the Russians came to Felsőzsolca, and they had to escape to Alsózsolca.

Andor Mátyus mentioned that he met Sallay in Focsani; he talked with him and he remembered – he said – that he was taken because of the Jews when he was in command of the Labor Service. He gave him tobacco, too. On another occasion Andor met Ferenc Kisida, too, but then both went missing from the vicinity.

Ferenc Kisida, the Greek Catholic teacher, was an enthusiastic adult-educator and public figure, the patron of the drama group and the organizer of the first cinema in our village. He was taken prisoner in World War I, and he had perfected the language that he had acquired there. Hereafter, I can rely once more only on collective memory. It happened that he was taken away from teaching to the Russian front several times, and for several weeks, where he did propaganda work. He worked with prisoners of war – the memory dies hard.

Because of his opposition to the Germans, the police took him away in the autumn of 1944, but he was already back home when the front came to Felsőzsolca. When the Russians took the first group to the Greek school on 30th November 1944, a number of people saw Kisida Ferenc in the school garden and they talked with him, they said. *

In the material collected, Imre Tóth and János Demkó talk about Ferenc Kisida's captivity. Both of them met Ferenc Kisida in Debrecen. When the others had already left the Pavilon barracks, they were separated from the inhabitants of Zsolca for different reasons and they were in Debrecen for weeks.

According to Mrs. Sárosi's memory, her husband spoke several times about the fact that he came home from Focsani together with Ferenc Kisida.

I know two documents about István Margitics's work. One of the documents is the county subprefect's decision concerning an István Margitics who lived in Felsőzsolca and who served as an interpreter from 1st December 1944 till the end of February 1945. He was given 1050, that is one thousand fifty pengő, as remuneration by the National Committee for this period, "because during this time he had lost his salary as a workman and required this amount for his family's livelihood." (Miskolc, 17th April 1945. no 7454/ai/1945)

It is not a special case because other communities were also forced to pay for an interpreter, but the starting point of his service and his travelling to Focsani is remarkable.

The community issued his certificate of character on 8th February; it was a necessary document to authorize his journey. [30] At that time, leaving one's permanent address and travelling was not allowed except with the permission of the Soviet headquarters. Besides these things, the following is based on the memory of his contemporaries.

We know just a few things about his previous life. During the war he came from Kárpátalja, from a Ruthenian language district, at the beginning of 1940. He spoke Russian like a native. He married a woman from Zsolca, Zsófia Szemes. He himself became very well-known in the village after the Russian victory. According to local memory, he entered the Russians' service immediately before 1st December. He went from house to house searching for food with soldiers at Sorik. With the support of the Russian Headquarters, he organized the armband militia in the first few days, which consisted of five or six Zsolca men (it's a kind of civil police which collaborated with the Russians), and on the following day he established the local communist Party with more or less the same people and he became its leader and secretary.

After that time he was the leader of the village. He interpreted, negotiated and made arrangements, as did the judge and the parish clerk. In the next few months, as the village became stronger and stronger and the National Committee was established, he moved more into the background and later he was displaced from the leadership of the party. But he was still an important person; his relationship with the Russians was good.

Meanwhile he took it upon himself to travel to Focsani on the trail of the people who had been deported. This journey

had to be undertaken after 8th February, after the expiry of his certificate. But beyond this usual certificate he had to have a more authoritative document, a certificate from one of the higher Soviet Headquarters because without this certificate it was impossible to travel across the international border without any harm in the confusion of those months, and to reach Focsani and travel back unchallenged

But it really happened to Margitics.

According to Lajos Fodor's memory, as they were looking for some people from Zsolca in the camp they were shouting to them to go to the headquarters' building.

"They were searching for me and my fellows for three days. I saw him and I talked to him; he was outside the fence and he whispered to me: 'You are a communist under all circumstances, do you understand?!' In the Headquarters building they questioned me. They asked my name, where I was from, whether I had been a soldier: I said no. But the Czech interpreter who was translating said that it was not true because in Hungary there was a general mobilization.

"Besides Lajos, did anybody else hear the warning?"

"Yes, János Takács."

I looked for János Takács, the movie man, and asked what he knew about the case. He said he was a soldier and he was captured south of Székesfehérvár, and he was taken to Focsani through Temesvár. They arrived there sometime in March. He was there for a few weeks. During these weeks he heard them shouting: the men from Zsolca should go to the headquarters.

People from Zsolca were being rounded up for about two days. Almost one hundred people were gathered together in the end, and he also went there; but none of them were from Zsolca, only from the surroundings. He met Lajos Fodor there and talked to Margitics as well.

But then nothing happened and he was taken to Lajla.

According to Lajos Fodor, the Russians finally sent Margitics away because women and children also came to the camp, and he took their luggage and shouted over the fence, asking who else was going there.

"Why do you think, Lajos, that people from Zsolca didn't go there?"

"Because they didn't hear it. Later on, when I met your family and asked them why they didn't come there, as we could have gone home, they just laughed at me and considered me a fool to say such things."

Apart from the details, if we accept the fact that Margitics really went to Focsani, there are two possible answers to the question why he didn't take any Zsolca people home in the end. One of the answers might be that it was his own private enterprise; the other answer might be that he travelled to Focsani to take only one person home but he didn't find him there. He couldn't find him, because by that time all the people from Zsolca had been taken to the center of the Soviet Union by train. Only those twenty to thirty Zsolca people who had been discharged could have been there, barely surviving in one or other of the medical blocks in the huge camp of 50,000 people, waiting for death or the return home.

Having collected sources, I got information in the middle of my writing that one other person, namely Pál Veres, who could have been in Felsőzsolca, belonged to the illegal communist 'cell.' When István Oszip was appointed subprefect of the county, he allegedly kept searching for Pál Veres. He wanted him brought home from Russian captivity. Is it only an assumption to connect this with István Margitics's journey?

I asked Andor Mátyus who spent ten months in Focsani:"How did you manage to survive in Focsani during these six months?"

"At the beginning of March, the Soviet Commander announced that each block had to decorate the front of the

barracks. We were collecting everything, such as colorful stones and pebbles within the camp territory, and used them as decoration. The Russian Commander liked our barracks the best. Andor Mátyás, the house painter, was an expert in his job and he painted churches as well."

"Then the Commander told us to make a big decorative feature in front of the Headquarters at the entrance of the camp. A book was given to me with a colorful illustration in it. 'These are the Soviet arms,' said the interpreter. As I'd never seen Soviet arms in my life before, it was natural that I didn't have an idea how to make it and what I needed for it. However, I was glad to undertake the job. Our lives depended on it, because I was told to take six or seven other men with me and get down to it immediately. Well, as the discharged people of Zsolca who remained there, I was with Jóska Papczun, Ferenc Papczun, your father, Sándor Zsíros, Imre Céklás and János Lénárt. We all were working on the decoration for weeks. We became the decorating brigade of the camp. This good luck helped us to survive Focsani."

"Our wages, the benefits, were a double portion of the meal that we could eat every day. The way it happened is that we got the daily one-course meal with the others in the barracks. It was what it was. There was some variety in the food that the chefs cooked: one day we had nettle soup, the second day carrot, the third day corn-meal; and then these took it in turn for several months. What we got was just enough to stay alive. From this point, we were allowed to have a double portion. Every day we got a piece of paper with the note 'food for 6 heads' written in pen. We went to the kitchen with this piece of paper and we always got the second portion. However, we soon came to realize that if we put the number one in front of the 6 in pen, we were served in the kitchen with 16 portions. It was a splendid idea, saving many lives…"

"Every day we brought the carrots and corn in a decorated bucket."

"Weren't you afraid of being caught?"

"We might have been afraid, as we were afraid of so many things there, but nobody cared about the fact that six people ate for twenty-two in a camp of 50,000 people. Every morning, five times more were tipped into the mass grave. We ate their food. We were working hard, neatly and meticulously. We only had to say a word and we could go out to the ruins escorted by armed people with 200 to 300 captives. From there we could bring all kinds of colorful materials in our hands and the edges of our coats. Pebbles, colored glass and pieces of tiles. A lot of these were necessary for the Soviet arms. We built a small embankment and laid out the arms on the slope. We were the decorating brigade and could feel relatively free to go up and down within the camp. This is how I met a few Jewish men whom I knew in the barracks."

"Wait a minute, Andor! Jewish? In the barracks, there?"

"Yes, there were about 2000 of them, once when…"

"Let's put this subject aside," I suggested. "We will discuss it next time. All right?"

"The staff of the camp was reduced by the end of April and by the beginning of May; prisoners were not coming in such large numbers. We might have been only 6-7,000 in the summer, when all of us were 'discharged.' We were taken to the Kisláger, but hundreds of people were taken away even from here from time to time. Our hope that we would ever get home evaporated each time. It was the 20th of August when we were lined up and were told that we were going home. In fact, no armed guards escorted us, as happened with every such transport to the station that was taken to the Soviet Union. We knew from this that we really were going home."

"I cannot say what I felt. We were escorted to the station in Focsani after the line-up. It was under the slope of

the south Carpathians, 10-15 kms from Obedis. The train sometimes stopped, we could get off, but I did not get off during the whole journey. I came straight home. I arrived through Debrecen on the 4th of September 1945."

Andor Mátyus, who as a decoration man could go freely in the camp, remembered the structure and arrangement of the prison camp. As I asked he drew it from memory. I attach the drawing here.

There are a lot of similarities with Auschwitz. However, there was no crematorium, just mass graves.

Jewish inmate of a labor camp in Focsani

I have no documentary evidence that about 20-25 Jewish inmates of a labor camp (and some Hungarian soldiers who stayed behind as well) remained in the village during the days the front came to Zsolca. I can rely only on the survivors' statements and information.

In those chaotic days, there were some families who, having escaped from Transylvania or from Miskolc, away from the bombing and fighting, settled down in Zsolca. Naturally, they came and went freely in the village. The public administration had practically stopped by November.

Only the judge and the clerk stayed in their posts. They were forced to, but dealing with fugitive Jewish and Hungarian soldiers was the least of their worries.

There was no constabulary in the village, nor any Hungarian Nazi organization (just as there was no illegal Communist Party here).[17]

[17] Several people remembered that they saw Balázs Juhász, a man living in Szilvas, with a Hungarian Nazi armband in the village. Others claim that he himself hid Jewish people, which is why he kept showing his armband. The fact that he became the best friend of the Jewish inmates of the labor camp within a few days bears witness to this.

Although those Jewish inmates of a labor camp who stayed here did not venture out into the street, they did go on working quietly with the animals for the farmers in the farmyard. I myself was a witness to it. Two inmates of a labor camp stayed at Sándor M. Tóth's, the neighboring farmer living opposite us. As a child I exchanged a few words with them when they worked in the farmyard next door.[18]

Lajos Fodor claims under oath that the Germans saw the Jewish people living there during the fighting; moreover, the German officers listened to the foreign language news on the radio which was for Jews. Someone called Sam spoke several foreign languages. Of course, they were not informed about the fact that they were Jewish. The Germans thought they were his workers, Lajos Fodor claims.

I must quote Lajos Fodor again:

"The Jews were put up in the shed in Balmazújváros, and they pocketed as much tobacco as they could. They poured out their German rucksacks here…Of course I got three packets of tobacco from the Jews concealed there. No, it was four! I gave everybody in the first group two leaves of tobacco (this refers to one of the groups of Zsolca men); I

[18] According to Mrs Mihály Dankó (Herminka Tóth), one of the inmates of a labor camp hidden at their place got hurt with her father. Her husband carried this Jewish man by cart to the Russian hospital in Alsózsolca. She does not know anything about the other one. She remembers that he went away or disappeared in the night when the Russians came in. Unfortunately, in spite of all this other tragedies happened. We know from the publications of Krisztian Kapusi, who is an archivist, that the German military constabulary captured and shot in the head on the spot the Jewish inmates of a labor camp trying to escape from the neighboring village in November 1944, and they were buried on the grounds of Zsolca. Their names are: Dr. Károly Pfeiffer, the secretary of the Commercial Bank of Budapest, György Rotthmann, a shop assistant from Dunaharaszti, József Weinberger, one of the graphic artists from Budapest, Viktor Róth, a shop assistant from Komárom, and József Szamer from Veszprém.

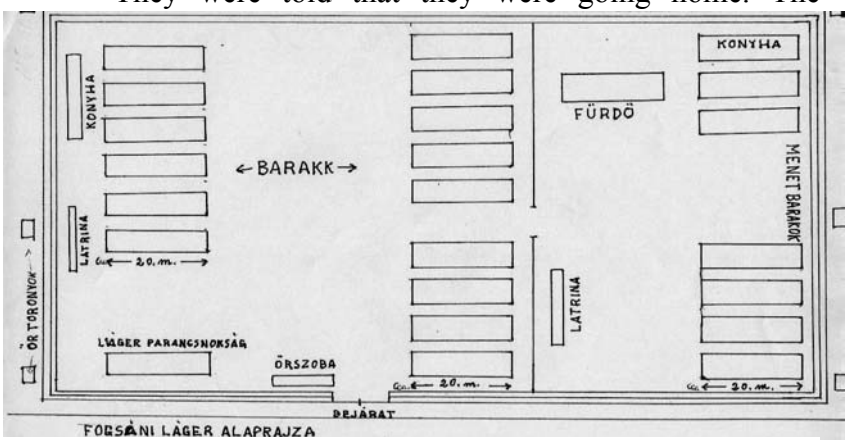
distributed it to them in a line. I kept one leaf of it for myself as currency…..”

Besides, Lajos Fodor mentioned several times during the conversations – unconnected with this topic – that Balázs Juhász became the leader of that group of Jewish people.

I asked Andor Mátyus what he knew about the Jewish inmates of the labor camp that he had mentioned before. He said that about 30-40 unknown civilians went with them from Zsolca. There were some men from Arnót and a lot of Jewish labor camp inmates. The latter could be easily distinguished as they wore different clothing and their main characteristic was their rucksacks, which they got when they were inmates of the labor camp. They also needed certification, a document of some sort.

“They were together in Block 4 at Focsani. There were about 4000 people,” Andor Mátyus remembers.

“They were told that they were going home. The



Andor Mátyus’s drawing of the ground-plan of the Focsani camp, made in 1994.

commander of this camp was also Jewish. He was very decent, a man from Ózd called László Slézinger. I know him well. He said to me: ‘Visit us, we are going home.’ After a few days the

block got a lot of vegetables, radishes and green onions thanks to the help of an outside organization. So they were going home, I thought, because they wanted to build them up, strengthen them. But in the afternoon, while I was walking around because of my decorating job, I saw that a great force of Russian soldiers were preparing themselves in the square which was on the other side of the commander's building. They were given ammunition. I had seen that earlier as well, but when they were getting ready to take people home, only a few soldiers went with them and only those soldiers prepared themselves. I ran to Slézinger and said to him that we should escape because it would come to no good. But he insisted that they were going home. They left. By the time I got back to the block they were no longer there. I didn't know what had happened to them, but sometime in the 1950s I was painting the house of Lili Krakovics, which is the building of the post office now, because the Krakovicses – you know they were Jewish as well – managed to survive the war and the deportation. Later they went to America. Lili Krakovics was still living there. So as I was working there Laci Slézinger suddenly dropped in unexpectedly."

"'Well, you…?'

"'And you…?'

"We welcomed each other. Slézinger told me – he swore – that they had been taken to Siberia. Many of them died there. Other Jewish inmates of the labor camp came to the block and stayed. They were chosen as well. When we were coming home their numbers were about a hundred. Balázs Juhász was their leader or something of the sort. He was given the list of names of those they travelled home with. He still has this document."

That is what Andor Mátyus said. It can be proved by official data. Tamás Stark has published details about those people who came home from Soviet imprisonment in 1947.

This document is based on the data of the Ministry of Welfare. According to the document, we know that in 1947, from January to 31st October, 817 inmates of the labor camp (they were Jewish men), 5,829 civilian interned men, as well as 3,596 women and 124 heroes returned home. [31] The author notes that the rate was similar the next year as well. How many Jewish people were taken to the Soviet Union altogether, and how many of them died there?

Ten thousand or fifteen thousand?

Curiously, nobody used to talk about those people who were taken to the Soviet Union and died there. Nobody talks about it even nowadays. These people were not even mentioned on the mourning day of the Holocaust. I watch and listen to the speeches of rabbis and the chief rabbis of Eger, Miskolc, Pécs, Nyíregyháza, Győr, Balassagyarmat and Szeged on TV, and I read the obituaries and apologies of Jewish and non-Jewish political leaders but they don't say a word about those people who were taken to the Soviet Union and died there. It is true that not one sympathetic sentence has been said about those hundreds of thousands of Hungarians, civilians and people with German family names, who suffered the same fate. These people's only sin was the fact that they were born Hungarian.

Although during the last half-century they have talked a lot about the conscripted Jewish inmates of the labor camp and the miserable fate and suffering of those who worked behind the front, all of these dissertations and articles suggested that most of the inmates of the labor camp died here.

Without any data we can make nothing of it. In our town, in Felsőzsolca, the numbers tell a significant story.

On 3rd May 1944 a census was made and according to it 73 Jewish people lived here at that time. All of them were deported, some of whom had been inmates of the labor camp earlier. On the memorial for World War II we can read 46 or

47 names of Jewish people who died in concentration camps or who passed away as inmates of the labor camp. It means that 25 or 26 of them survived the war. Only some of them were women (Mrs. Krakovics, Lili Krakovics, Ilona Grooszberg and presumably some others) and young men, the others were grown men who could escape by means of forced labor. Most of these people went to Palestine or America immediately, but some of them came home (László Swarc, Dezső Ritter, Gyula Kaufman, Zoltán Feldman (Kárpáti), László Wellesz, László Weisz) and they lived here peacefully, respected by all, until they passed away.

At the same time 51 or 52 young men of those who went to the front died, and we haven't mentioned those 47 of the deported civilians who also died.

People of Zsolca in the GULÁGs

It can be proved that people of the village tried to stay in one block. This effort met with success at Focsani. But after this time they were scattered. They were placed in many barracks, then after a long process of selection, they were swept into smaller groups. It depended only on the Soviet administration where fate threw those people, where the train consisting of cattle cars took them to slavery. Now it is impossible to find out where they were or where they died. There is nobody to ask. Maybe if lists, name-lists, and accounts made in the Soviet camps are one day discovered – because such lists were made. If these are preserved somewhere…

I think that the captives were taken to similar areas over a period of time. In January, when the majority of the people from Zsolca had been transported, the Don basin came next; most people were taken to the Dombász valley.

Imre Kércsi, who spent four tormenting years doing slave-work in the factories and mines of the Don basin, spoke about their lives and conditions:

"Our situation was miserable in Focsani, but it was no better in Sepsenkova, where we arrived on 20th January 1945. It was terribly cold. About 2000 people came on the train; seven of us were from Zsolca. István Franczuz, the innkeeper; Demeter Simárszky and his two sons, the oldest and the youngest, Pista and Jancsika; Józsi Kovács, the 'small-eyed'; Lajos Székely and Antal Varga, the father of the footballer, Viktor. In the subsequent times, a lot of things merge into one another for me, but I will always remember it to this day. First we were taken to a bath house; there were a couple of some kind of wash basins made of metal, there were 5-10 liters of water in them, and who knows how many people had washed themselves in each wash basin. We were naked because our clothes were taken away to be disinfected, but we were still covered with lice after that, too. Typhoid killed many people. I remember there were people who crouched down next to the wall in the bath and died there. We were very weary then. After having a bath we were led to a building, which had no doors or windows, either. Later we had to make them. We were herded into a large room where at least a hundred people huddled together. We were packed there like herrings in a barrel, our bodies next to one another, but it was fortunate because we warmed each other. This camp was different in that although they gave us poor food, we got meals twice a day, in the morning and in the evening. We had to work at a construction site. First we cleared a ruined area, then we made a building there, but we were very weak. On the first day when they made me carry a carriage-spring, I felt so giddy that I was like a drunken man, though at home with my father, who was a smith, I carried it in one hand. We worked and worked like slaves. We went to the factory in the morning, later to the

mine, and finally in the evening we went back to the camps. The food was poor, and people suffered from typhoid and dysentery. About 2000 people arrived here, but by the summer half of them had died, but new ones were brought in."

"What about the people from Zsolca who were with you?"

"The six of them all died one after another in six months' time. I was the only one who survived."

"But for God's sake, why were you taken there, why were you dragged there, just in order to kill you?"

"Believe me, I pondered on it a lot. Not there, but when after four years I came back, and at home, I retrospectively got to know what had happened in the world when we were there, because we did not know one thing about the outside. We lived like slaves, like prisoners. I pondered on it, I am still thinking of it now, whether the Soviets kept us there as hostages. I think that it was important for them, the leaders of the Soviet Union and Stalin, that we should not be at home. Imagine, 2-3000 or more strong, healthy men who could be called up at any time, it would have meant more trouble for them if they had been in Hungary. I read that the English and the Americans thought that they, the Russians, would attack them immediately after the war. They knew it as well. It is true that the Germans and the war destroyed them completely. After four years, when I came home, the bombed locomotives were still there at the station depot. There were no men to work."

"But of course, how could that be when so many of you were there; just as many people were in arms here and everywhere else in the world till 1989?"

"But they were lazy as well… They had nothing to eat; they did not live better than we did. We were brought out to the collective farm to work and, imagine, the wheat cut by a hand-scythe was still there unthreshed in December! And even at

Christmas! Imagine! Crops went to seed there in large quantities."

András Fehér, who arrived during the conversation, interrupts:

"Believe it, in Russia, the civilians and even the guards and soldiers asked us for food."

"Yes, it was so," continues Imre Kércsi. "Those who worked on the collective farm ('kolhoz') stole and sold the carrots and potatoes to people in the village, but if they were caught, they were punished a lot. It was easier for us so we stole everything, everywhere. From the 'kolhoz' we stole potatoes, cabbages and carrots; we also stole from the factory and from buildings, and bartered with the civilians for tobacco and food and even for spirits. We survived somehow. I sold my boots three times to civilians. But it happened in the mine in Dombasz. You know, we were given boots for winter, and if they were good enough we bartered them for worse ones. And then I started complaining about my boots, but we had to survive.

"Weren't you punished?"

"No, I wasn't because they didn't notice that. In summer we were given shoes with a wooden sole. There was huge poverty and misery there."

"But I was punished once," continues András Fehér. "I was caught stealing and was shut in an air-raid shelter for five days. Do you know what it was like? I could hardly stretch out and one night even ten people were in it. Life was very wretched there. When our group arrived we were 1200 people altogether in Dombasz, but one year later when I returned home only 430 of them were still alive."

János Hernádi:

"I was sent to one of the camps in Dombasz. We worked in a coalmine and in a quarry. There were some people there from Zsolca, such as: István Novák, the barber, Pali

Macsuga whose wife came from Eszlár, and Lajos Urszin. We were in the same camp in the same barracks. Balázs Balatoni was also there but in another camp. One of his companions, a young boy, said that Balázs Balatoni died. Later on we worked together and carried wood to a frame-saw**.** As I remember, Jani Pásztor and his son, the son of Anna Szűcs, were also nearby. I'd been waiting to come home for two years, but some people from time to time came home from there. You know, as I said before, the skin on our feet, arms and hips was infected sometimes and those who were in a very bad condition, but transportable, they were sent home, those who weren't they died there. Those who were able to work were also kept. One day we were finally told: 'Szkoro domoj', (Quick! Home!) We quickly packed and came. We were brought back to Focsani where we were given new clothes and from there through Máramarossziget we were brought back to Debrecen. I arrived home on the 31st October 1947."

András Hegedűs:

"I was a soldier, I was left behind, but I was caught at Szécsény and on 5th December I was taken to Gyöngyös. From there we walked and we were put into coaches in Hatvan and at last, Jászberény. There must have been around 1200 of us there, and from there we travelled to Debrecen. We stopped but we didn't get out: other groups were put on the train at the station, that's all.

"We arrived at Focsani at the beginning of January where I met people from Zsolca. I went to them. There were Balázs Juhász, Antal Alaxai, Jani Huru-Tóth, one of my acquaintances from Pálfala, Vilmos Szabó was also there, but I remember I also met Feri Vágási and Imre Guba. We were put into coaches there and taken to Horlovka. Jancsi Mezei and Gyula Turcsányi were also there.

"I was also together with Pista Novák and Bandi Fehér. In spring we were transported out to the 'kolhoz' and in the

autumn we were brought back to the camp. But I was taken to Odessa, where we were also in a camp, but I also worked at a frame-saw. We carried wood. If I remember it well it was in 1947 when I met Laci Szűcs and Sándor Üveges. I arrived home on the 9th of July 1947. I weighed 35 kilos then. We were also transported to Focsani first, then via Máramarossziget to Debrecen."

János Mezei:

"From Focsani we were sent to the big camp next to Orlovka-Nikitovka. Balázs Balatoni and Pista Lénárt from Zsolca were with me.

"Jani told us that the conditions were very bad. They got very little to eat; it was also bad in that many people got sick and died. That winter already, István Lénárt died, as did Jani and a companion brought his corpse to a mass grave. They carried him on a stretcher and so rolled him into the grave between the others, but Lénárt's corpse turned face down, so Jani jumped into the ditch and turned it over. The Russian guard asked "Familia?" (member of your family?) 'No,' answered Jani. The guard said with a compassionate tone: 'Vojna, na, vojna, vojna' (That's the war!). Balázs Balatoni also died there that winter; he was also tipped into a mass grave,' Jani remembered.

From two manuscripts:

Károly Oláh, an inhabitant of Zsolca who was caught on national territory as a soldier and was deported to the Soviet Union like many other men from Zsolca, writes:

"Many armed guards accompanied us to the station. They shouted: 'Matyarszki, posli doma!' (Hungarians, go home!) But in a strange way, with a laugh, as if the words meant nothing. We learned these words in the first couple of days along with the rough expressions they often used.

“We nearly went mad at the station when we saw the long line of wagons. The ventilators were covered with barbed wire. It was obvious that we weren’t being taken home but to the Soviet Union. The guards were not secretive any more; they pointed at the barbed wire wagons laughing and mocking. ‘Matyarszki! Pasli doma, na Szibír, jovfolye matty!’*

“I will not translate these disgusting words. Above all, the mention of the word ‘Siberia’ was terrifying. We were forced with similar rude words and with rifle butts into the cattle cars. It was a kind of organized selection, twenty-five enclosed wagons. 2000 people were transported in them. Eighty of us were crammed into one wagon; the door shut on us; we could hardly even get fresh air…I couldn’t think or say anything; fear of death came over me. Maybe only doctors can tell that when one is in such a situaton there’s only a thin line between sanity and insanity. If the line breaks one might as well be dead. Senses and nerves cease to work, the man – so to speak – goes insane.

“I don’t remember when the train moved or stopped. The rumbling of the wheels pulsed into my mind death, death, death. I could take neither drink nor food for two days. Nor do I remember whether it was myself who went to the toilet or I was taken to it? Visions of distant lands came to me; they quickly disappeared, then revived, and were gone again. Siberia, Siberia, Siberia!

“My senses only started to work again after several days; I started to feel hunger and thirst. The others were in no better condition either. The hair of some of them turned from black to pure white from one day to the next. The spirit of helping each other evolved during this greatest trouble. The wagon was small, sitting or lying was only possible when we stuck close to each other. My leg, when I streched it, got between the legs of the fellow on the other side.

"I can't remember on which day we got to the great concentration camp at Focsani again; we were only transported further after two or three days of rest. We were given more to eat on those two or three days; the food tasted better and we were given water too. There was a well in the middle of the camp just like in the grazing fields of Hortobágy. Two people took it in turns at the water; we could drink from the trough as much as we needed. The water was always fresh and cool. Underwear could be washed, and clothes disinfected in a hot dry stream. There were numerous POWs of various nationalities there, and a lot of ordering, controlling Russians. I couldn't estimate the camp's size or the total number of inmates.

"We were forced into wagons after three days. We got used to being transported for a couple of days, then they gave us a rest, then we carried on again, for who knows how many more thousands of kilometers towards that terrifying Siberia. There was a big need for transit rest camps. We were transported under such circustances that we wouldn't have made it through in many weeks or months. The rail transport was slow; distances were great. It wouldn't have made any sense at all if people had died by the time the trains got to their destinations.

"One day I'll remember as long as I live. 26th July, the name day of Anna – but not because of the Annas. I found myself in the shadow of death. There was a blazing sun; dog-days I should say, on that particular day. Wagons set out in the early hours, but they forgot to open the doors. The roof of the wagons was made of metal, so they got really hot inside by noon. After lunch distribution – we were also given water – they started to force us into the waggons as they were transporting us onwards. They shut the doors on us: eighty people crammed inside the boiling wagons without air and ventilation. You can guess what happened. Puddles of human

sweat formed on the floor of the wagon in five to ten minutes. They opened the doors at the great thumping, the noise and the human wailing. I was put on the ground in the shade of the wagon, unconscious. Lots of others were in the same condition. I recovered on the cool side from the fresh air and I was put back. The train set off, but this time the doors were not shut. The waggons were arranged in a way that on every second one there was a brake-van. There was an armed guard on each, and they had to look after and keep their eyes on two wagons. This meant there was less chance of our escaping and getting home safely. Two boys from the other wagon jumped off, and fled, running, risking their lives. They were shot at from two of the vans; a couple of shots were fired. They keeled over. The train didn't stop; it kept on going. What happened to them, who found them, we never got to know.

"August is the month I just can't remember. The journey, crammed into wagons, just wouldn't come to an end. One day the train stopped. There was a sign in Cyrillic letters on the station, but it could be made out: Csernovitz.

"All that I had studied in school returned to me, I imagined a map and I could approximately put this somewhere. I remembered that Csernovitz was the centre of Bukovina province at the time of the Austrian-Monarchy. Before the war it belonged to Romania, to whom it belonged at that time I didn't know. It is of no importance, because we were passing on. While I was thinking about all these things the train was decoupled and armed soldiers appeared at the wagon behind ours. People were told 'davaj', to hurry to get off. But in our wagon, containing me and my little crew, people were not told to form lines of five, as the rest were.

"That meant the following: they stayed and we were transported somewhere else. Csernovitz or Siberia, there was a big difference between them. Recalling the map, this was a town, not a dreary desert; it was surrounded by forest. I thought

about the severe cold. In a fraction of a second, it came into my mind that it would be better to stay here; who knows where they would take us. I told two of my fellows to get off and mingle with the others who were transported. They had no fear: if one of the Russians noticed it, he would merely beat them. The doors of the wagon were opened. A Russian soldier arranged the lines. When he went to the end of the line, I jumped off the wagon and I stood among those who were numbered by the soldier. I had no time to wave good-bye to my friends.

"So I stayed in Csernovitz, in a totally strange place, with totally strange people. I was exhausted. We were accompanied to the other side of the town, to a camp. Beyond the main gate, about 100 meters from it, we were allowed to sit down, and the guards left. We could see a long, three-lined fence and at the top of it a multi-lined wire. There were some watch towers in between, supplied with searchlights, and guards were standing in them. In a distant part of the camp a lot of people bustled around a building site. Within the fence there was a water tank where we could buy water. Within an hour two officers appeared, one of them could speak Hungarian well. He asked who could speak Russian, and about twenty people stepped forward, all of them Hungarian soldiers. Eight of them who could speak Russian well were chosen. We were divided into 100-member groups. The eight chosen were charged with leadership, as they said they were the brigade leaders. They were responsible for us and had to report if anyone was absent. They were also responsible for getting the food and the bread allocation. We were placed, on that first day, in those ground-floor buildings. In them, there were beds and berths made from planks. In the afternoon we were led to the kitchen, where we got half a liter of tea, 60 decagrams of bread and a handful of oily fish. Comparing that with the provisions on the journey, there was a big difference. Although

the tea was hot, it was totally tasteless; the bread was black, but it was much more than before. I got in the lower berth with another fellow. Above us there were four fellows on two levels. There was no straw sack, blanket, or pillow, only the unplaned plank. But that was much better than the waggon because I could stretch my legs. On the second day I was interrogated minutely; they wanted to know when, where and which unit I was in, in what operations I had taken part, what level of rank or medal I had got. Had I seen Russian prisoners, could I name those who tortured Russians or Jews? I can mention several things that they wrote down. They took nothing away from us, though by now there was nothing to take. I kept my wallet and my military driving licence. They reminded us that if anyone hadn't told the truth, he would get a serious punishment. Camp life began; we didn't know when it would end, and whether this end would mean freedom or annihilation. We didn't have to work in the following days. We got the daily portion regularly; we never had enough but the amount just saved us from death. This is not the moment to speak about the quality of the catering. We weren't guarded with weapons, because we were enclosed in the camp. We were inactive for days. There were nearly eight hundred Hungarians. In the distant part of the camp where there was the building site, there were Germans and people who were of different nationalities but they counted as Germans (Austrians, for example). As we know there were about 2000 (two thousand). It wasn't forbidden, but we didn't want to mix with them. We were directed to work after a week of rest. All of us, in our room, were directed to clean the yard and the surroundings of the toilet. The toilet was an uncovered building. They had dug out the soil from a huge area; they had put ten-meter long thick rafters across the hollow and they nailed thick boards on them. They left many gaps. We couldn't sit down; we could only crouch if we had something to do. It hadn't got sides or a roof. We had to clean it with chlorined

water each day. We couldn't get to the end of the work on the yard. There were two-meter wide areas of ground between the three lines of wire. The two areas were four meters long and ran around the camp, and they were about one thousand meters long. We had to dig and rake them up every day, as they were flower gardens. On both sides guards walked along with dogs by their sides, searching for tracks, in case anyone had escaped. More than a hundred people were directed to get this area in order. Soldiers with guns were watching us, while we were working. I hated nearly everything that was Russian, the soldiers, too. But I managed to learn Russian words, just as I felt that every word I learnt would help me to stay alive. We weren't assaulted, but some of them mocked us rudely, although we didn't understand what they said. We bore it. We had to bear it, because we were defeated. It was hard to bear the starvation, because what we got was not enough: the food was of poor quality; it was fatless, tasteless, damp food. Some bread and a tablespoon of granulated sugar were what kept us alive; we got them constantly, day by day. One morning when we were driven to rake the ground, a jeep stopped outside the gate, a Russian officer jumped out of the car, and talked with the commander of the guard. I stood not far from them, I understood some words, but I couldn't join their conversation together. The officer on duty called me, he asked me something and kept showing me the car in front of the gate.

"The huge house is not mine, it's the state's; I'm just living in it. I want to live in an honest way as you do, but I have to steal, too. We won the war but nothing lasts forever. Hitler failed and so also will Stalin, the violence won't last for long.' It was unbelievable for us. After several days we were still amazed that a leader, a Russian officer in a high position, dared to speak in that way."

"We couldn't know how long the imprisonment would last and what we should steal. We would steal a machine part

in vain; we couldn't eat it. It was a great advantage that we ate our fill once a day. After some weeks it was October, and our exceptional position ended. We repaired every car but we were sent back to the other slaves in the camp."

(Our brother Károly Oláh got back home after several hard years spent in the camp – the editor).

From Andor Fodor's manuscript,
this personal recollection:

"…The people who weren't taken into custody with the first group on 29th November were collected by the deportation section on 30th November. It was lucky for whoever was not found at home. However, I will write down one case: Andor Urszin told it to a family at Segesvár, when we were on the road home.

"I was captured. Earlier my father stood at the gate in front of our house. When he saw me in the group he asked: 'Where are you going?' 'We are just going for a certificate and then we shall come back.' 'Wait, I'm going with you, too,' said my father and hastened for his overcoat and ran after us. Similar things happened to the others.

"I was taken from the kindergarten (where, as directed, we peeled potatoes) to the courtyard of Pali Pásztor. It was about 2 p.m. and there were people gathered in large numbers, mainly from Szent István and Rákóczi Streets. I remember Géza Lukács, Pál Macsuga, János Tóth and Kobzos with his sons from the "szug" (a small lane). Later, at around 3 or 4 p.m. they sent me off towards Alsózsolca for the certificate. There, on the right side of the street in front of the Calvinist church, we were directed to a shed, from which we were accompanied one by one into the house. We had to answer questions. When it was my turn, men who were sitting at the

barn door said to me: 'Andor, your father hasn't come back.' I was surprised because I didn't know he was there.

"The first question was: 'What language do you speak?' Later: 'Do you work with the military?' I answered that I wasn't at work yet, because I attended school where I studied Latin, German, Italian and French. The GPU officer tried out just my French, then he said something and gave a sign.

"In a minute I found myself in the barn again. Some slept, some chatted, there were people who prayed. I joined this group, then I fell asleep. In the morning of the 1st of December, we left to get the certificate. I no longer know exactly if it was in Ónod or Hejőkeresztúr where we stopped and we had to take everything out of our pockets. I didn't take my wallet out, just a block of Transylvanian -----, which the four-star officer immediately picked up; he kept looking at it because he thought it was chocolate; it was packed that way. He unwrapped it and started eating it, while I was salivating. I was annoyed that I hadn't eaten it earlier. Nevertheless I was happy I hadn't taken out my razor, because I made a good use of that in the prison camp.

"Early in the afternoon we arrived at Igric, where we had one meal. Two days later we stood in a line to march, and every two people got one piece of bread. I was with my brother János Cservenyák – at that time we were about 300, 90%-95% civilian. We started out for the certificate.

"At Ároktő, in the mud before the Tisza Bridge, I lost one sole from my shoes. I inmediately thought about Pali Pásztor because he made and repaired my shoes. We had hardly reached the other side of the Tisza River when a group of women started to watch us. There were perhaps six or seven of them, some of them cried. I showed them my right foot and I asked for paper of some kind. One of the women gave me a rolled up newspaper. She said: "There is …" but I didn't understand what it was.

"Shortly after we arrived at Tiszacsege, I and the others found ourselves in a barn, where the smell was disgusting. It was full of horse dung, shit and urine. Puddles were everywhere, at least on the side where I was. There was no lamp. We spent the night here. I took my Polish fur coat and I sat on it with my brother János. He sat beside me and rested, while I was busy with my shoe. I carefully folded the newspaper, which I had got from the woman, and I found two half slices of bread with lard; there were bitemarks on them. I was busy with my shoes. With the lace I tied the newspaper, and when my brother János sat up again, we turned to face each other and ate half of the bread we had got in Igric - behind me horse dung in a puddle.

"I don't know if anybody slept apart from us – because on the following day I heard that we wouldn't even be able to sit down. The team assembled again, and we started towards the 'document-village.' Lots of us were tortured by thirst, but there was nowhere we could drink a drop of water. It wasn't even noon on December 4th, when on the right-hand side of the road the subsoil water had come to the surface or it was rainwater that had not dried up or both, anyway we saw water and ice over a huge area.

"Lots of people from the march (about 30-40 people) set out in the direction of the water, jumping across a small ditch. They couldn't break the ice at once but one brainy man near a dead horse managed it easily, lying on the ice; and they scooped up water in their own palms, while the Russian soldier fired a salvo with his gun into the air to hurry them. In the early afternoon, as far as I remember, we arrived in Balmazújváros where we spent the night at a school. We emptied our pockets again and everything was taken away. Here there was no stink, so I also slept at least two or three hours.

"It was still dark when my brother and I ate the second half of the greasy bread and two thirds of the bun. We were praying to God while we waited for the morning.

"We marched on again and went for 'identification papers' but already with less and less hope. We were so tired already and dulled by many smooth words and fair promises about receiving the certificate, that we turned giddy, holding one another up as we trudged along the road.

"The newspaper came away from my shoes shortly after we left Tiszacsege, thus I marched only slowly.

"Noon had already passed when two fine horses pulling a cart approached us from the opposite direction, on it a seventy-year old man sitting alone.

"We looked only onwards, not backwards, since looking back on the days that had passed we were filled with sadness. We were not even in the right mood to talk, since our muscles were tired already and we only dragged ourselves along. Suddenly news came from the back, about the old man: his two horses and his cart had been taken away, and he himself was with us. Someone noticed: 'But he has already been given a certificate.' The poor old man was just crying about his two horses and his wife. (The following morning in Debrecen I heard that he was carried off by disease.)

"We arrived in Debrecen still in daylight and and we walked and walked, but when I saw the wire fence I said to my brother:

"We won't be given a certificate, we will be deported."

"We stood for a while in front of the tall wire fence; then we were counted and led into the Debrecen Pavilon barracks. Its gates were shut behind us.

"It was still daylight, when about 60-70 men were driven into a room where there were bunks without mattresses and blankets. We occupied two beds straight away, me and my brother. I tried to sleep on the top, but about an hour later when

it was already dark we were sent out and had to go into another room. It was December 5th and we went to bed hungry again.

"The following morning everyone was given just soup, if they had a pot. The cavalrymen were lucky because they had their own bowl. More than a hundred did not eat anything. I went towards a big pile of litter but from his 'pigeonhole' a Russian soldier – probably he only wanted to frighten me – shouted something close to me; I looked up at him, and showed that I was looking for something. I did not go for food, but for a tin. With a thick stick I poked the litter and found a tin; I went on searching full of hope and found one for my brother, too. Next day we also ate and drank soup.

"On that same day I found a piece of string and a pointed piece of metal and, with the help of a stone, I made two holes in the tin and wore it around my neck until February but at that time my neighbor stole it from me when I was asleep.

"On December 7th it was already evening when everyone had to go out in the yard. We stood in a line. We could have been about 1500, and we marched to the railway station. We stopped at a cattle train and we were sent up in groups of fifty. In this carriage there were more men from Felsőzsolca, János Cservenyák, my brother, János Guba, Imre Guba, János Petrovics and many more.

"I was sitting facing the engine in the middle of the front of the carriage because I had an overcoat; in front of me my uncle, János Cservenyák, was sitting in my lap as he was wearing only a jacket. In the opposite corner there was a football-size hole where we could go to the toilet standing or crouching above it.

"Already on the first night I recognized that the train was taking us along the Maros to the east. Once we heard firing but we did not know why. It stopped at the next station and then the doors were opened from outside, and we were sent to one side of the carriage. They counted us one by one;

meanwhile, they kicked us and hit us with a pistol handle, where they could. Then again they counted us. They locked the door of the carriage again and the train started. In a few minutes there were more of us in the coach than before. It happened that János Petrovics and one or two others undid the upper wire network of the window, and jumped from the train in the nighttime in Transylvania.

"The Russians made up the number with Romanian soldiers standing at the barrier and took away their boxes. They told the same story as the people from Zsolca. They were not soldiers, only prisoners of war.

"As usual we stopped at some halt at night. Once I could read that we were in Brasov from a sign as the train was waiting on an outward platform. I had very bad feelings when the train went on the Regat (Romanian side of the Carpathians). As we left Brasso the train went slowly up the hill; when we went down the hill I thought the brakes had failed, we would leave the rails and die in this way in a foreign country. Maybe we were only half way there when the train stopped in daylight. The doors were opened. János Guba and Imre Guba were allowed to bring bread for the fifty men. Everybody got a slice of bread and dry beans were served. The beans said to me (as if they could talk) 'You will be sick if you eat me'. I did not eat them.

"Some others did the same. Some of us almost starved to death. Late afternoon the train stopped on an embankment. The doors were opened and we had to leave the train. We had to go down the bank for an assembly. Many tried to go under the wire, others stepped over it trying to find solid ground under the snow. I saw some people losing their balance and they slid down on their stomachs or on their backs and landed on their heads or feet. Some rolled down. We got to the compound in this way, slowly in the snow. We stood before the wire fence for hours. We were freezing, starving, thirsty and

we could hardly move. As we were standing I often held up my foot and I tried to warm it up with my right hand while I was holding my brother's shoulder. As I held up my foot I found a garlic clove frozen to my socks. (I had had no shoesoles since Tiszacsege) As I saw it I picked it up because it was lucky. People noticed when I started to eat it. I had eaten half of it when somebody shouted: 'Who is eating sausage here?' Those who were near me said 'Yes' and 'What a lovely smell.' So I said that I had found it with my toes. About 15-20 people came around me and asked me to breathe on them. Well, that piece of garlic was the supper not only for me but for a lot of hungry prisoners of war in the Focsani compound on December 24th, Christmas Eve of 1944.

"I sang Christmas songs to myself that night but not too loud. After a while some did the same. Later low Hungarian voices sang a Reformed Christmas song. After it we sang 'Mennyből az angyal,' 'Krisztus Jézus született,' 'Fel nagy örömre' and 'Ó gyönyörű szép.' These songs were known by many of us… many of us slept. (When I last saw Géza Lukács, he was at Pásztor's yard. I heard in the middle of January that he had died.) On the first day we moved from block 5 to 6. I got a bed next to the window as I had a winter coat. Uncle János sat on my leg but I didn't know who sat on his legs. Next to me there was a boy born in Transylvania who could speak Hungarian well. He could cook well, that is why we cooked and ate every time before we went to sleep. I didn't have a good relationship with the person on my left. He stole my tin so I could not drink the hot water which was called soup just because some cabbages were in it. One day I talked to Márton Papczun. He was in the 6th block but at the end of the room. On the next day he didn't go for bread. He died."

"We got one Romanian loaf for 15-23 people. The weight of it was about one or one and a half kilos. If you had money or anything valuable, you could buy bread from the

Russians. We had the chance to wash ourselves for very high black market prices on every seventh or eighth day while our clothes hung on a steel circle. But usually two hundred people used one and a half liters of water to wash and ran naked to the stove to warm up, until a stupid Russian came in and flushed us with a bucket of cold water. I didn't see anyone dying. First, I heard about Géza Lukács, then Márton Papczun, later Jancsi Hegedűs, whom I had talked with two days before he died. He met me on the 6th and complained to me. He sat next to me in the Catholic Gymnasium. I heard that Andor Halász and his son had gone too. I heard about Pál Macsuga. He died in Kolozsvár. I heard it when I came home through there. We had diarrhea. So I went out to collect twigs from the kitchen. A man with a weapon went with us. We asked the guard to make a fire. We put small dry twigs on the fire and we pissed on them. After a few minutes we ate them. This was the cure for dysentery.

"In spite of it I had diarrhea after midnight. I went out at the backdoor and I waited until a guard fired a rocket from a guardhouse not too far away. The rocket made daylight for a moment, which was enough for me to locate the toilet. Anyone who went too near to the fence got a bullet in his head when the next rocket was fired. We saw many bodies near the fence in the mornings.

"So I managed to get to the toilet and I moved carefully. A man came with the same intention as me a few boards away, about two meters from me. I heard the procedure, too. A big splash at the end of his operation. Then I saw the legs and hands disappear.

"I had good relations only with Sándor Üveges. We met not long after Christmas, and he told me that he was the servant of an officer. There he learned what is meant by exercise. I was lucky that he said that especially to me. On the next morning we met at the place we appointed, which was about 150 meters

from door six. First we did exercises in our coats, later we took them off and we continued it in our shirtsleeves. We began with an inhalation exercise, neck and head exercises for half an hour. When everybody went into their barracks we did the same and we waited until the soup and bread assembly. Days passed by in this order. I cried a lot because of the stress. I quoted from the Book of Revelation, and I was thinking about my future. Some laughed at me because every morning I did exercises. I tried to preach but this only served to lose me my prayer book that I had got in my first years in the gymnasium. I did not see it for days because it went from hand to hand. I took it home in a very bad condition. I have it right now because I pray from it to this day.

"On 29th January 1945 an announcement was made: Whoever was under 18 and more than 45 could go home. János checked in as he was 45. I checked in as I was 18. The following afternoon the date of birth was asked of those who had not reached the 17 or 50.

"I said that I was born on 29th March 1927 (the month and the day are my younger brother's dates because I was born on 30th November 1924)

"An hour later they came to me and I was taken to the other side, number 18. My brother was not allowed to go home.

"I was checked three times in January but with the help of God I survived. Those who were in good condition and thought to be adults were transported to the middle of the Soviet Union. At last 2nd February came and we were given ground corn, about 2 deciliters, as much as I could get in my tin can. Some kind of a purple fat was put in our hands and we got some re-toasted bread crusts. After this we were commanded to make rows of four. There were 314 sick Hungarians. They weren't prisoners of war any more because the list was given into the hands of Ferenc Kisida, who was a Greek Catholic teacher. Ferenc Kisida said that we were going

to the school and from there everyone could go wherever he wanted to. When we passed the gatehouse I waved to the people standing there. A civilian and a man in uniform were standing there. I could believe that Comrade Margitics came to Focsani to bring us home. Some curious people went out into the streets from the school. We didn't move till morning and we didn't see them come back. There was fire for us to cook on so I cooked my corn pulp and I ate it.

"Then I was sick for two days. There were three people in the school: Andor Urszin, a man from Sorik and me. We made a pact that we would never leave each other until we arrived in Borsod or Heves county. On the 3rd February 1945 we warmed ourselves at the stove for the last time. I had a brand new sole on my right shoe. I tied it on with two pieces of wire. It was cold when we left the doors of the school. The railway station was a few minutes from us. Just a few people were hanging around. The morning trains had gone in both directions. At last a goods train came and all of us got in a guard's van as free people, but we didn't have any papers. We were in miserable clothes in a foreign country and we thanked God for his help. The train was heading home.

"The cold was unbearable. After two hours we left the guard's van. We saw a village nearby. A few days later, we realized that what we had done was not good. In Transylvania prisoners of war were caught and they were made to work for months. They were put in ghettos. We didn't know this. We arrived at a Greek church, where I stood in front of the icon, and my two friends sat down.

"I prayed on my knees and in my prayer I thanked God that we were free again. I opened the door behind the icon and I walked around the altar. Nobody was there. I saw a door and opened it, and suddenly I was standing face to face with a tall priest with a black moustache and these words issued from my mouth: 'Gospogyi pomiluj'. We explained things with hand

and foot language, then finally we understood each other. The priest gave me some bread, cottage cheese, cheese and a little fur bag, and he took a look at my prayer book and my little Saint Antal relic. Then, I think, for our safety he walked with us to the station and then, on the first train, we travelled down from Romania up to Segesvár. We went to the station where a Hungarian woman, called Margit, invited us in for lunch. They did not want to let us go until we felt better. I especially was in a very bad state. They showed us the Romanian soldiers who walked around the town in pairs. On the fourth day the two girls and their mother saw us arm in arm to the station. We said farewell to the girls and their mother and we got on the train. (We wrote letters to each other until 1949, even when I was in Budapest at the Economics University. They invited me to the 100th anniversary of Petőfi in Segesvár. The last time was in October '56, when I sent them a card from Karlovi Vari.)

"The train was overcrowded, there were only a few windows here and there. There were many people travelling on the top of the train, so Andor and our friend from Sorik went up there, too, in Segesvár. I was talking to three Jewish men in Hungarian until we got to the next stop; they had Romanian passports to Sweden. There was no room in the train, so I also went to the top of the train and I saw that many people were lying there, so I lay down, too, because I saw a bridge in the far distance. At the next stop all three of us got off the train because of the cold. Coming out from a bend to the straight line, we saw 15-20 civilians walking in front of us, who had also got tired of waiting for the train, and they had hit the road on foot. Most of them were Hungarian prisoners of war. It was late in the afternoon. We went to the station and we talked to some people in Hungarian, too, and they suggested that we should not go on beside the railway, because not too far away there was a big Romanian concentration camp. But a Hungarian offered to lead us through the mountains to Kolozs.

We just followed him in single file on the narrow, icy, slippery path covered with snow, next to rocky gaps here and there, and he always told us to watch out to left and right. At last, sometime between 7 and 8 o'clock we reached the village. We, three of us, knocked on the gate and a woman came out. She was Hungarian. She admitted us and gave us some food and while we were eating she put hay into the manger in front of the cows. She told us that her husband was Romanian, a good man. He had gone to the mill that day and would come home late in the evening. She led us into the stall, and we lay down in the manger. I have never again slept as sweetly as then in the village of Kolozs, when the cows breathed their warm breath around us. The woman woke me up. All three of us started in the direction of Apahida. We proceeded at a good speed because we were relaxed. Apahida was the first Hungarian village, but still we could only see Romanian and Russian soldiers. We got to the station, where a Russian soldier caught us and took us to do 'málenkij robot' (some little job). We had to carry bags full of salt from the train to the truck parked on the road. The bags were approximately 50-75 kg. It was not easy to carry them over the railway lines.

"As the three of us got off a military train carriage in Kunmadaras, late in the afternoon, we went into the local town hall to ask for shelter from the cold weather. Shortly after we asked them, they told us that we would have to stay there until the following morning; then they separated us from each other and took each of us into different rooms, where men wearing arm bands guarded us. The next day, in the morning, they took us to the local GPU headquarters where a Russian soldier was our interpreter. Having taken everything out of my pockets, he opened my grammar school and commercial school report book, but he did not ask anything. He did not even open my 'levente' railway identity card with my photo. (A levente was a member of a para-military youth organization in Hungary

between 1928-1944). Andor Urszin was inside only for a short time; they questioned our friend from Sirok for the longest time. Then we waited for a while, and later the commander of the GPU sent us fresh sausages and bread on a big plate and he sent a message that we were free, we could go home. It was late in the afternoon, so we went back to the town hall, where they saw us to a beautiful country house. The woman's sons had been taken as 'leventék'.

"We were her guests and she provided us with completely new and clean beds. We did not want to accept them, but she said that she did it as if for her own children. The fragrance of the fresh bedclothes smelt so good to us that we fell into a deep sleep after a few minutes. In the morning we thanked her very much for everything and the breakfast, and we started to walk in the direction of Tiszafüred. If the officers had decided at the GPU headquarters in Kunmadaras that we had been spies or saboteurs, then maybe they would not have known anything about us (Andor Urszin and me) until this very day in Felsőzsolca, and they could only have guessed whether we had ended our lives in a Romanian concentration camp or somewhere else. But God chose another way for us. We got home, and our families were glad to see us again. It is true that I had dysentery, itch, famine fever, and tuberculosis that became serious in 1954 and I was sick with that for 360 days, and five months of that period I spent in a lung hospital; but God helped me, I got better and I went to America where I live now."

Home-coming

Of the deported people, as we know, Imre Kovács was kept there for the longest time. He was allowed to come home five years later. He told us how he got home:

"During these four years, although we did not get used to it, we accepted the situation as it was. When we entered Hungary, we entered a different world. As we detrained in Debrecen, civilians were gathered around us. It was strange that a policeman called me 'fellow'. We got documents in every county; thirty of us came to Borsod. It was night when we arrived in Tokaj. I still do not know why, but the train wasn't running there, so we went to the station by truck.

"To see the lamps shine and flash on the station was a really great feeling. There were women on the platform, old ladies with packs as well. I asked one of the women where I could drink some water, because I had bought some bread during the journey and I had nibbled away half of it so I was thirsty. When the woman realized where I came from she insisted on buying me wine. On the train I ate the other half of the bread, until I arrived in Hernádnémati. A railway man in uniform sat next to me there, but he did not talk to me. It was strange to stand up and get off without anyone's order. Well, the next station was my village, Felsőzsolca. I got off and went through under a gate, in the first snow of that year. I walked back to the village on the same road on which they had carried me off four years earlier. There were lights on the road to Zsolca; the Castle was in its own place. It was unbelievable.

"I was walking in front of the pub of Erzsi Miklós. The pub was full of life, lamps, electric lights – and I walked into the pub. Imre Szinai recognized me immediately.

"'Look! There is Imre Kércsi!' Then the others gathered around me. Mr.Andris Szemes wanted to help me home and told me that my father grieved for me and my mother wept because of her son, Laci.

"The gate was closed so I jumped over it to get in. I hurried to the windows and called them. My father could not speak; he was breathless as he opened the door.

"I was home!"

VI. OFFICIALLY FORGOTTEN

During the collection of archives I argued with a young and talented colleague about Hungary's treatment at the hands of the Soviets. I mean, in his opinion we were talking about the liberation of Hungary. According to his studies, he asserted that the Soviets were the rescuers because "they rescued us from the grinding, oppressive German bondage." He did not know anything about those enormities that the Soviets committed against us during and after the war. I mentioned the valuable things that had passed into Soviet hands, the factories, the deported people, the imprisonment, about everything that historians had forgotten to put in their books.

It is a historical fact that they hounded the German invaders out of the country, but it is a fact as well that they took their place, though the schoolbooks do not write about it. They occupied and colonized our country. It would be no more nonsensical to consider the Turkish as liberators as well, and to claim that, after Mohács, they colonized our country to save us from growing Austrian power under the Emperor Ferdinand Habsburg.

In 1944 we fell out of the frying pan into the fire. Two big ideological and military Great Powers fought for control of our body, taking no account of our own aims and will.

The methods, acts and actions of the Germans and the Russians were very similar. The basis of their ideologies was similar as well. Fascism and Bolshevism are foster brothers; they were raised on the same breast. The humane concept of socialism was distorted into an inhumane ideology. One of them advertised its superiority on the basis of race; the other, the communist, on the basis of class. They are antisocial because it is impossible to force one's subjective will on the whole of humankind with weapons …" says Attila József.

Attila József, who censured fascism and communism in both verse and prose, warned against "the triumph of Fascism over crowds fearful of Bolshevism." {32}

He alluded to the Bolshevik ideas when he wrote this in 1937:

"s az emberségen, mint rajta a rák,
nem egy szörny-állam iszonyata rág
s mi borzadva kérdezzük, mi lesz még,
honnan uszulnak rank új ordas
eszmék…" (33)

The Germans wrote above the entrance of the camp at Auschwitz: "Work sets you free!" The Red Army officers collected their victims with the deception that they were sending them for a little work, "málenkij robot" and they would give them documents about it as well.

Then, in the camps, they gave as their reason for taking prisoners that, because of the "damage done by the fascists," the prisoners had to take part in the rebuilding.

Meanwhile those workmen, experts, civilians and soldiers who were supposedly taken away for work, died like flies during the journey, and in the camps, a further one hundred thousand of them died because of starvation, epidemics, and in consequence of cruel treatment.

Approximately one-third of the captured civilian men escaped on the way to Focsani, or were released from there because of their state of health. Two-thirds of them were kept prisoner, but half of those people died during the journey or perished in the camp in a short time. In the end only one-third of them were involved in the work, and these arrived home after a few years. If the Soviets had been honest, then it would have been acceptable and useful for both countries, if they had produced the demanded, prescribed compensation.*

*The Soviet Union demanded 200 million dollars (at the 1938 rate of exchange) because of the damage caused. Meanwhile they had taken it in hand: they had taken possession of several enterprises, and factories (MASZOLAJ, MASZOVLET, the Deischel wire factory at Miskolc, which later became December 4th Drótművek). After that, these factories produced for the Soviet Union until 1972. These factories were sold back by the Soviet Union to the Hungarian state in 1972. Together with these and other tricks we paid one billion dollars compensation to the Soviet Union altogether. Of course, that didn't include the production value of those who were taken to the Soviet Union. (34)

It is common knowledge that more than 100 workers of the December 4th Wire Factory came from Felsőzsolca and Szirmabesenyő. It was a strange irony of fate that most of the workers of the wire factory (the "drótgyáriak") had been taken by the Soviets from Zsolca.

As if they had not lived. We don't know how many. According to the findings of social science researchers, altogether 600,000 Hungarians were sent to the work camps in the Soviet Union; 60-65,000 of them were civilians. Altogether about 250,000 of them died because of the starvation, epidemics and bad conditions.

And meanwhile more than 100,000 captives languished for years after the end of the war, while the Soviet Union had their soldiers stationed in the country, doing no real work, because they were "protecting the peace."

Because of that I tend to accept the opinion which originated with Imre Kércsi, that they were not captives but hostages, and work was not the primary reason for their being taken; it was that, by removing these men they had withdrawn thousands of the politically "unreliable" from the country. On the other hand, this huge mass of people which they kept in

their hands was available at the same time for political blackmail against the Hungarian government.*

**Such 'hostage-taking' actions have been known since ancient times. Whole crowds of people were dragged away to the middle of the empire by Egypt and Babylon for such reasons.*

After the war the winner of the election, the coalition government of the Smallholder Party made some ineffective attempts to resolve the issue of the Hungarian captives in the Soviet Union, but to no avail. Later on, on the 7th of May 1947, a 100-member delegation of women confronted Mátyás Rákosi, the secretary-general of the Hungarian Communist Party with the question.

On the 12th of May Stalin sent a telegram that, because of the progress of Rákosi and the Hungarian Communist Party, he would comply with the Hungarian women's request and he would send home all the Hungarian captives in a short time.(35)

But he did not. The whole exchange of telegrams was a political scheme. Maybe Rákosi would have been especially surprised if one hundred thousand Hungarians had come home and together with their families they had turned up at the ballot boxes.After the victory of Rákosi's party, a deadly silence surrounded the fate of and concern for the prisoners of war; there were Hungarian captives in the GULAGs even in 1956. What happened was that, stealthily, under various regulations in the 50's, they withdrew the state benefits from the unfortunate war-widows and war-orphans.

It was a taboo also in the Kádár era to say a word about 'prisoners of war,' as well as about Trianon. It was not 'tactful' to mention them, nor even ask about them. Meanwhile 'our lips were singing the song ecstatically' about 'Liberation', the great glorious friend, the Soviet Union and its leaders: Stalin, Khruschev, Brezhnev…

That happened all over the country; it could hardly have been different in Felsőzsolca either. It seemed as if the official aim might have been realized and the people of Zsolca had forgotten the victims and the torment of those who had been carried off.

Then, when the pressure was softening and in 1989 the time seemed to be close when the invading army, in occupation since 1944, would leave our country, a private venture was undertaken. The initiative by Antal Nemkin to raise a memorial for the victims of World War II received the support of many people from the community. In February that year the leadership of the village also took up the suggestion and decided to build the war memorial. This demonstrated that the community had not forgotten. In a short time 200,000 forints were collected by donation, family members, war-widows and orphans. So preparation for the monument began.*

(*It was made by Éva Varga, a sculptor. The cost finally reached 920,000 forints, the largest part paid from public money by the representatives of the village. 1990 is the date on the monument, the year when it was made. It was erected in 1991 when the Russian troops left Hungary, after some wrangling about where to locate the monument.)

The memorial was consecrated by the priest of the three churches in front of a huge crowd of mourners, on 30th July 1991. A native of the village, Dr Gyula Kiss, a minister, gave a dedicatory speech. In the name of the prisoners of war István Dobos remembered the distress.

The widow of Lajos Ligetváry spoke in the name of relatives and orphans. Her father and husband were carried away from the family as civilians, and her husband lies in one of the camp's mass graves far from his loved ones and his country. *

*(*Antal Nemkin formulated her honest words.)*

Her words are cited here, complete:

'Memento mori,! Remember death! warned the Roman people thousands of years ago. Remember the victims of the war, I say, so that we should remember them in the name of the mothers, wives, and fiancées. By the right of a war widow. If anybody does, I deserve the right to remember.

I am telling you what it means to wait for the SAS call-up papers. What it means to say goodbye, when there is no proof, just the hope of coming back. I am telling you what it is like to wait for the postman. Terrified of getting a death-notice instead of a sign of life. I am telling you of the sleepless, tearful nights of prayer; what it meant to crouch with small children in pits, promoted from vegetable cellar to place of protection, after you heard the shouting. I remember the nerve killing-sapping, hopeless, meaningless years after losing your husband, your father, when the widow, tired of crying and becoming insensible, resigned herself.

I remember the child who lost his father, his eyes full of tears, asking for the first time: 'Why don't I have a father?'

I recall the visions, the false images of the subconscious, when hearing the gate slam, the dog bark, the windows clattering we thought, maybe it's the mourned one who is coming. Because the heart and the mind didn't want to accept that the one whom we loved cannot come back. I recall the years of privation because – for want of the fathers' wages – there was only a little bread on the table for the children of war-widows. And I also recall the cynicism and callousness of the authorities and the hard- hearted, scornful tone: 'Why did he go? If he had stayed at home, he wouldn't have died.'

I could enumerate the wounds caused by the war which we can also call: the fate of war-widows and orphans. That's why we ask God that there be no war again!

The war memorial with the multitude of names on it should serve as an exclamation mark.

People, look out!

There should be no more Isonzó, Doberdó, San River, fields covered with blood, smoking crematoria, hills of corpses, people destroyed in mind and body, blinded, crippled crowds of people. Let there be no Voronyezs, Foscani, Bori mines, death marches, streams of tears, masses of orphans and windows.

Our dear dead people!

Your unmarked grave warns us! Man shouldn't be the killer of other men.

Let your memory be the guard of peace!

World War II Memorial in Felsőzsolca with the names of the martyrs.

One hundred and sixty-six names of men from Zsolca were written on the monument, all were victims of the war. There are the heroes who died on the front for their country; there are the exterminated Jewish families' names, whom the community remembers with the same pain as the others. (That's why I was so very hurt when they did not even mention the other victims of Hungary at the Holocaust commemorations). Then there are the names of the forty-seven men whom this book is about and who could have lived longer.

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