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**Czechoslovakian–Hungarian Population Exchange in Nyíregyháza,  
1946-1948**

Propositions of the PhD Dissertation

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## **I. Background of the research; questions**

The research of the history of Hungarians in Czechoslovakia after World War II has been going on for three decades, including numerous studies about the agreement on the population exchange. The story of the population exchange is also present in the history of Slovak community in Hungary, the most detailed studies were written about the ‘*re-emigration*’ of the Slovaks from the southern part of the Great Hungarian Plain. However, generally only little emphasis has been put on the *Tirpaks* of Nyíregyháza in historical researches, as they are studied from ethnographical, socio-geographical aspects thanks to their unique form of farm settlement, the “*bokortanya*”. My choice of theme is motivated by the lack of comprehensive, scientific analysis concerning the execution of the population exchange in Nyíregyháza.

As the starting point of this study is connected with a particular area, I must delineate data of the region, as well as the circumstances and effects that connected with the historical event. As a result of the inevitable assimilation, the Slovak community of Nyíregyháza has almost been disappeared from the statistics by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In spite of the limited opportunities for using their mother language and the lack of institutional framework for maintaining their identity, the community’s ethnic consciousness was still preserved. It is proven by the result of the Czechoslovak agitation in the spring of 1946, as more than 6,000 residents applied for population exchange. In my dissertation I give a detailed description of the processes that led to the weakening of ethnic binding and the assimilation into the majority society. I will also introduce the factors which worked as the preservers of Slovak self-consciousness.

I also analyze the social problems and land issues after World War II, as people besides their national identity volunteered to the resettlement mostly for existential reasons. These circumstances are closely connected to the resettlement of Hungarians from Czechoslovakia.

Besides the obvious emotional and economic loss of the forced relocation, the description of difficulties of the deported Hungarians during their first years in Hungary is also necessary.

In the thesis it is examined what the population exchange meant for the town of Nyíregyháza, how the residents had related to the population exchange, whether it had changed the town or the Slovak community, how it had accelerated and finished the assimilation of the *Tirpaks*. As concerns the *re-emigrated* group, it is interesting to ask whether their wishes and hopes had been fulfilled as a result of the re-settlement, thus I will take a look at their life in Czechoslovakia.

As part of the nation-wide population exchange, the analysis of the population exchange in Nyíregyháza will make our knowledge about the historical event more complete, contributes to establish a broader context for this topic and may help the work of other researchers.

## II. Methods

The dissertation is essentially relying on archival researches supported by literature. I studied on a wide base of sources, carried out archival researches in Hungary and Slovakia. The abundance of written sources from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the variety of the documents, and as pointed out, sometimes their unreliability makes comprehensive examination impossible for the individual. Unprocessed archival fonds and fragmented data also limit research work.

Archival materials of the governmental organizations managing the population exchange held in the national archives of the two countries are almost 400 running metres, and extended by other state and local administrative bodies, churches, the *Antifascist Front of Slavs in Hungary* and documental heritages of certain people and families.

As an archivist in Nyíregyháza, I arranged the archival records of local divisions of two central administrative bodies: the *Hungarian Resettlement Steering Committee* and the *Land Registry*. The multiannual processing work, the individual revision of records, the separation of the documents of the bodies, arranging them respect to their original reference number or subject, provided a great opportunity to get to know the material. These sources are the backbone of the dissertation.

I had gain to access to some unprocessed and therefore, unexplored documents in the *Slovak National Archives*. Based on these, I was able to examine the less-researched aspects of the population exchange, such as the internal problems of the Czechoslovak committee, its activities after the summer of 1946. Sources in other archives in Slovakia were not examined due to their geographical distance, although they might offer additional perspectives to the recent results.

Since the information provided by the archival sources, and as historical standpoints are often controversial, I considered the exploration of similarities and differences important. In my thesis I explain why certain data cannot be deemed facts and why other data are unavailable.

Besides primary historical sources, I studied contemporary local press and *Sloboda*, the paper of the Slovak party. Documents in the collection of *András Jósa Museum*, donated by individuals, are also valuable. Among these private documents and photos I managed to find administrative documents that cannot be found in the archives. Censuses and legal bulletins were also used.

The historical context was approached from two perspectives. The population exchange was a part of the revenge against Hungarians of Czechoslovakia after World War II., thus the framework of the process leading to the agreement is indispensable similarly to the influential events of its execution. A rich literature was available to learn these events. As the thesis is locally bound, first of all, I studied the local implementation, compared with national data and highlighted the differences and similarities.

The events are analyzed in chronological order: unilateral re-settlement, prior to the actual population exchange in 1946, the year 1947, when the most number of people were moved, and the year 1948, when the exchange finished, are unfolded in separate chapters.

Besides the evaluation of the historical events, my aim was to enumerate the available quantitative data which is the most unexplored aspect of the population exchange research at local level. Particular attention was given to different surveys and lists which represent the major part of archive documents in connection with settlings into and out of

Nyíregyháza. Based on the official statistic reports, I used the charts to carry out calculations and managed to gain information that was not supplied by official reports, summaries. Bases on the results, I was able to describe the socio-economic characteristics of residents leaving and arriving to Nyíregyháza.

In the next chapter, I introduce the re-organized lives of three different communities. Both in personal documents and official records, I have found those the most interesting where the individual was outlined. Thus, besides factual, summarizing data, by the examples of participants I was able to analyze the events from a human-centred approach. At first, adjusting of the “*repatriants*” from Nyíregyháza to Czechoslovakia is discussed, then the difficulties of Hungarians who were forcedly re-settled from Czechoslovakia to Nyíregyháza are described, and finally, the loss caused by the population exchange for the Slovak community in Nyíregyháza is also presented. The thesis ends with a summary and outlook.

Small charts, which help the understanding of the information, are included in the text, while bigger charts can be found as appendices in order not to broke the description or analysis of a certain event. Figures in the appendix present a bigger amount of information. Some documental sources are also placed there, such as parts of archival documents and personal photos.

### III. New results

The main conclusions of the thesis are as follows:

❖ In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the assimilation of Slovaks in Nyíregyháza was not as high as statistics may suggest. Although, it was not able to substitute institutional frameworks, the closed settlements of '*bokortanya*' and the practice of religion in Slovak language ensured the subsistence of the ethnic language and the cohesion of the community together with its separation from the majority (Hungarian residents). In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Slovak preachers had a dissimilation effect on those who wanted to find their place in religious awakening movements as their native language was used there.

After World War I members of the religious movement joined to the Methodist church. From 1931 *József András Márkus* took over the leadership of the church and the use of the Slovak language was strengthened.

❖ Preliminary Czechoslovak calculations expected 4,500 Slovak applicants from the town, but the *Czechoslovak Transfer Committee* was more successful, as more than 6,000 people signed up to resettle from Nyíregyháza and its surroundings. *József András Márkus* convinced his whole church to resettle. Similarly to other parts of the country, a lot of people chose to move for financial reasons, while others were promised that their deported husbands would be brought home from the Soviet Union. Czechoslovak agitators were helped by some leaders of the local communities, whose services were honoured with better career

opportunities in Czechoslovakia. However, it is worth studying individual motivation thoroughly, which can influence the matter.

❖ After revising the list of the applicants for resettling, almost half of the applications were infirmed by the *Hungarian Resettlement Steering Committee*. Sources mention family law problems as the main reason, i.e. not both members of the married couple wanted to resettle and a lot of wives applied in the name of their husbands who were far from home. Significant group of people had no Czech or Slovak ancestry and did not speak the language.

Most of the applicants were poor farm-laborers, but the ratio of the land-owners with more than 5 acres of land was twice the national average.

❖ 576 people left Nyíregyháza during the unilateral resettlement in the autumn of 1946. Based on the archival documents, seems that the last group left the city on 3 December. The lorry convoy took mostly students and poor residents, who did not leave behind properties that could have been used for moving in.

The division of the Czechoslovak Transfer Committee in Nyíregyháza continued the intensive work to maintain the willingness to resettle: they organized cultural programmes, language courses, provided relief and regularly visited the applicants.

❖ In Hungary the process of population exchange was controlled by the Hungarian Resettlement Steering Committee. During the preparation stage, local authorities were involved. Multiple complaints were filed against the major of Nyíregyháza, as his office did not pay the necessary



attention concerning the issue of Hungarians relocated from Czechoslovakia. At the same time, the Slovak applicants also had inconveniences with local authorities.

❖ There was not enough time to properly prepare the bilateral exchange, so during the first weeks a lot of uncertainties were experienced on both sides. The resettlement began on 11 April, 1947 from Pitvaros and Nyíregyháza districts. Nyíregyháza was the first district, where the settling of Hungarians from Slovakia could begin into the properties left behind by Slovaks.

❖ Previous studies have shown that the obvious aim of Czechoslovak politics was to relocate Hungarian landowners and intellectuals and as opposed to this, a mass of poor people volunteered for resettling from Hungary to Czechoslovakia. Therefore, the two groups of population exchange had different economic potential. The evaluation of the data presented in this work leads to the similar pattern of results in Nyíregyháza. Multiple factors made data comparison difficult. Lists and statistics generated by different authorities are often inaccurate and inventories based on self-declaration contain intentional misstatements, so-called *twin sheets* were hardly taken into consideration. On the other hand, it seems that certain accounts were not even compiled: we have detailed financial data in connection only with the two-third of the re-settlers from Nyíregyháza, while the numeric summary of population exchange was not accomplished.

❖ The number of Hungarians relocated to Nyíregyháza and its surroundings from Czechoslovakia was earlier overestimated by historians.

Based on archival researches and the 1949 census, approximately 1,500 people arrived to Nyíregyháza from Slovakia between 1945 and 1948 as part of the population exchange process or as refugees, although in earlier studies have been estimated about 2,500 to 3,000 people.

Settling in greater numbers was not prevented by the shortage of lands, as in other parts of the country, but the lack of adequate housing and limited work opportunities. Since empty properties were available only in the farms, re-settlers from Slovakia started their new life in worse circumstances because of the distance from the town and the low quality of dwellings. Therefore, a lot of them asked for a transfer to another part of the country. Nyíregyháza was a rural town, and could not provide a livelihood for craftsmen and merchant families, so they either asked for reclassification to farmer status, or moved.

The basis of the immigrants' allowance was their asset left behind in Czechoslovakia which had to be certified by appropriate documents. The primary aim was to provide minimum livelihood for each family and then was possible to compensate over 15 acres of land. 20 percent of the newly arrived had more land left behind. They were compensated by separating families into multiple economic units.

❖ The biggest part of Slovak applicants, who were also property-owners, left the town in the spring of 1947. In that autumn another smaller group moved, finally, and finally, in 1948, those units resettled who could not be classified into transports in order to keep the parity of property, or couldn't be relocated due to other reasons. They were settled in Levice (Léva) and surrounding. Three quarters of the '*in-settlers*' of the population exchange transferred to Nyíregyháza between April and August in 1947,

there was only official transport in 1948. 10 percent of them came *out-of-quota*.

❖ Population exchange caused conflicts in multiple relations. The Hungarian community of the city was obnoxious with the Czechoslovak committee and the Slovak applicants. This phenomenon was experienced in the behaviour of civil servants, too.

Participation in population exchange caused breaks within Slovak families, amongst relatives. According to the traditional division of labour, children worked in the family farm, later the younger generation took care of the elderly and inherited the property after the parents' death. After the population exchange, family members who didn't intend to relocate found themselves in difficult financial situation, wide variety of their problems was explained based on archival documents. Those Slovaks, who felt empathy for the deported Hungarians, thought that their '*repatriating*' family members contributed to the discrimination of Hungarians.

At the same time Hungarians, who were re-settled into Nyíregyháza, barely received understanding and help from local residents to restart their lives. Its reason is that the public awareness wasn't raised for the tragedy of Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia, the press addressed the issue only briefly. Thus, the relation, as it was worded by a member of the Hungarian Resettlement Steering Committee, was defined by '*bread envy*'.

Regardless of political and economic situation, the fact that '*outsider*' Roman Catholic and Calvinist Hungarians were settled into the closed Slovak-speaking Lutheran communities, was the main source of conflict. However, the same relations towards the immigrants can be observed in other parts of the country.

❖ Immigrants from certain towns, e.g. Andovce (Andód) and Sládkovičovo (Diószeg), Matuškovó (Taksonyfalva) settled in Nyíregyháza, did not lose the relationship with their motherland. In the 1990s became important for the community to collect their memories and make their history visible: civil organizations were established, a commemorative plaque was placed and books were published. All these contributed to strengthen their collective identity five decades after the tragedy.

❖ Population exchange was a loss also for the Slovak community in Hungary. During 1946 and 1947 the most ethnically-conscious part of them left Hungary. On those places where the Slovak community had the opportunity to preserve its identity through higher education, press, ethnically-conscious intellectuals, avoided complete assimilation, while in Nyíregyháza, the process of assimilation was practically completed by the population exchange.

The bond between the *repatriants* and those who stayed in the motherland, did not break: it was ensured by family visits, holiday camps for Slovak children and then the official connections between the farmers' cooperatives during the socialist era. However, after the families lost the older generation, who were first or second degree relatives, before the population exchange had lived together, had had common memories, the sense of unity has disappeared.

#### **IV. Publications**

1.

A csehszlovák–magyar lakosságcsere keretében Nyíregyházára telepített felvidéki magyarok elhelyezésének nehézségei

In: Galambos Sándor; Kujbusné Mecsei Éva (szerk.): Szabolcs-szatmár-beregi Levéltári Évkönyv, XXI. Nyíregyháza: Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg Megyei Levéltára, 2019. 209–222. o.

2.

A csehszlovák–magyar lakosságcsere Nyíregyházán és a tanyabokrokban

In: Szabó Sarolta (szerk.): A reformáció öröksége a tírjákok körében. Nyíregyháza: Nyíregyházi Evangélikus Nagytemplomért Alapítvány, 2017. 59–83. o.

3.

A Csehszlovák Áttelepítési Bizottság propagandatevékenysége Nyíregyházán: Információ és történelem. Sajtó és propaganda – az információ publicitása.

In: Gulyás László Szabolcs (szerk.): Az információ mikrotörténetéhez. Budapest: Gondolat, 2015. 36–58. o.

4.

A csehszlovák–magyar lakosságcsere előkészítése Nyíregyházán

In: Buhály Attila; Reszler Gábor; Szoboszlai György; Óbis Hajnalka (szerk.): Falak és választóvonalak a történelemben. A Nyíregyházi Főiskola Történettudományi és Filozófia Intézete által 2012. november 29–30-án rendezett társadalomtudományi konferencia előadásai. Nyíregyháza: Nyíregyházi Főiskola, 2014. 241–253. o.

5.

Szlovákia és Kárpátaljai 1938–1939-ben. Hasonlóságok és különbségek

In: Zubánics László: A magyar-ukrán közös múlt és jelen. Összekötő és elválasztó fehér foltok. Beregszász: Kárpátaljai Magyar Művelődési Intézet (KMMI), 2011. 51–56. o.

**Other publications:**

1.

Magyar–szlovák szellemi kapcsolatkeresések az 1930-as évek második felében

In: Antos Balázs; Tamás Ágnes (szerk.) Szemelvények ötszáz év magyar történelméből. A III. modern kori magyar történeti PhD-konferencia tanulmányai. Szeged: SZTE BTK Történelemtudományi Doktori Iskola, 2011. 105–115. o.

2.

Nagy Sámuel és Leffler Sámuel, Nyíregyháza történetének korai krónikásai. In: Galambos Sándor; Kujbusné Mecsei Éva (szerk.): Szabolcs-szatmár-beregi Levéltári Évkönyv, XIX. Nyíregyháza: Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg Megyei Levéltár, 2011. 253–264. o.