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## **/// The Fate of People Displaced to Hortobágy after Stalin's Death**

**Based on Examples from Somogy County**

### **== Introduction**

Several times in Hungary's twentieth-century history, people and entire groups were forced for various reasons to leave their place of residence. One of these instances was the case of resettlement from the border strip established in the southern and the western parts of the country between 1950–1953.

After the formation of the post-war, bipolar world, Soviet leadership was afraid of a land attack carried out by the Western powers via the territory of Hungary. Therefore, the Hungarian leadership decided to close the southern and western borders of the country, and to eliminate the so-called “internal enemy,” meaning all those who could have facilitated this attack in any way.<sup>1</sup> To achieve this, on June 1, 1950 a fifteen-kilometre-wide border strip covering seven counties was created, then subsequently expanded to twenty-five kilometres in 1952.<sup>2</sup> The people from here were taken and sent to one of the twelve closed labour camps established in Hortobágy.<sup>3</sup> Their properties that had been left behind were confiscated, and their movable assets were auctioned off.<sup>4</sup>

1 = = Lajos Srágli, *Erődország. A déli határvédelmi rendszer létesítésének és lebontásának története, 1948–1958* (Budapest: Város- és Faluvédők Szövetsége, 2007), 13–19.

2 = = István Orgoványi, “A déli határsáv 1948 és 1956 között,” *Bács-Kiskun megye múltjából* 17 (Kecskemét, 2001): 277.

3 = = Mária Nagy and József Saád, eds., ‘Péntek volt és 23’. *Kitelepítések 1950–1953 között a baranyai határsávból* (Mohács: The Settlers' Social Museum Foundation, 2011), 1.

4 = = Zsuzsa Hantó, János Takács, Miklós Füzes, and József Saád, eds., *Kitaszítottak* (Budapest: Alterra, 2001), vol. 1, 10; István Novák, *Ítélet nélkül, ártatlanul. Fejezetek a csurgói járásból 1950–53 között, a hortobágyi zárt kényszermunkatáborba elhurcoltak életéről* (Gyékényes: Chronicle of Gyékényes, 2011), 17; MNL SVL XXIII-898-d. Confidential document of the Ministry of Finance Nr. 0982/2/1952. January 11, 1952.

These measures in Somogy affected mostly the districts of Barcs, Csurgó, and Nagyatád, but they also dragged away people from the central and the northern parts of the county. According to the present state of the research, 702 people were taken away from forty-seven settlements of Somogy,<sup>5</sup> the vast majority of whom ended up in one of the Árkus, Borzas-Mihályhalma, Elep, Tedej, and Tisztaszentimre camps.<sup>6</sup> Here they “lived” in the still-intact farm buildings of the former farms, working on the territory of the state farms under police supervision, where, among other things, no ordinary plants were grown: rice, cotton, and rubber dandelion.<sup>7</sup> The rice growing areas were established on the saline soil of Hortobágy within the framework of the large-scale, nature-transforming activities taking place in Hungary at that time based on the Soviet model. The inhabitants of these camps weeded in summer in water teeming with leeches, and in late October or early November harvested rice, knee-deep in cold water.<sup>8</sup>

This study attempts, with the help of some examples from Somogy and interviews with former abductees, to present the fate of these people after their release and thus the impact of the Hortobágy events on their further lives.

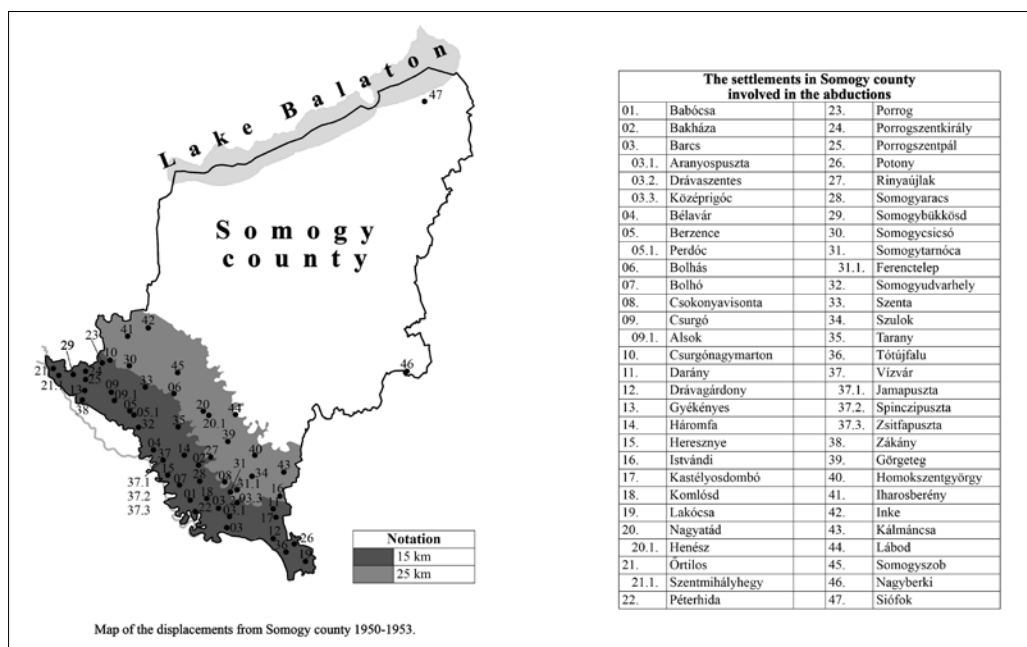
This theme demonstrates the utilitarian functioning of the communist system and revives a forgotten piece of Hungarian history. The communist government condemned these forced removals and labour camps to oblivion, and they were a taboo theme until the change of the political system in 1989/1990. In this study, I have used the books of those historians who first wrote about it and the memoirs of survivors. I have augmented these with sources from the Hungarian National Archives and Somogy County Archives, and I have additionally conducted interviews with the former prisoners.

5 = = Babócsa, Bakháza, Barcs, Bélavár, Berzence, Bolhás, Bolhó, Csokonyavisonta, Csurgó, Csurgónagymarton, Darány, Drávagárdony, Görgeteg, Gyékényes, Háromfa, Heresznye, Homokszentgyörgy, Iharosberény, Inke, Istvándi, Kálmánca, Kastélyosdombó, Komlósd, Lábod, Lakócsa, Nagyatád, Nagyberki, Őrtilos, Péterhida, Porrog, Porrogszentkirály, Porrogszentpál, Potony, Rinyaújlak, Siófok, Somogyaracs, Somogybükkösd, Somogyicsicsó, Somogyszob, Somogytarnóca, Somogyudvarhely, Szentá, Szulok, Tarany, Tótújfalu, Vízvár, and Zákány.

6 = = Nagy, *Péntek volt és 23*; József Saád, ed., *Telepessors* (Budapest: Gondolat, 2004), 48; MNL SVL XXIII-202.; XXIII-220-a.; XXIII-277-a. Protocols of meetings on relevant dates, September, 1956 – December, 1957.

7 = = Pál Breuer, *A hortobágyi kitelepítések igaz története 1950–53* (Pécs: B&D Stúdió, 2005), 18; Kinga Széchenyi, *Megbélyezettek* (Budapest: Helikon, 2015), 96.

8 = = Interview with Mrs. D. R. in 2017, who was fourteen years old when she was taken from Nagyatád together with her family in 1952 because her father was a military officer in the Horthy era and did not want to join the Hungarian People's Army. The interview—similarly to the other ones—is owned by the author for the time being. In order to protect personal rights, the interviewees are identified only by initials. Here I would like to thank my colleague László Fejes, who contributed to the interviews with the displaced persons.



Map of the displacements from Somogy county, 1950–1953

### = = The first phase of the thaw: 1953

After Stalin's death on March 5, 1953, the new Soviet leadership – in order to stabilize the system – committed itself to foreign and domestic policy changes. As part of this undertaking, they admitted that the likelihood of an attack from the west or the south, and with it the potential outbreak of a Third World War, gradually decreased from the middle of 1953. Thus there was no longer a need for either the expensive – and in any event not-very-effective – border strip or the forced labour camps established for defensive reasons.<sup>9</sup>

All of this change affected political life in the other states belonging to the Soviet bloc, including Hungary. The government established under the leadership of Imre Nagy set a new political and economic direction, through which the strained relations with the country's southern and eastern neighbours began to ease. In terms of domestic politics, the amnesty decree issued on July 26 abolished the punishment of political prisoners interned for less than two years.<sup>10</sup> However, this decree did not affect the people held in Hortobágy, as they had never been convicted. Their internment was abolished by a decision of the Council of Ministers made at the same time as the amnesty; this decision set the date for the full closure

9 = = Imre Okváth, *Bástya a béke frontján. Magyar haderő és katonapolitika 1945–1956* (Debrecen: Aquila, 1999), 277.

10 = = Orgoványi, "A déli határsáv 1948 és 1956 között," 278.

of these cases on October 31, 1953.<sup>11</sup> The prescribed deadline was met, in spite of the fact that the release progressed very slowly. Initially, it was mainly the sick, the elderly, mothers with little children, and pregnant women who were released, as the supervisors of the camps wanted the detained people to remain fit enough to perform the agricultural work of harvesting, plowing, and sowing. At the same time that the prisoners were released, the farms tried to recruit a labour force among the people released, offering them a contract, better payment, and suitable working conditions.<sup>12</sup> Of the 2,524 families (7,241 people) released from the camps, only 107 families (288 people) took advantage of this opportunity.<sup>13</sup>

At the time of their release, the camp residents were told that *“It was a mistake, forget it,”* or, *“Then not a word to anyone about what happened here, because you might be sent back.”*<sup>14</sup>

The decree announcing their release did not allow the former prisoners to return to their former place of residence, to other settlements within the border zone, to cities subject to a settlement permit (Koml6, Miskolc, Szt6linv6ros,<sup>15</sup> and V6rpalota), or even to Budapest. The settlement applications submitted were judged strictly by the authorities, and permits were only given to very old and sick former prisoners of Hortob6gy, who essentially returned home to die. The requests of the others, however, were rejected. In addition to this, neither the settled nor the rejected individuals could reclaim their confiscated movable or immovable properties.<sup>16</sup> Thus the families who were displaced and made homeless could only rely on relatives, friends, acquaintances, or benevolent strangers living outside the border zone to help them find work and housing. These circumstances made it possible, then, for people who were taken from Csokonyavisonta to end up in L6bod, while those from Barcs got to Fony6d, to Rinyahossz6falu (at present it belongs to L6bod), or even to P6cs.<sup>1</sup> Upon release, most of the residents of Somogy managed to return to the county, usually to one of the settlements near the border zone. However, even in this case it was hard for them to get by. The former prisoners were kept under ob-

11 == Sz6chenyi, *Megb6lyegzettek*, 222.

12 == B6la Tantalics, *Az 6t- 6s kitelep6tett politikai 6ld6z6ttek sorsa Zala megy6ben a hat6r ment6n 1950–1953* (Lenti: Honismereti Egyes6let Lenti, 2017), 52.

13 == Nov6k, *6t6let n6lk6l, 6rtatlanul*, 20.

14 == Gyula Guly6s and J6nos Guly6s, *T6rv6ny6s6rt6s n6lk6l* (Budapest: L6ng, 1989), 11.

15 == Today: Duna6jv6ros, Fej6r County.

16 == Nov6k, *6t6let n6lk6l, 6rtatlanul*, 20.

17 == Interview with Mrs. H. Gy., who was nine years old when she was taken away from Barcs together with her family in 1950 because her father had a dry goods store; interview with Mrs. G. J., who was nine years old when she was taken from Koml6sd together with her family in 1951 because her father had an oil crusher mill, a milk shop, and a carbonated water-producing machine; interview with Mrs. S. M., who was seven years old when she was taken from Csokonyavisonta together with her

servation until the change of regime of 1989/1990; the young people could not study further because of their “bad record from Hortobágy,” or not in the field they would have preferred, while employers were reluctant to employ them and could dismiss them any time. In short, their rehabilitation could only be discussed after the end of the communist era.<sup>18</sup>

### **= = The second phase of the thaw: 1956**

As a result of the improved relations between Hungary and its neighbours, the fifteen-kilometre border strip was abolished in January 1956, and only a 500-metre guard lane was maintained. Within it was a one-hundred-metre restricted zone, which was still strictly controlled by internal affairs organisations without harassing the surrounding population. On March 12, 1956, the whole southern border zone was abolished, including the former guard lane.<sup>19</sup>

In spring of 1956, the kulaks<sup>20</sup> were reconsidered, and many of them were deleted from the kulak lists. As a result of this, they were more likely to submit their application for settlement and support to the authorities.<sup>21</sup>

On August 1, the settlement was no longer tied to a permit. Thus, from then on the former deportees could return without restriction to Budapest, to those towns that had previously required a settlement permit, and (except for those expelled for crime) to the border strip, where they could try to regain their former homes.<sup>22</sup>

From September 1, 1956 to December 31, 1957, they could submit applications for the recovery of their confiscated real estate assets, as well as for the disbursement of aid of up to 5,000 HUF and state loans of up to 10,000 HUF per family (taking into account their financial and social situation). The latter form of aid could be spent on fixing their apartment buildings and starting their businesses. This aid could also be requested by those who had not returned to their former place of residence. However, their confiscated properties were not returned, nor was compensation paid. To meet the ongoing needs, the Ministry of Finance provided additional loans of HUF 2.2 million for the counties of Baranya, Bács-Kiskun and

family in 1950 because her grandfather was classified as a kulak; interview with Mr. M. J., who was six and a half years old when he was taken from Barcs with his family in 1951 because his father, who had been a member of the Social Democratic Party and who, after the union with the Communist Party in 1948, did not want to be a member of the HWP.

18 = = Széchenyi, *Megbélyezettek*, 242.

19 = = MNL SVL XXIII-2-c. 12/1957./Tan./Tük. Decision on the re-establishment of the southern border zone, February 5, 1957.

20 = = Wealthy farmers.

21 = = Miklós Füzes, *Törvénysértéssel* (Pécs: Pannónia könyvek, 1992), 30.

22 = = Novák, *Ítélet nélkül, ártatlanul*, 21.

Somogy as well as the city of Szeged, and HUF 1.5 million for Zala County.<sup>23</sup> The Kádár government made HUF 12.5 million available to the councils.<sup>24</sup>

The exact amount of the aid was determined and allocated by the executive committee of the district (city) council responsible for the returned person's place of residence, while the loan was provided – based on the recommendations of the same committees – by the county branch of the National Savings Bank.<sup>25</sup>

The decree on the enforcement of property rights regulated in detail the procedure for returning state-owned real estate. However, numerous problems arose during its practical implementation. Only roughly 10 percent of the residential buildings could be returned to their former owners; the rest had to be obtained from replacement properties.<sup>26</sup>

In addition, local party and state authorities were generally afraid of the situation with the returnees because they should have admitted their responsibility and should have returned the confiscated property, from which they also continued to benefit. For this reason, they tried in every possible way to prevent or even to prohibit the return of the abductees. The Executive Committee of Somogy County Council advised district councils to prevent the return of the displaced persons, and the county council instructed the village councils not to fulfill the needs of the returnees. In Zákány, for example, which is in the Csurgó District, one of the returnees registered as a permanent resident was automatically reported back to the previous place of residence by the district department. Because of this, he was unable to return home.<sup>27</sup> In its decision on June 27, 1956, the management of the village Lakócsa in the Barcs District allowed the displaced people from the village to return, but only if they were able to provide housing for themselves.<sup>28</sup> The returned former abductees were kept under surveillance by the district departments of the State Defence Authority, and were immediately banned from the given settlement in the event that their behaviour was considered hostile.

Another problem was that, due to their previous abduction, the evicted requested a written certificate stating that their evicting was illegal and guaranteeing that they could not be harmed again. These cases were finally decided on an individual basis. Several people asked for their personal belongings (mainly their furniture) to be

23 == Novák, *Ítélet nélkül, ártatlanul*, 21.

24 == Füzes, *Törvénytéséssel*, 31.

25 == MNL SVL XXIII-204. Decree Nr. 29/1956/IX. 8./ M. T. on the on the enforcement of the property rights claims of certain persons affected by the former southern border strip, September 8, 1956. The basis of reference for the following paragraphs is the same.

26 == Füzes, *Törvénytéséssel*, 32.

27 == Orgoványi, "A déli határsáv 1948 és 1956 között," 279.

28 == MNL SVL XXIII-820-a. Protocols, Decision of the executive committee Nr. 19/1956, June 27, 1956.

returned. However, some of these requests were made by individual district party and council bodies, farmers' co-operatives, and state farms, so it was not clear whether they had to be returned and, if they had been sold, whether the amount received had to be refunded or not. In the end, a decision was made that if the "usurper" of the furniture did not really need it, and the origin of the object could be proven beyond all doubt, then it had to be returned to its original owner.<sup>29</sup>

A question arose in the Csurgó District over who was considered rehabilitated: those who were evicted by the authority by car, or those who left voluntarily for another settlement out of fear. It was also a problem that several people only asked for their houses back, since in the meantime they had already established an employment relationship in addition to which they could not undertake cultivating the land. There were some people who wanted to regain only their vineyards and orchards, but they could only get them together with the unwanted fields. It was yet another problem that they could sell only part of their movable property and were able to pay only for its smaller portion. In the end, the solution was simply that the authorities involved in the cases did not deal with the question of compensation.<sup>30</sup>

The authorities usually allowed borrowing and gave the maximum of HUF 10,000; only in a few cases did they pay HUF 6,000 to 8,000.<sup>31</sup> On rare occasions HUF 5,000 in aid was granted, with the applicants usually receiving between HUF 1,500 and 3,500. Still, it sometimes happened that the aid granted was withdrawn and repaid in full for all kinds of reasons (such as the person's financial circumstances, residing outside the territory of the district, or a relative in the same household having already received aid).<sup>32</sup>

### **= = = The period of temporary repression: 1957–1958**

Following the defeat of the Revolution that broke out on October 23, 1956, the Hungarian Revolutionary Workers' and Peasants' Government was established under the leadership of János Kádár. As many people, in order to escape the reprisals, fled the country through the territory of the former border zone, Ferenc Münnich, the new government's Minister of Armed Forces and Public Security, ordered the restoration of the southern border strip and the re-introduction of the former rules in his Order Number Six that went into effect on February 2, 1957. According to the order, warning signs for the border zone had to be erected immediately in their former places, and the local police stations – or in their absence, the village executive committees – were once more required to keep records of the people entering

29 = = Novák, *Ítélet nélkül, ártatlanul*, 21.

30 = = Novák, *Ítélet nélkül, ártatlanul*, 22.

31 = = MNL SVL XXIII-301. 14-234/1956. The case of Mr. B. J., resident of Bolhó, October 25, 1956.

32 = = MNL SVL XXIII-334. Protocol of the council meeting, June 6, 1957.

the border zone. However, the previously existing minefield in the southern border section was not restored.<sup>33</sup>

In 1958, the assessment of applications for reviewing the nationalized properties continued. In the district of Marcali, seventy-two applications were assessed; in twenty-seven cases, the property was released from state ownership, while in forty-five cases the applications were rejected due to various exclusionary reasons.<sup>34</sup> The most common of these reasons was the classification of the petitioner as an exploiter, oppressor of the people, or participant in revolutionary activities. Before considering the application, the executive committee was obliged to request information from the police of the relevant territory to verify that the applicant did not belong to one of these categories that would prevent the property's release.<sup>35</sup> Applications were assessed in other districts of the county as well; the table below shows the current status of the research:

**The numbers of the accepted and the rejected applications in the districts  
of Somogy county in 1957–1958**

District	Number of accepted applications (pieces)	Number of rejected applications (pieces)
Barcs	19	48
Csurgó	1	12
Fonyód	16	64
Kaposvár	22	84
Marcal	27	45
Nagyatád	1	5
Siófok	49	105
Tab	15	52
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>415</b>

Most rejections were due to the applicant's "pre-liberation" activities. If they were classified as a kulak, exploiter, or oppressor of the people, if they had held some office during the Horthy regime, or if perhaps they were a military officer, gendarme, or police officer, the submitted application was rejected. Additionally, other common reasons for rejection included the following: when the number of rooms classified as rooms for living exceeded the permitted six; if at least 50 percent of the building

33 = = MNL SVL XXIII-2-c. 12/1957./Tan./Tük. Decision on the re-establishment of the southern border zone, February 5, 1957

34 = = MNL SVL XXIII-264. Protocol, January 15, 1958.

35 = = MNL SVL XXIII-2-c. 049/1958. Exemption of nationalized properties, April 10, 1958.



was used by a public body or a state body; if the applicant could not or did not want to pay the remainder of the cost that exceeded the HUF 5,000 paid by the state on the property; if the applicant had another residential property; or if the applicant's relative had died before the legal decree on nationalization came into force (on February 17, 1952). In the latter case, the widow(er) did not acquire ownership of the property, so they could not reclaim as the legal heir. However, in some cases an interesting justification was given: despite having been divorced and having married another man, an applicant did not recover the property that had been taken from her because her first husband had been a member of a right-wing extremist organization. In still other cases, the person was unable to reclaim their house because it had already been given to another claimant as an exchange property.<sup>36</sup>

### == Conclusion

The “meltdown” surrounding the former abductees began in 1988 with the documentary film *No lawless...* by János Gulyás and Gyula Gulyás. It intensified after 1995, when the relevant documents became researchable and historians began to publish works on the subject. At the same time, the survivors also began publishing their memoirs. On June 23, 1990, on the first anniversary of the first deportation, the former prisoners erected the Hortobágy Cross near the famous Nine-arched Bridge. This monument was the work of the architect Sándor Haranghy and was constructed from railway tracks as a reminder of the fact that they had been deported by rail.<sup>37</sup>

Starting in 1990, the former deportees could request an official certificate, for which they received a standard pension supplement of HUF 500. Later, a HUF 11,000 “pain fee” was paid in the form of a compensation ticket after each month spent in resettlement. From the year 2000 on, those persons whose detention period had been at least three but less than five years received a monthly allowance of HUF 20,000. In 2013, this rule was modified so that if the person's total detention period had been less than three years, they would receive HUF 15,000 benefits per month, while if the person's detention period had been at least three but less than five years, they would then receive HUF 30,000 benefits per month. However, those who had been taken in the last big wave of relocation and who thus had spent less than a year

36 == MNL SVL XXIII-202. Protocols of the executive committee meetings, March 28 – October 25, 1958; MNL SVL XXIII-220-a. Protocols of the executive committee meetings, January 11 – October 31, 1958; MNL SVL XXIII-232. Protocols of the executive committee meetings, March 21 – October 17, 1958; MNL SVL XXIII-247. Protocols of the executive committee meetings, January 25 – November 1, 1958; MNL SVL XXIII-277-a. Protocols of the executive committee meetings, January 25 – October 20, 1958; MNL SVL XXIII-291. Protocols of the executive committee meetings, February 13 – December 31, 1958; MNL SVL XXIII-308. Protocols of the executive committee meetings, February 8 – December 20, 1958.

37 == Zsuzsa W. Balassa, *Hortobágyi kényszermunkatáborok 1950–1953* (Veszprém: Veszprémi Nyomda, 2005), 9.

in Hortobágy did not receive any compensation. As for moral rehabilitation, after the change of the system, the Antall Government issued a one-sentence apology for the wrongful harm these individuals had suffered.<sup>38</sup>

In 2000, the Association of Hortobágy Forced Labour Camps Deportees was established, which primarily produces publications and documentaries, holds school lectures, and operates a website. During the 2000s, it had memorials erected at the sites of all former camps, commissioned a commemorative plaque, built the ecumenical Jesus the Good Shepherd Church, and every year, on the anniversary of the first wave of deportation, organized a commemorative trip to the former camps.<sup>39</sup> Today, in several settlements of the country and in collaboration with the local governments, memorials have been erected to the memory of those who experienced atrocities during the communist rule. In Somogy County for example, in 2002 a commemorative plaque was installed (among others) in Nagyatád and dedicated to those who were innocently displaced, while in Kaposvár in 2005 another was dedicated to the memory of the victims of communism. The Settlers Social Museum Foundation is also active and has organized a conference on the topic. In 2019, sixty-nine years after the beginning of the events, the establishment of the Hortobágy Deportees' Memorial Place, an educational and memorial centre, also began. On June 13, 2000, the Hungarian Parliament declared February 25 as Memorial Day for the Victims of Communism.<sup>40</sup>

However, only a few of the former Hortobágy residents lived to see it. Those who were already old at the time of the deportation died either in the camps or after their release, when they could not get home. Of those who were deported to the camps as adults and who thus bore the primary responsibility of feeding their family members through their work, many died a few years later from various illnesses. Due to this factor as well as the passage of time, only those who were children, teenagers, or young adults in their twenties during the resettlement are alive today. They are now in their seventies, eighties, and nineties – as for example are those we interviewed about the events in Somogy County. Ten of our interviewees were between seventy-one and seventy-nine, two were eighty-two and eighty-three years old, and one was over ninety years old. We also conducted five more interviews: three

38 == Széchenyi, *Megbélyegzettek*, 264; interview with Mr. K. J., who was fourteen years old when he was taken away together with his family from Komlósd because the authorities wanted to set an example so that no one would feel safe. There were twelve siblings in the family, and his family was the poorest in the village; interview with Mr. Á. G., who was seven years old when he was taken away together with his family in 1952 from Órtilos, where his father was a ferryman. Due to his work, he had to cross over to Yugoslavia several times, so he was classified as a spy.

39 == Interview with Mrs. R. A., who was sixteen years old when she was taken away together with her family in 1951 from Barcs because her father had a small pálinka (special Hungarian brandy) brewing business.

40 == Decision of the Hungarian Parliament Nr. 58/2000.

with persons deported from Baranya County, and two with individuals from Zala County, all of whom were between seventy-four and eighty-nine years old.

In conclusion, it can be said that during the early 1950s in Hungary, the “Hungarian Gulag” was established: twelve forced labor camps in Hortobágy. It was here that the communist government tried to realize its flawed and problematic ideas through the forced labour of more than 8,000 innocent people.

The story of the people abducted from Somogy County shows how the major political events made their impact felt at the local level. These people could survive camp conditions and the decades of enduring discrimination after their release with only the help of their faith, solidarity, willpower, and ability to fight. Besides all this, even after the regime change, they had to fight: not only for compensation, but against being condemned to oblivion.

Yet in spite of it all, they do not desire revenge. Rather, they would be fully satisfied if their story could receive sufficient attention, both in the public discourse and in public and higher education.

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XXIII-232. Documents of the Executive Committee of the District of Fonyód

XXIII-247. Documents of the Executive Committee of the District of Kaposvár

XXIII-264. Documents of the Executive Committee of the District of Marcali

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#### **Keywords**

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*Communist Hungary, Hortobágy, displacement, border strip,  
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Nine-arched Bridge, Hortobágy (Hungary), 1950.

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