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LABOUR SERVICEMEN AT BOR
CHAPTERS FROM THE HISTORY OF THE BOR LABOUR CAMP

(SUMMARY)

On 20 November 1940 Hungary joined the Tripartite Pact with Germany, Italy and Japan. On 6 April 1941 Germany attacked Yugoslavia, and so did Regent Miklós Horthy and the government of László Bárdossy a few days later. Hungarian soldiers occupied the Yugoslavian region of Bačka. A few months later, on 26 June, Hungary declared war on the Soviet Union.

The Hungarian military forces consisted not only of armed, but also of unarmed soldiers. The latter were obliged to do unarmed home defence labour service. Under the Horthy regime the first labour service law was brought into effect in March 1939. The aim was to gather all politically unreliable individuals, and use their manpower for military purposes. Labour service enlistees mainly included communists, people belonging to various ethnicities, as well as Romas and Jews. They first of all constructed railways, roads, airfields and military facilities. By the summer of 1940 about 60 Jewish labour service battalions were established. However, their situation, place of service and duties changed during the war years. Members of the first Jewish battalions served in military uniforms and could keep their ranks and arms. However, from the spring of 1941 this privilege was withdrawn. Due to their Jewish origin they were required to wear yellow armbands. Treatment of these servicemen got worse and worse, and labour service had an increasingly punitive character.

The labour servicemen worked on Hungarian territory, including territories occupied during the war in (Northern Transylvania, Southern Slovakia, Bačka, Carpatho-Ukraine). However, after Hungary attacked the Soviet Union, they also served in military operational areas far away from the Hungarian borders. By the beginning of 1943 the number of labour servicemen reached 50,000, thousands of whom lost their lives while attached to the Second Hungarian Army on the Soviet front, during the removal of landmines, in the retreat or as prisoners of war in Russia.

In the German-occupied territory of Yugoslavia Germany took possession of the mines and industrial facilities, too, including the very important (formerly French-owned) Bor mining region. This region in south-east Serbia (in the Serbian Ore Mountains close to the Romanian and Bulgarian borders) had valuable raw materials for the production of weaponry (copper, nickel, tin and lead). From 1942

these mines provided fifty percent of Germany's total ore requirement for its war efforts. For mining and processing, as well as for the increase of production, the Germans required more and more workers. To this end, they decided on the use of forced labour. Therefore, from the end of 1942 until the autumn of 1944 a labour camp complex employing 30,000 to 80,000 forced labourers was organised in Bor and its vicinity. In addition to "Yugoslavs" living on the territory of Yugoslavia (Bosniaks, Croats, Hungarians, Serbs, Slovenes, Jews), captured partisans, Czech, French, Greek, Polish and Romanian workers, as well as a large number of Italian prisoners of war (following Italy's withdrawal from the war in May 1943), were living and toiling in the region. Work was directed by Organisation Todt (OT), the German military labour organisation with the German Siemens factory providing the professional background. Therefore, the forced labourers became Siemens employees.

Berlin repeatedly turned to Budapest in order that it provide 10,000 Hungarian workers for the works in Bor. Initially the Hungarian government declined these requests, but eventually Minister of Defence Colonel-general Lajos Csataj acceded to the request. On 2 July 1943 the first Hungarian-German agreement was concluded in Budapest. This meant that Hungary sent 3,000 people to Bor in exchange for some of the raw materials mined there. The Hungarian labour servicemen went to and were held in Yugoslavia under Hungarian military control. In Bor they were involved in mining activities led by OT. As much as 98 per cent of the labour servicemen sent to Yugoslavia by Hungary in 1943 were Jewish. The remaining two per cent, around 200 people, were members of minority churches. The 160 to 180 Jehovah's Witnesses, 18 Sabbatarians (otherwise known as members of the Seventh Day Adventist Reform Church) and 9 Nazarenes who were taken to Bor were first sentenced to several years of imprisonment and incarcerated due to their anti-military views and for refusing military service. They were collected from various prisons in 1943 to form the so called „Jehovah” or „Sectarian” battalion in the Bor labour camp.

While 3,000 Hungarians were doing labour service in Bor, Germany invaded Hungary on 19 March 1944. The Germans demanded that more and more forced labourers be sent to Bor from Hungary. The government now no longer hesitated to fulfil the request, and it provided the Germans with 3,000 Jewish labour servicemen under the same conditions. The labour servicemen arrived in Bor in the summer of 1944. Those who arrived in 1943 were put in the central, i.e. Berlin camp located near Bor, and did mining related forced labour. Those arriving in 1944 were placed at the seven subsidiary labour camps situated to the north-west of Bor, and were made to construct a narrow-gauge railway over the mountains.

Many of the 6,000 labour servicemen taken to Bor were well known figures from the world of culture, arts, public life or politics, including the internationally

known great Hungarian poet, Miklós Radnóti, and the poet László Lukács, who died in Bor. The well-known Social Democratic politician, Pál Justus was one of the older servicemen. All three of them served in Bor under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Ede Marányi. Under his command the situation of the labour servicemen fundamentally changed. The already strict discipline was replaced with a cruel and Antisemitic system. During Marányi's tenure the cruel forms of punishment, torture and executions were used on a massive scale; such as in the case of Albert Csillag, the graphic artist from Budapest. After the war Ede Marányi changed his name to Antal Fehér and disappeared in Western Europe. He was tried in absentia in Hungary for war crimes. For unknown reasons he was not convicted, whilst several of his military subordinates in Bor were sentenced to death and executed.

From among the Jewish forced labourers taken to Bor doctors (medical students, dentists, pharmacists, veterinaries, paramedics) formed a separate group. The first part of the book deals with them and their work. It describes the living conditions and working regime in the central camp and the sub-camps, as well as the servicemen's everyday lives. Many of the liberated Bor doctors became the doctors of Tito's partisans, but some were forced to serve the pro-German chetniks. Several of the former Bor doctors and labour servicemen that survived the Holocaust became famous physicians in Hungary and other countries.

On 23 August 1944 Romania pulled out of the war, as a result of which the Soviets quickly forced the German troops to retreat from the Balkans. The Hungarian Ministry of Defence called the Hungarian soldiers and labour servicemen back from Bor. The first group of labour servicemen left Bor on 17 September 1944. The approximately 3,600 people suffered significant losses by the time they reached the Szentkirályszabadja camp near Lake Balaton. The greatest losses were incurred at Crvenka in the West Bačka region of Serbia. Here German soldiers, with the support of Hungarian soldiers, executed 800 to 1,000 Jewish labour servicemen during the night of 7 October 1944. At Szentkirályszabadja the labour servicemen were again put under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Ede Marányi. From the very end of October and the very beginning of November 1944, they were marched on foot in two groups via Veszprém and Győr to Mosonmagyaróvár. The Mohács group included, among others, the poet Miklós Radnóti and Gyula Trebitsch, the later Hamburg-based film producer. Radnóti was executed at Abda near Győr, while Trebitsch survived the Holocaust. I have written about the events along the Transdanubian route based on memoirs and the soldiers' legal court cases. The military treated their prisoners with extreme cruelty on this journey, too, and even murdered some. The most serious of these murder cases was the one committed at Abda, where 22 labour servicemen, including Radnóti, were executed.

The nearly 1,500-strong group of the Bor servicemen were handed over by Hungarian soldiers to German soldiers at Mosonmagyaróvár. They were led by the SS to Zurndorf train station in Austria, where they were loaded into wagons with other battalions of Hungarian labour servicemen. One of the groups from the Bor labour camp ended up at Sachsenhausen near Berlin, while another group was taken to the Flossenbürg concentration camp, near the German-Czech border. From here they were taken to various concentration camps, with around 500 of them surviving the war.

Most of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Sabbatarians and Nazarenes that were attached to the group survived the war. The first to be freed were the Sabbatarians near Belgrade, who managed to escape with the help of their Serbian brethren. Members of Jehovah's Witnesses and Nazarenes were freed in western Hungary after suffering further vicissitudes on their journey. Later some members of all three minority churches were taken by Soviet soldiers to do forced labour in the Soviet Union, where three Sabbatarians lost their lives.

A few days after the first group left Bor, a second group set off for Hungary on 29 September 1944. This group included Pál Justus, Social Democratic politician, and many prominent members of the Hungarian cultural and scientific life. The approximately 2,000 Jewish labour servicemen that set off were liberated on the day after their departure by Tito's partisans in the Serbian mountains. Several people became partisans, while the doctors served as military doctors during the liberation of Yugoslavia. However, most people were forced to hide from the Germans and to flee to Romania. Finally, they returned to the liberated Hungary from Timișoara and Arad, or emigrated to Palestine.