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Mortification, legal continuity, frustration: the fugitive government-board of the Co. Lower-Fehér in Budapest, 1919-1921.

Abstract

Using archive material, the essay explains the workings of the association founded by civil servants who fled from Co. Lower Fehér in Transylvania to Budapest. Besides the facts of organization the major aim has been to analyse the language used in legislation as well as the requirements it expressed. The association was managed by a small number of participants whose social background explains the position of the fugitives in the society of the Horthy-era, their possibilities to integrate, to preserve their social prestige, to develop their social activities. The results of the survey show that associations of the kind did not offer ways and means to integration. Due to the decision of the government, the association that aimed at the legal continuity of Co. Lower Fehér, discontinued its operations in the summer of 1921.

There has been relatively little published about the social status and options of the refugees after the Paris peace treaty¹. There were officially about 350 thousand, unofficially about 420-425 thousand persons, representing about 5% of the population of Hungary's reduced area. The social developments and their integration has been still offering much to discover.

The present paper is based on a bundle of official papers discovered by chance completed by the results of other sources and analyses.

¹ Szűts István Gergely: A miskolci optások társadalomszerkezeti vizsgálata. In: Czetz Balázs-Kunt Gergely (szerk.): Politika és mindennapok. (A jelenkortörténet útjai 2.) Miskolc, 2007, ME BTK Új- és Jelenkori Magyar Történeti Tanszék. 143-165. [Social system of the Miskolc optants]

Mountains and storms

The Co. Lower Fehér on both sides of River Maros was created in 1764²; its final size, 3577 km², was established by the reform of public administration in 1876. The area is geographically variable consisting of the Transylvanian Erzgebirge in the west, the so-called Transylvanian Plateau in the east and the wine-growing area of the Transylvanian Hegyalja as well as the mountain ranges along the Rivers Ompoly and Aranyos. There were four towns: Abrudbánya, Zalatna, Nagyenyed and Verespatak, the latter being the county town. A short overview of the events of 1848-1849 is essential to understand of the events under discussion. In the spring and summer of 1848 the new Hungarian government wanting to secede from the Habsburg monarchy recruited soldiers to fight for its cause that raised high passions in Transylvania. Not only Romanian peasants resisted but several Romanian border guard battalions too refused to obey the new government's orders. In October 1848 civil war broke out centring in Co. Lower Fehér. It was the first time that houses of Hungarian landowners were sacked, their inhabitants massacred, the civil servants of the county attacked. The area was the headquarters of the Romanian rebellion led by Avram Iancu and Axente Sever. The Hungarian inhabitants of Abrudbánya, Zalatna, Nagyenyed and Verespatak and the area of the Transylvanian Hegyalja suffered because of their nationality. The 1848-1849 civil war has been a much discussed topic of the history of Hungarian War of Independence.³ Fifty years later Farkas Szilágyi, a protestant minister in Nagyenyed, the chronicler of the county, estimated the Hungarian victims of the civil war to 4264 persons (not counting 400 mentally victimised ones and 500 soldiers dieing on the battlefields and in hospitals), about one sixth of the Hungarian inhabitants of the county. Ákos Egyed, the specialist of the era has completed the number to 6000.⁴ It would mean that

² Iczkovits Emma: Az erdélyi Fehér megye a középkorban. Budapest, 1939. [County Fehér in the Middle Ages]

³ Egyed Ákos: Erdély 1848-1849. I-II. köt. Csíkszereda, 1999, Pallas-Akadémia. I. köt. 221-234. II. köt. 24-42., 159-179., 282-293. [Transylvania 1848-1849]; Szilágyi Farkas: Alsófehér vármegye 1848-49-ben. (Alsófehér vármegye történelme. III. kötet, 1. rész). Nagyenyed, 1898, Nagyenyedi Könyvnyomda és Papírárugyár Részvénytársaság. 113-198., 228-254.; 400-407 [County Lower Fehér 1848-49]; Hermann Róbert: Az abrudbányai tragédia - 1849. Budapest, 1999, Heraldika. [The tragedy in Abrudbánya

⁴ Egyed: op.cit.. Vol. II. p. 300.

70-80 % of the 7500-8000 Hungarian civilian victims of the Transylvanian civil war were inhabitants of the Co.Lower Fehér. Frakas Szilágyi estimated 1000 the number of Romanians of the county killed during the actions of the Hungarian army in addition to the Romanian casualties in the battlefields, thus adding up to 3500-4000 Romanian victims.⁵ There were only few Saxon losses; the more than 10 thousand dead represented about 6% of the 160 thousand inhabitants of the County between the autumn of 1848 and summer of 1849. According to Szilágyi's reckoning the material loss was about 9 million Forints.⁶ The reason why these circumstances have received a more detailed summary is that in 1848 there had still been memories of the Horea – Closca rebellion of 1783-84, and in 1918 there must have been persons whose childhood memories had preserved the horrors of 1848-49. Since the events of the county had central interest in history books as well as fiction, quite a few people must have regarded 1918 as a repetition of earlier events.

The county and its towns

The census following 1867 show a slight increase in the number of inhabitants: from 188 702 to 219 177. According to the 1910 census the total was 221 618, of which 39 107 (17,6%) were Hungarians, unevenly distributed in the region, the majority living in small towns.⁷ There were also 7269 Saxons in the county, The number of Lutherans equalled with the number of the Saxons while Hungarians made up the number of Catholics (11 194), Calvinists (23 009), Unitarians (1269) and Jews (3845).⁸ The proportion of illiteracy was very high, only about one third of the inhabitants (76 618 persons) were literate.

Though the county was varied where nationality and education were concerned, its role in Hungarian learning was important nonetheless: the schools of Nagyenyed, the archbishopric and its seminary

⁵ Ibid. 401-402.

⁶ Szilágyi:op.cit. 407.

⁷ Lázár István: Alsófehér vármegye magyar népe. Nagyenyed, 1896, Cirner és Lingner Könyvnyomdája. 3-4. [The Hungarians of County Lower Fehér]

⁸ Magyar Statisztikai Közlemények Új sorozat. 42. köt. Budapest, 1912, Athenaeum. 376-379., 850-851. [Hungarian Statistical publications] 1911-ben 89% of the Jews claimed to have Hungarian as their mother tongue: Glück Jenő: A gyulafehérvári izraelita hitközség története. Levéltári Szemle, 2004. 2. sz. 37. [The history of the Jewish community in Gyulafehérvár]

in Gyulafehérvár, the state officials in the managements of the mines meant that Hungarian learned people played an important role in the county's public life. On the other hand post 1848 surveys refer to the urban Hungarians as immigrants giving a very low number of families true-born of the county.⁹

Towards the end of World War I, public order of the county broke down already in autumn 1918. The Hungarian civil servants were threatened or made to flee by the Romanian inhabitants in regions with Romanian majority. The papers of the refugee government board contains evidence that Miklós Roska mayor of Gyulafehérvár and János Winkler district-notary of Abrudbánya had already left their posts in November 1918.¹⁰ The nationality movements, the geographically central position of the county (from the point of view of Romanian inhabited territories to be annexed to Romania), the county's history in the Romanian movements, the hostile attitude of the Hungarian government in Kolozsvár had a cumulating affect and the reason that the Romanian nation forming act was organized in Gyulafehérvár, the county town of Co.Lower Fehér.¹¹

On the turn of 1918-19 the Romanian army occupied the county. On the 9th of December the railway connection to Kolozsvár was cut off at Tövis, a major railway junction.

Gyulafehérvár was occupied on the 19th of December, Nagyenyed on the 20th, and Budapest papers informed about a delegation from Bucharest to take over the ore mines in Abrudbánya and Verespatak.¹² In most of the cases the military entry merely sanctioned the *status quo*, e.g. in Gyulafehérvár, where the Romanian inhabitants took over the control of the city as early as the 5th of December and elected a local lawyer to mayor.¹³ The new military and civil authorities jointly prevented the local Hungarians to go to the General

⁹ Lázár: op.cit. 4.

¹⁰ Pest Megyei Levéltár, IV. 901., Alsó-Fehér vármegye Budapesten működő törvényhatóságának iratai, I. cs. 124-1920. sz. ill. 133-1920. sz. [Papers of the government board of County Lower Fehér in Budapest]

¹¹ 'Az erdélyi románok Nagyromániához csatlakoznak.' *Az Est*, 1918. december 3. 1-2. [The Romanians want to join Great Romania]

¹² *Pesti Napló*, 1918. december 20. p.1., *Budapesti Hírlap*, 1918. december 20. p.5.

¹³ 'Gyulafehérvár tisztviselői felesküdtek a románoknak'. *Az Est*, 1918. december 8. 3. [The civil servants of Gyulafehérvár made the oath to the Romanians]

assembly of Transylvanian Hungarians held in Kolozsvár on the 21st and 22nd of December.¹⁴

Because after the political takeover Hungarian officials were fired from their posts and because of atrocities against Hungarians, a mass refuge began towards the regions still under Hungarian rule. The first great wave of refuge was at the beginning of 1919 when the occupying Romanian authorities chase away those who did not gave the demanded oath of allegiance or because their behaviour was considered otherwise hostile. During the Hungarian Soviet Republic there was a lull in expelling Hungarians from the county – judging by the accounts of the sources – but the Romanian authorities changed techniques and interned or imprisoned persons disagreeable to them, e.g Győző Korinsky former judge of the court.¹⁵ After the fall of the Communist power the expulsion started immediately renewed and continued all through 1920.¹⁶

The act

The radical right-wing daily paper *Szózat* published a notice in its 19. December 1919 issue requesting the inhabitants of the deannexed counties to register with the governmental boards.¹⁷ The forming governmental boards must have started earlier, because two days later the Budapest board of the Co. Lower Fehér was founded in the premises of the *Magyar Nemzeti Szövetség* [Hungarian National Association]. The organization probably was initiated by *Területvédő Liga* [Ligue for territory preservation (LTP)] because the meeting was called by Sándor Krisztics the secretary of LTP and Zsigmond Perényi president of the Hungarian National Association. At the meeting László Okolicsányi vice president represented LTP. Those present declared the government board of the Co.Lower Fehér formed and Aladár Pongrácz, former county attorney of Abrudbánya, elected as its head.

¹⁴ *Az Est*, 1918. december 24. p.2.

¹⁵ PML, IV. 901. 7-1920. sz. Alsó-Fehér vármegye törvényhatóságának átirata a Tevéhez, Budapest, 1920. február 12. [letter of the government board of County Lower Fehér in Budapest to Tevé]

¹⁶ cf. the cases Daubravszyk, Gyula chief auditor of Gyulafehérvár (No. 62-1920.), Újhelyi, János municipal cash-clerk of Nagyenyed (No. 85-1920. sz.).

¹⁷ Also in the Catholic paper *Új Nemzedék* 14. July 1919.

The twenty odd participants could hardly represent the whole county legitimately; from the start on it was stressed that the association was necessary to maintain legal continuity. The 29 participants were men (with only 5 women, 3 of them as family members) who were state or town officials with Budapest domicile at the end of 1919 and a town in Co.Lower Fehér as their previous address. According to occupation three of them were gendarm, police and army officers, 7 civil servants (chief auditor, county attorney, vice mayor, town councillor, dispatching clerk,) 3 teachers and head masters (and two family members), 3 municipal and district-notaries, 2 technical university students, one state geologist (and his wife), one lawyer, journalist, coffee-house owner, locksmith, landowner, technician, retail bank manager, and some who did not specify their occupation. There are two of the participants who had later more important careers: Gyula Toókos (1883-1958) hussar captain, member of the group known as the 'Szeged' officers, he later became a general, registered as refugee from Vajasd; Lajos Esztergár (1894-1978) lawyer from Abrudbánya, later became the mayor of Pécs, and in the early 1940s was one of the organizers of the Horthy governments social policy.

It is noteworthy that former county officials were represented only by László Tóth former chief administration officer in Verespatak, several of them had remained in Transylvania but probably many others were also among the fugitives. All the same, their absence is strange even if they might have lived away from Budapest in various parts of Hungary and might not have any information about the initiative nor the means to travel to the capital, as is suggested by later applications by refugees who lived in the country at the time (a judge, an accountant, a state financial councillor).

The participants of the meeting declared to form the governmental board (it was one of other 47 ones) to maintain legal continuation. Dr. Aladár Pongrácz, former county attorney of Abrudbánya was elected president.¹⁸

¹⁸ PML, IV. 901., 1-2/1920. minutes of the meeting of 21. December 1919.

Statement

The newly formed general assembly accepted a resolution to collect all reasons and statements against the disannexation of the county and for the necessity of the foundation of the board. Besides stressing the maintenance of legal continuity there appear the phrases which remain the characteristic usage of the association and its members.

The arguments can be summed up as

- (a) reference to past sufferings (1783-84, 1848-49): 'Our ancestors had suffered much. They saw the hords of Hora – Kloska kill and rob, the bands of Janku and Axentye in Austrian pay, however, they did not despair, the county still remained. The Romanians calling themselves the descendants of the ancient Romans do now the same what their grandfathers did, but we, the sons of the martyrs of past times do not despair either and know that the county will survive'. There is also reference to the destruction of Abrudbánya, Zalatna and Nagyenyed.¹⁹
- (b) the stressing of cultural superiority: the Romanian rabbles destroyed cultural treasures during their marauding campaigns and are without any historical, legal and moral basis [sic].
- (c) The description of scenes of patriarchal life: 'the inhabitants of the Co.Lower Fehér, Hungarians, Saxons and sober Romanians, especially the more intelligent Romanian miners, would make a statement in favour of the integrity of our country fully appreciating the past and firmly believing in the future.'

It is peculiar, that the economic and geographical arguments so importantly present in the Hungarian propaganda demanding the territorial integrity of Hungary are missing from these document apart from some stereotypical references to the gold of Zalatna, the salt of Vizakna and the wine of Magyarigen.²⁰

In the following months several other boards were also formed, probably in answer to the initiative of LTP. The available documents indicate the establishment of the governmental boards of the counties Torda-Aranyos, Maros-Torda and Szilágy, and the town of Zombor,

¹⁹ *Abrudbánya és Vidéke* 1917: Bölöni Mikó Samu on the destroyal of Zalatna and Abrudbánya, 1918: Rákosy, István Memoires of 1848-49.

²⁰ PML, IV. 901., 2-1919 decision of the general meeting 27. December 1919.

which kept intensive correspondence with other refugee boards and even tried to call them to make political statements, thus to support Sekler Association instead of Sekler National Party, also to found a Transylvanian army²¹

The Hungarian government was aware of the initiatives. On the 29th of February 1919 Cabinet meeting Ödön Beniczky minister of home affairs reported on the government boards and sub-prefect offices established by the fugitives of disannexed counties in Budapest. Though the minister appreciated the movements, he stressed the importance of legality and disapproved of their operation contradicting legally formulated criteria. He agreed with their actions as long as they remained within the limits of making statements on their wish to preserve territorial integrity; he added that he would make these conditions known to the groups too. The meeting confirmed the motion.²²

The Co. Lower Fehér board was not satisfied and sent petitions to power holders of Hungary and the world. There were several privately initiated petitions of which that of the members of Abrudbánya is most noteworthy, since it was addressed to the president of the peace conference. The style of the document dated on the 16 February 1919 is typically patriarchal: the authors claimed that the 'seriously minded' Romanians were dissatisfied with the secession of the region and gave sound of their opinion that the Romanians were in general incapable of statehood.²³ It would be easy to take these initiatives lightly and dismiss their provinciality; but such petitions could reach high places e.g. the one from Co. Sáros to Paris and under the circumstances of the time no one could tell what petition signed by a small group of people would have caught the attention of the great powers. The archive of the government board contains a great number of petitions demanding the leaders of the county to protest against the peace treaty. In February 1920 the county wrote a letter to Albert Apponyi the head of the peace delegation to inform him that 'the more serious Romanians also insist till their death to the

²¹ Uo. 67-1920, on the general assembly of Co. Torda-Aranyos 5. June 1920. június 5. 139-1920, Co. Maros-Torda, 31. October 1920.

²² Magyar Országos Levéltár (MOL), K 27 Minisztertanácsi jegyzőkönyvek, 1920. február 29. 23. napirendi pont.[Cabinet minutes, item 23].

²³ PML, IV. 901., 16-1920. Felhívás, Budapest, 16. February 1920. [proclamation]

upkeep of St. Stephen's ancient country and would never want to become the slaves of Romanians from the Balkans. All the culture in the country is the result of Hungarian money, work and brain, there was no such thing as Romanian culture. The Romanians can pride only in their marauding and mass murders'; then after a reference to 1848-49: 'The spirits of the murdered women, children and old people of Nagyenyed, Abrudbánya, Zalatna, etc. would all come to help us gaining back our ancient country.' The document ends with an explicit threat: 'We will never put up with the loss of our country and curse the hand which signs the peace treaty sanctioning the dismembering the country.'²⁴

Activities

The refugee self-government – self-appointed as it were – had no own administration nor office; they had to rely on the infrastructure provided by LTP and the National Association. During 1920 they moved several times until all the refugee boards were finally settled down in the Adria Building. The heads of the counties issued certificates (of character, domicile, poverty), verifying patriotic conduct and also tried to lobby in favour of certain co-refugees. The activities required no great exertion of the elected clerks: in 1920 there were 134 papers filed, in the first half of 1921 80, the last on being 80-1921; the archive was closed down on 23. July 1921. The validity of the documents were enhanced by the boards own stamp with the inscription "The community of the Co.Lower Fehér", a model shared by the other refugee offices too.²⁵

The major part of the board's activity was to lobby for the active members, to give character references or obtain medical help; there was one instance when someone was accused of unpatriotic behaviour.²⁶ It seems that on their part LTP as well as governmental organs tried to use these governmental boards to collect information (on

²⁴ Uo. 9-1920, Memorandum to Albert Apponyi signed by Aladár Pongrácz. Budapest, 5. February 1920.

²⁵ Uo. 5-1920, letter of Ferenc Kratochvil, Budapest, 23. December 1919.

²⁶ Uo. 8-1920, the government board of Co. Lower-Fehér to the Ministry of Justice. Budapest, 12. February 1920.

local firewood prices,²⁷ on Hungarian, Romanian and German newspapers published in the region,²⁸ on the disposition of the county²⁹), however, the data collected were fragmentary and proved useless. There were also attempts at unifying the work of the various refugee boards. In February 1921 István Dessewffy former notary of Co. Sáros signed a document which invited the Lower Fehér representatives to participate at a great meeting of delegates to be organized later; the addressees were paradoxically asked to keep secret 'the existence of the leading committee of the occupied counties'. Though Aladár Pongrácz head of the board answered that they could not materially contribute to the costs of the meeting, offered himself for talking on Romanian nationality questions.³⁰ It was also lack of money that the refugees of Co. Lower Fehér could not buy the 'Hungarian Talisman' of *Védő Ligák Szövetsége* [the Association of Protecting Leagues] propagated by the central bureau of occupied government boards.³¹

It was not lack of funds what finally ended the activities of the governmental boards. After the ratification of the Paris peace treaty the Hungarian government was compelled to dissolve the openly irredentist organizations, among them the self-appointed regional government boards too. The Bethlen government organized central and partly covert structures to handle matters concerning the regions which had got outside the borders of Hungary.³² The last board meeting was held on the 9. June 1921 again with twenty some participants. A couple of days later the organization ceased to exist and its tasks were taken over by the National Refugee Bureau.

The short existence of the refugee governmental board of Co. Lower Fehér might have some lessons to offer. Unfortunately there is no information about the actual number of people fleeing from the county to Hungary between 1918 and 1924. Judging from the total number of Transylvanian refugees it could be estimated about

²⁷ Uo., 4-1920, Budapest, 29. January 1920.

²⁸ Uo., sz. n.-1920, a note of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Budapest, 4. November 1920.

²⁹ Uo., 23-1920, the account of Gyula Daubravszky on the June 1919. events in Gyulafehérvár Budapest, d. n. [1920]

³⁰ Uo. 34-35-1921. Letter of Pongrácz Aladár 24. March 1921. and letter of Dessewffy István 28. February 1921.

³¹ Uo. 5-1921, Letter of the central office of government boards, Budapest, 12. January 1921.

³² Nemes Dezső-Karsai Elek (szerk.): *Iratok az ellenforradalom történetéhez*. II. kötet. Budapest, 1956, Szikra. 177-181. [Papers concerning the history of the counterrevolution]

5000 (The total number of Hungarian inhabitants in Transylvania decreased by 13,4%,³³ in the case of the 40 thousand Hungarians in Co. Lower Fehér that would proportionally make 5300 persons). The number of names appearing in the board's registers is between 100-200, i.e. only a fraction of the refugees turned to the representatives, mostly those who lived in or around Budapest. Even if we consider the generally unfavourable material and travel situation of the post war period, the organization could not exceed the level of a movement of a few desperate, embittered persons or of such who had interest in the matters. There is very little known about the later life of the participants (thus, e.g. that of Aladár Pongrácz), the path of the two better known persons, explained above, indicates that their participation in the refugee board that did not serve them as political or social lever, it had no role in their reintegration. Though István Dessewffy mentioned above and Árpád Gálócsy metallurgical engineer were well known figures of the radical right movement of the time still they remained on the periphery of the political life. The comparison of the earlier and 1920-21 job situation of the refugees shows serious downgrading in their social status. The documents report destitution as well as – at least temporary - employment at the lower level of municipal or governmental administration. It might come surprising that there was no overt or covert anti-Semitism discernible, such a characteristic feature of the era. The board quite regularly issued certificates, documents for Jewish applicants, sometimes stressing their patriotic conduct.³⁴ In analyses it is customary to connect revisionism and anti-Semitism but as this example represents, not always correctly.

The motivation of the participants was varied. Anger and grievance dominated but there are examples for attempts at maintaining legal claim of material effects through the help of the board.³⁵ The

³³ Istvan I. Mócsy: *The Effects of World War I The Uprooted: Hungarian Refugees and Their Impact on Hungary's Domestic Politics, 1918-1921*. Social Science Monographs-Brooklyn College Press, New York, 1983. Petrichevich-Horváth Emil (ed.): *Jelentés az országos Menekültügyi Hivatal négy évi működéséről* (Budapest, 1924) [Report on the four years of activity of the national Refugee Bureau]. Cf. also: <http://varga.adatbank.transindex.ro/?pg=3&action=etnik&megye=11>

³⁴ PML, IV. 901., 33-1920, Ervin Ábrahám certificate of character, 11. March 1920. 52-1920, document for Weinfeld, Mór hotelier-coffee-house owner, 4. May 1921. 79-1921: Trencsiner, Netty inhabitant of Gyulafehérvár, 23. July 1921. probably also Grünfeld, Ignác shopassistant, Wolf, Ignác lawyer and Lobstein, Dezső.

³⁵ . Uo. 132-1920. it was about a grand piano.

language and vocabulary used by the organization was rooted in the traumatic memories of 1783-84 and 1848-49 as well as the feeling of cultural superiority.

Although the organization was operated by persons well versed in administration and law, the form of activity was without future. The Hungarian government lent no hand in the organization albeit tried to use it for its own purposes with modest success. The developments of international politics forced the cabinet to dissolve the refugee boards and other similar organizations and try other, more centralized structures.