

# The History of the Germans from Mérk and Vállaj, Deported to the Soviet Union for Forced Labour 1945–1949

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**Abstract.** The deportation – in German: Verschleppung – was a ‘taboo’ for a long time. However, the works born since the change of regime provide an excellent and overall picture about this painful historical act. At the same time, it is desirable to get a more precise picture by examining the detailed history of the deportation in the case of the individual settlements. Mérk and Vállaj, the Swabian settlements in the Szatmár region, in the eastern part of the country, lie on the periphery in several aspects. Still, considering the numerical proportion of their population, the most displaced persons were deported by the Soviets, as war criminals, from here in 1945 – a quarter of whom never saw their beloved ones and home country again. It is the particular tragedy of this fact that those deported were at least as much bound to their recipient country, the Hungarian nation, as to their German nationality. They are not criminals of war but victims of the war of racial discrimination. ‘Who will be responsible for these people suffering innocently?’ – puts the question Ferenc Juhász, parish priest in Mérk at that time. Giving an answer is the task of all of us. The paper seeks to explore a segment of the micro-texture of the country-wide, and even wider, regional trauma of this community, based on diary excerpts from the period as well as on individual, specialized literature research.

**Keywords:** ‘Malenkey robot,’ Mérk, Vállaj, Donyeck, Szatmár Swabians, forced labour, deportation, reparation, victims, forced-labour camp

‘We are just spending time here, one day after another. Like animals, we are looking for every opportunity to skive off or to steal, so that we can get something to eat, in order to obtain some more and better food. It is the body, always just the body. The soul remains only with the small prayer that we say in the morning, at noon, or in the evening, if we say it at all. If yes, we say it lazily, most frequently absent-mindedly, sleepily, tiredly... We have become like the drunken people, dazed by alcohol. We are dazed by exasperation. This is how we try to forget.

And then, when we get “sober,” when common sense returns, we realize that we are here, nowhere else but here, and everything is happening in vain, and there is nothing that could change our fate’ (Irén Véber’s diary). These are the lines of a young girl in her twenties in November 1945, who had been a happy, religious Roman Catholic young person not long before, brimming with life. How could she have changed so much? She drudged hard, her body and spirit being worn out in a forced-labour camp in the Soviet Union. She had been deported and condemned to spend years there, just because she was of German origin. She was declared guilty of the war, collectively with her brothers and sisters, parents and her co-villagers, and all those tens of thousands of people deported to Soviet camps between September 1944 and the spring of 1945.

Deportation had been a ‘taboo topic’ for a long time. However, the works published since the change of the political system provide an excellent and comprehensive idea about deportations. At the same, it is desirable to create a clearer description of the events on a country-wide scale by describing the detailed story of deportation in the case of various settlements.

The Soviet Union wanted to obtain compensation from the newly occupied countries for its economy destroyed by the war and its extensive labour shortage. The deportation of the civilian population, primarily of German origin, aiming at reparation by communal work, was carried out systematically, according to plans that had been conceived long before.

‘Each person with German origin, capable of work has to be mobilized and is due to report for work!’ (György Zielbauer: *The Deportation of the German People from Hungary 1944/45*). The gathering up of the people of German origin was called into action by General Order 0060 of the Soviet Army dated on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December, 1944, on the organization and accomplishment of communal work in the rear areas.

The Hungarian authorities – primarily the administrative bodies of villages and districts – were also obliged to help with the deportation; they were ordained to compile the lists and to rank and classify the people. This was included in the order of Interior Minister Ferenc Erdei, given on the 5<sup>th</sup> of January, 1945 (Zielbauer 1990).

One of the main questions of the matter is related to the number of deported people. Researches so far determine the number of people deported to *malenkaya rabota* to approximately 60-65 thousand.

Their transportations – to the gathering camps and then on to the Soviet Union – were entirely accomplished by Soviet military authorities.

People carried off from Hungary ended up in the demolished factories and mines of the Soviet Union, e.g. in the Urals, the Donetsk Basin, the Sayan Mountains or the Caucasus.

The Soviets reported reassuring news about the deported people all along: ‘... the living conditions and the health provision of the people carried are fair given the circumstances’ (Füzes 1990).

In spite of their 'fair' circumstances and health provision, almost one third of the prisoners died as a result of the inhumane conditions – starving, epidemics, accidents, and the weather!

This was the first stage of the collective calling to account and punishment of Germans from Hungary. This was followed by the agrarian reform, the confiscation of lands from the Germans, the abolishment of German-language education, the restriction of their political and civil rights, and finally – 'Get out of the country with the Swabian traitors!' – their banishment (Füzes 1990).

## **The History of the Deportations from Mérk and Vállaj**

### **The Occupation**

Mérk and Vállaj were occupied by the Soviet army a few days after the battle between Zalău and Tășnad, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of October, 1944. The army took control over everything right as they marched in (História Domus, Mérk). For the interpretation of their orders – quartering, requisitions etc. –, they made use of a small group of local men who had been prisoners of war in World War I and had a basic knowledge of Russian – they became the so-called policemen.

### **Gathering and Vicissitudinous Journey to the Detention Camp**

The commanding officer of the occupying forces – a Russian major – had the policemen compile the list of people to be deported to the Soviet Union at the very end of December. By New Year's Eve, the precise list was ready, and it affected each family – because every family had at least one member in the age limit.

'The 3<sup>rd</sup> of January, 1945 was the most painful day in the history of our township' – wrote the Historia Domus of the parish from Mérk. Early in the morning, the public criers and policemen knocked on the windows of almost every house, and read out aloud the names of those that had to show up in the Reformed school in Mérk and a smaller school in Vállaj. In Mérk, the motivation was that they would be given shoes and salt, whereas in Vállaj they were told that a meeting would be held about 'establishing new order in the village'. When they considered everyone was there, armed Russian soldiers surrounded the building of the school.

Around noon, they were driven over the gendarmerie barracks at the end of the village, under strong escort. They announced by beat of drum that warm clothes and food for 18 days should be brought for everyone.

On the morning of the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, an order was given that they should pack up because they would depart in two hours. 264 people (159 men and 109

women) were deported from Mérk (História Domus, Mérk) and 214 people from Vállaj (136 men, 78 women): a total number of 478 people. They departed on foot – surrounded by armed troopers – to the gathering camp of the county in Carei (Nagykároly), located at a distance of 12 kilometres.

Their relatives – almost the entire village – followed them from a distance. The church bells were tolled in the village. After leaving the confines of Vállaj, they turned on the stony road and continued their way through Urziceni (Csanálos, Schontal) to the county seat. The inhabitants of the Swabian settlements from the region were also gathered in the yard of the county hall those days.

During the day of the 9<sup>th</sup> of January, they departed to the railway station, where cattle wagons were waiting for them. Wooden bunks and utility stoves that could be heated up with tarred railway sleepers were set up in the wagons. The toilet was a small hole cut in the floor. Dawn came by the time the train left the railway station of Carei. The men loudly sang the song ‘As so many times in the past, let’s hurry and save our country once again!’

After this, came the bitter 18-day long journey by train. From Carei through Oradea and Cluj, they joined the South-Eastern railway. At the transferring station, they changed train – and continued their journey in Russian wagons because of the difference of track gauge. From here, even more people travelled in a wagon – 80 people –, and besides that these were coal wagons, so they became dirty and got infested with lice. It was even more uncomfortable to stay in these wagons – ‘we could only crouch’ – remembered Mrs. János Schlachter.

## **Arrival, Transfer, and Assignment to Work**

They arrived to a picturesque station, but they were not taken to the same place – the men from Mérk and the women from Vállaj were taken to Nikitovka, while the men from Vállaj, together with the women from Mérk, to Kostiantynivka. These industrial settlements are located in present-day Ukraine, in the Donetsk Basin, in a region called Donbass. Those separated could not even say goodbye, husbands and wives did not know anything about each other for years or forever.

Camps were built near several huge factories and mines destroyed during the war in Donbass, and surrounded with barbed-wired fences, watch-towers, and sentry-boxes.

1,100-1,200 people lived in their camp in a huge, two-storeyed building complex. The hallmarks of the war could be seen on the building, which had to be renovated first. 30-40 people lived together in a room. They displayed a cross and the picture of Virgin Mary on the wall, but the soldiers laughed at them.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of January, they were registered by names, and on the next day, on Monday, work began. The working sites – plastering ruins, building railways, rebuilding factories, working in factories of bricks, of iron, of mercury, on the

fields, in stone pits and other mines, kolkhozes – were often at a distance of 20-30 kilometres. The workers had to go on foot every day, obviously accompanied by armed attendants.

The most difficult work was in the mines and in the mercury factory. In the mercury factory, one could only resist for a few months at most because it was harmful to the lungs, and atrophied the workers gingivae, making them lose their teeth. Their lips got constantly wounded, their eyesight got weaker. Most of the people died here. Working in mines was dangerous as well because the mines were obsolete, old and they had no security at all. Work was extremely difficult as mainly the women had to work with pickaxes, shovel stones into mine cars and push them (!), also carry water with buckets when the water came into the mine. A lot of accidents happened deep down in the mines.

The factories destroyed during the war had to be rebuilt first. Once the ruins had been cleared away, people were organized into brigades of bricklayers, scaffolders, and painters. A lot of factories, industrial units were built, renovated and called into action by Hungarian forced labourers. They worked also in the restarted factories. They tried to include men in the brigades according to their professions. Those without a profession – agricultural labourers and housewives – were assigned to unskilled labour. Many of them loaded and unloaded wagons, while some of them worked on trucks as loaders.

Work at kolkhozes meant different types of agricultural work from early spring to late autumn. At the beginning, they were frequently assigned to build railways, mainly in the region of Artinovka.

Weaker people were assigned to work in the detention camp, in the kitchen, as cleaning personnel, to wash, repair clothes, as stokers etc. This kind of work was also given to those coming out of lager hospitals, too. Russian brigade leaders were assigned to the working brigades, who watched over performance.

## **Everyday Life in the Camp**

They had to go out to work six days a week – in kolkhozes often on Sundays too – irrespective of the weather or even if they had no dry clothing. They were only allowed to stay inside when the temperature got below -35°C outside! From Mondays to Saturdays, they had to wake up at 4 o'clock in the morning because daily bread ration was given out at this hour in the 'shop'. After this, they got soup, then line-up, counting and roll-call followed. They had to start work at around 7 or 8 o'clock, depending on the distance between the lager and the workplace. They worked until 4 o'clock in the afternoon and then went back to the camp on foot. Then there was a roll-call and counting again in the centre of the camp. Then they were given some soup again for dinner and they went to bed tired after a full day's work. Stoves in the rooms had to be heated after coming

back from work. People were cold very often. Clothes becoming wet during the day were dried by the warmth of their bodies.

Getting clean officially meant that they went to the communal bath of the town once in two or three months, and they were disinfected in the lager. Disinfection was unpleasant because clothes were burned, became stinky, but body lice survived. They tried to wash themselves and their clothes on Sundays because during the week there was no time, energy and means for it.

Some people were assigned to work as interpreters from among those who spoke Russian. They did not do physical work, but they got a role in administration and management.

The camps were directed by military authorities and the guardians were soldiers. Besides the military leadership – from the ‘nachalnik,’ the captain to officers –, there was also an economic leader, a director, and there were political officers, too.

Several people were sent to jail, to the ‘kalzer’ (incarceration), which was an underground hole with a trap-door. It was extremely wet, with a lot of rats. Jail punishment also went together with the reduction of food ration.

The lager inhabitants who managed to learn some Russian were chosen to be commanders of rooms and barracks, and leaders of workers’ brigades. They were the ones who distributed the bread rations for their roommates or the members of the brigade.

Rarely people ran away, but they did not get far; most of them only managed to get to a distance of tens of kilometres from the camp. Besides distance and bad weather, the civilian population also prevented people to escape.

Only a few and lucky people succeeded to get home. Vera Bauman and Anna Leser returned home. Vera Bauman learned Russian and this helped them, too. József Altfater succeeded to come home – his brother, János Altfater, had run away right from Carei. He sewed clothes for money for the Soviet officers. According to those remembering, the officers knew about his running away but did not do anything against it. After coming home, he even sent a letter back to the lager. Apart from these rare and lucky exceptions, most runaways were unsuccessful. Fugitives were generally caught after a few days. Those caught were very badly beaten and it even happened that people died because of the beating (János Ritli, for instance).

The wage system in the case of the people from Mérk and Vállaj meant that the price of dwelling and food was kept back from their so-called salaries. So, in the end, they even got into debt.

If someone worked well, they got food: a ‘ticket’ for which they could get two spoonfuls of rice.

A form of meeting the civilian population was begging: the deported felt very much ashamed because of this. During the Sunday permissions two-three

people went together and knocked in every house. In spite of the deep poverty, the civilian population was good-hearted and gave something to the starving Hungarians: a corn-cob, an onion, a jar of milk, a piece of bread, potatoes, etc.

Unfortunately, starving also forced them to steal. But they only stole food, or something that could be exchanged for food. They stole from the civilian population, from the workplace and from the camp.

Anything could be sold or changed in the market place. They mainly sold their clothes and objects brought from home, but the stuff stolen from the workplace or other places were changed here, too. The market was fairly expensive: the price of a litre of milk was 15-18 roubles, a glass of corn or beans cost 3-4 roubles, an egg 4-5 roubles (while they were paid 16 roubles for a cubic meter of cleaned bricks!). With the money obtained, they only bought food: anything they could afford from potato skin to pies.

The base of lager feeding was bread. Bread was made from barley husk, rye, and oat. It was very 'barbed,' difficult to eat. As soon as they got it – at 4 o'clock in the morning –, they immediately ate it because they were very hungry. There were three quantitative categories in the case of bread, in function of the difficulty of work. Workers in the mines got 100 decagrams per day, those working in the factories 75 decagrams and kolkhoz workers 50 decagrams. Besides bread, the main food item was soup. Most often it was cooked of cabbage stalk, a dark-coloured soup. Sometimes, they also got other soups: made of sour cucumber, bran, beet, beet leaves, soup made of husked wheat, of millet, sorrel and apples. Soup was made for 120 people at once and – as a prisoner working in the kitchen recalls – half a litre (!) of oil was used for this amount!

Lager inhabitants often suffered from thirst. There was only one well, which could hardly satisfy all the prisoners and civilians. Deported people were starving all the time; their weight was around 35-40 kilograms. 'We became very weak because of the monotonous food. Only bread gives us life, but it is not for the first time that we do not get bread' – wrote Irén Véber in her diary. 'We are dizzy as autumn flies because of hunger.'

The most miserable year was that of 1946, when they ate everything they got. They even gathered the rest from refuse dumps and rubbish.

Women were more resourceful, they could cook from anything. It happened that they ate rank grass with bread, raw or cooked.

Supply, besides feeding, was also very weak and driven by necessity. Once their own clothes deteriorated, they got 5 metres of canvas to sew clothes of it. They got shoes of canvas with wooden soles, so they could hardly walk and it was extremely cold. These were naturally deducted from their salaries.

Health care was similarly disastrous. Although officially there was a room for sick people in the camp and a hospital in the town, there were no professionals and medicines at all.



They had already got infected with lice during the journey in the Russian wagons. There were body and hair lice. Lice spread a lot of diseases and caused epidemics.

Disinfection was not useful, neither vaccinations. And weakened people easily became sick. A lot of people suffered from typhus, dysentery, flux, scurvy; there were many cases of ulcer and abscess, some people became scabious. Everybody complained about kidney troubles because of the salty brine. According to the recollections, the skin of the people staying in the sick-room was yellowish in colour. There had been cases of lung disease and of heart enlargement. Women had dysmenorrhoea – according to posterior medical opinions, this was due to endocrine disorder caused by stress (Miklós Füzes: *Modern Slavery*). It happened that during the night eyelashes froze and the eyes inflamed.

A medical commission controlled incapability for work in the camp. If the skin on someone's bottom could be pinched, then he or she was capable to work.

80 people from among the Mérk and Vállaj deportees died in the detention camps. This is 17% of the deported people. This number is increased by those dying en route or immediately after their return home. A quarter of the people deported from Mérk and Vállaj died because of deportation! The majority of the deceased died of weakness or because of curable diseases untreated in the lagers.

Another cause of death was accidents. Intentionally or unintentionally, but in each case the cause was life in the detention camp. For example, István Plánk was swept down by the coal-mine. A young man from Urziceni (Csanálos) was crushed to death by a drunk driver. Two girls got burnt. And the list could continue with many other cases.

Men led the death rate with a 20:1 ratio. A man from Vállaj died on the very first day of their arrival to the camp. By 23-29 June 1945, a number of 19 had already died in the lager of Nikitovka (Irén Véber's diary). The cause might have been that people were expected much more effort despite the same amount of food, but their addictions killed a lot of people as well. Some even gave their food for cigarettes (Miklós Füzes: *Modern Slavery*).

Funerals were organized very simply. Usually, all the people attended, but in the end only the family members were present. The priest deported together with them was also present at funerals in Nikitovka, but there was no ceremony – the Russians did not allow it. Bodies were buried anonymously, without a burial hill. A separate cemetery was opened for the deportees. In the beginning, men stole wood from the wood-mill and the carpenters made wooden coffins, but later on they did not do that anymore – because of the deaths in large numbers.

Those dying at home should also be added to this list. Many of the returned people died a few years after coming home because of the diseases they were carrying in their bodies or because of their weakened organism and immune system.

They got news from home only after one and a half year, and they could also write home only then. The first news was transmitted by the sick. Letters were



obviously censored. When writing letters, the deportees were almost dictated what to write. They could only write nice things about the Soviet Union and their lives in the camps.

The entire lives of the detainees, every second they spent in the camps was characterized by deep piety, by their trust in God. Christ was their only support in their years of torment. Besides daily prayers, they tried to keep the spirit of Sundays and Catholic holidays – albeit they were forced to work – by common prayer and common remembrance. They could only go to church – an Orthodox one – by the end of their detention, in smaller groups of 4-5 people. The priest from Aporliget, Károly Franzen, was also deported to Nikitovka. He was forced to work just as everyone else; moreover, he was imprisoned several times, being accused of organizing people. He performed a holy mass only once, right after their deportation, but it was forbidden.

## **Returning Home**

The most precise determinations of the time when they would be allowed to return home were ‘bistra domoy’ and ‘skora domoy,’ i.e. the promise of a near return home.

The first group returning home – with schoolmaster Béla Galambos among them – returned home on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 1945 with a sick transport. The old and the sick came home with other transports as well, like for instance the one on the 5<sup>th</sup> of January, 1947. Most of those deported from the two villages came home in the October of 1947. The last people from Mérk and Vállaj arrived on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December, 1949 (e.g. Margit Supler)!

It is a fact that they had to work right until the day of their return. The farewell from the other Swabians from the region of Szatmár was heart-rending. They could not yet come as they again belonged to another state. Friends, relatives said goodbye to each other for long decades, some even forever. They were carried by trucks from the lager to the gathering encampment in Stalinov, where they spent a few days undergoing a medical screening examination. From there, they were taken to Romania through Bessarabia, reaching Sighetul Marmăției (Máramarosziget), where they were examined again, and those found to be sick or weak were sent to recovering camps for a few days or weeks. Many of them kissed the soil when they reached Sighetul Marmăției.

From here, they travelled on by train to Debrecen. Here they were again thoroughly checked up, even X-rayed. They were given a certificate of prisoner, medical papers, a small, painted handkerchief and 5 forints (20 for those arriving later) for several years of forced labour. They also got travelling documents, valid until they reached their homes.

They were threatened here and also in the Soviet Union: only good things can be said about the Soviet Union. Anyone talking about detention camps will be taken back there.

Once they had returned home, the first thing after greeting their family members was to thank God in the church for their return. The relatives of those still remaining in the camps visited them to get some information about their loved ones.

They had to be very careful not to eat too much after their return. Unfortunately, not everybody could do this, and several people died after their first, copious meals (e.g. Ferenc Scheibli).

‘Those that died on their way to and in the labour camps should be considered victims that were officially annihilated by blind tyranny.’ (Miklós Füzes: *Modern Slavery*)

Nonetheless, the survivors are also victims. Those returning home had to bear the consequences of forced labour during their entire lives, physically and mentally. They were stigmatized in the eyes of the new power. They were not allowed to do the work they would have liked. Many of them died within a few years because of the diseases they had brought with them.

‘Who can be held responsible for these innocent sufferers?’ – asks Father Ferenc Juhász, the parish priest of Mérék at that time (*História Domus, Mérék*). The answer is left for us to give. The issue cannot be avoided, and this sad, tragic chapter of Hungarian history must be known for us.

The present paper – in its humble way – also attempts to help in remembering.

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