

# The Tragedies of Gyórsövényház, 1704 and 1946.

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## Introduction

Death and disasters were familiar to the residents of Hungary's villages from ancient times to the twentieth century. Personal tragedies were every-day occurrence. Whether it was the all-too-frequent death of an infant, the loss of a mother in childbirth, or being maimed as the result of an accident, catastrophe was always just around the corner. Beyond the personal calamities that burdened families, there were the disasters that impacted the entire village: fires, floods, droughts, famines, plagues, and wars that periodically brought misery to the people. Of these, the most savage devastation was caused usually by wars.

In Hungary during the past five hundred years the most destructive wars had been the Ottoman wars (especially Sultan Suleiman's campaigns of the late 1520s, the Long War of 1591-1606, the wars of the Grand Viziers Köprülü in the 1660s, and the Turks' last attempt to take Vienna followed by the War for the Liberation of Hungary) and the Second World War. Some villages and towns managed to avoid destruction during these great conflicts, only to find that military and political events at other times brought calamity to them. One such village was Gyórsövényház, a village known to German-speakers as Siedlung Sövényháza. People used to call this village Sövényháza, but that name was changed to Gyórsövényház lest it would be confused with another village with the same name located in south-central Hungary. Nevertheless, when talking about pre-1900 events, I will call the village Sövényháza, as that was how my grandparents and their contemporaries knew it. In any case, the other Sövényháza is better known today as Ópusztaszer, which in recent decades has become one of Hungary's foremost national shrines.

Gyórsövényház is located in what today is Győr-Moson-Sopron County, on the Kisalföld or Little Hungarian Plain. It is one of several villages on the edge of the region known as the Hanság, a vast marshland that in times past used to stretch from Lake Fertő (Neusiedler See in German) in the west to the Kis Duna (Little Danube) River in the east. Some of the original

settlers of this region were Pecheneg or other nomadic peoples who had fled from the Pontic steppes to Hungary during the second half of the tenth century and who were directed by Prince Árpád's descendants to this region to guard the Western borderlands of their realm. The Pechenegs (known to Hungarians as Bessenyők and often mentioned in medieval documents as Bessi) retained their language and even a special legal status for centuries but lost both by about 1500. Sövényháza's closest neighbour, the village of Bezi, is believed to have a name of Pecheneg origin.

I have some family ties to Sövényháza. Most of my mother's ancestors lived in a neighbouring village throughout post-Ottoman times, probably even earlier. They no doubt interacted, probably even intermarried with the pre-1704 residents of Sövényháza. Then at the end of the nineteenth century, the parents of my father, who were basically German-speaking Catholics, moved there for some time. To understand why this could happen, why a Magyar village of Protestants became a village of German-speaking Catholics, we have to know the story of Sövényháza's first great tragedy, the one that happened in 1704.

### **Sövényháza in Ottoman Times**

Before much of the Hanság had been drained and its rivers regulated, the region used to be flooded every spring. Only a few places, those on higher ground, escaped the annual flooding. The flood-waters used to be brought to the Hanság by the Danube River which carried the spring-time melt-waters of the Alps to the Little Hungarian Plain.

At the height of the Ottoman expansion into Central Europe, during the Long War of 1591-1606, the Hanság constituted a kind of a no-man's-land between the Turkish and Habsburg empires. Turkish incursions into the region often brought destruction to the region's villages. Historians do not know which of these places were destroyed and when, but from descriptions that survived of the district from the period just after the end of Ottoman rule, we get the impression that most of these villages had been nearly depopulated and their residents were impoverished.

How did these people survive Ottoman times? They probably did it by hiding in the

marshes whenever Turkish troops were on the march. In fact, they often kept their women-folk and children hidden for extended periods of time. There is an island in the endless marshes near a neighbouring village. It is called Asszonysziget (Women's Island) where presumably the women from the village, possibly also from neighbouring villages, used to hide in times of danger.

One period of great danger and privations for the people of the Hanság was the 1680s. This decade brought still another revolt in Hungary against Habsburg rule. It also witnessed the last great attempt by the Ottoman Empire's military to capture Vienna. This was followed by the beginning of the struggle by the Christian sovereigns of Europe to liberate the Turkish-occupied parts of Hungary. The Ottoman armies on their way to (and from) Vienna passed through the Little Hungarian Plain, as did the Christian forces on their way to re-conquer the old Hungarian capital of Buda.

Sövényháza evidently survived these perilous times. At the end of the Ottoman Era late in the seventeenth century it had a small population of Hungarian peasants. The village was owned by the Jesuit fathers of Győr. In 1698 a Catholic priest visited the village on behalf of the Bishop of Győr. He found 160 people living there, all but 15 of them Protestants, predominantly Lutherans. The village even had a teacher but it had no minister. The villagers used the services, for baptisms for example, of the parish priests of neighbouring Roman Catholic communities such as Fehértó.

### **Religious Life from the Reformation to the Counter-Reformation**

The Sövényháza of the times was not the only Protestant (predominantly Lutheran) village in the area. Several of its neighbours were also populated by Lutherans: the already mentioned Bezi, as well as Kapi (today's Rábcakapi), Réti (today's Tárnokréti) and Czakóháza. Other villages however, were Catholic: Fehértó, Markota, Bődöge, Bő Sárkány (later Bősárkány).

Protestantism began to gain a foothold in what then were Sopron and Győr counties during the middle of the sixteenth century, just at the time of the expansion of the Ottoman Turks into central Hungary. Most of the Hanság's villages were owned by the Roman Catholic Church or its various orders. Some lands further afar were part of the possessions of Hungarian magnates.

Within a few decades after the beginning of the Reformation several of these became converts to the new faiths and encouraged their serfs to follow them in their choice of religion. The new religion then must have spread to other villages of the Kisalföld as well.

One of the great aristocratic families who in the sixteenth and much of the seventeenth centuries owned much land in this part of Hungary was the Nádasdy. They remained promoters of the Reformation until the middle of the seventeenth century when their patriarch re-converted to Catholicism. Not many years thereafter a leading member of the family became embroiled in an anti-Habsburg conspiracy. When it was discovered, the Nádasdy possessions were confiscated by the Viennese Court and were given to the Esterházy family. The Esterhazys were staunch Catholics.

Another prominent family that had several estates in this part of the Little Hungarian Plain was the Osl family. They were later known as the Ostffy. Some of their lands became part of the Nádasdy estates as a result of various marriage alliances, while other lands remained in the possession of certain branches of the Ostffy family. Some Ostffys became Protestants, and remained such throughout the ages. They were not dispossessed during the age of Counter Reformation, but their influence declined and they could do little to protect their co-religionists from the persecution that had started in all of Habsburg-controlled Hungary well before the end of the 17th century.

The Protestant villages of the Hanság did not escape persecution even though they were not owned by such stalwart Catholics and Habsburg-loyalists as the Esterházy who by the end of the 17th century owned most of the villages in the neighbouring Sopron county. One important aspect of this persecution was that most Protestant villages were not allowed to have their own preachers or ministers, or to build and keep houses of worship.

### **From the End of Ottoman Rule to Prince Rákóczi's War of Independence**

The history of Hungary during the time of the Ottoman occupation, from the early sixteenth century to the end of the seventeenth, is complex. While the Turks ruled southern, central, and nominally at least, eastern Hungary, the Habsburgs ruled the rest. To make a long story short, we

can say that some Hungarians thought at the time that the Habsburgs of Austria were their natural allies in the struggle against the Ottomans. Others believed that Hungary should achieve her independence first from Habsburg dominance and then liberate herself from the Turks. One consequence of these beliefs was a series of wars of liberation against the Habsburgs. These wars, and even plots to end Habsburg rule, usually ended in severe retribution from the government at Vienna. Their participants were imprisoned, some even beheaded, and their estates were confiscated and given to Hungarian landowners who remained loyal to the Habsburgs, such as the already-mentioned Esterházy.

The war for Hungary's "liberation" from the Turks (1683-1699), undertaken by a coalition of European sovereigns, brought much grief to the country's people, including the people of the Hanság. The Christian forces sent against the Ottomans treated as occupied enemy territory not only the Turkish-controlled regions but all of Hungary. Furthermore, as former Ottoman lands became "liberated", the Hungarian families who had owned them generations ago expected to repossess them. But, this is not what happened. In most cases these lands were awarded to favourites of the Austrian government, often the military commanders who had participated in the war. Hungarian discontent with Habsburg rule kept growing.

The situation resulted in still another war of liberation against the Habsburgs, a bitter struggle that lasted from 1703 to 1711. The leader of this war was Prince Ferenc Rákóczi II, and his followers were known as the *Kuruc*. Opposed to them were the armies of the House of Habsburg and their Hungarian and other allies. They were known as the *Labanc*.

This war in the Carpathian Basin coincided with a major conflict in Western Europe. This was known as the War of Spanish Succession and was fought between the France of Louis XIV on the one hand and the Habsburgs and their allies led by Leopold I on the other. Rákóczi's hope was to capitalize on the Habsburgs' troubles and link up with Louis' armies, but that hope was never realized.

The war in Hungary began with Hungarian successes but became a protracted guerrilla-type conflict after it became evident that the Habsburgs were no easy prey either for Louis XIV's ambitions or those of Rákóczi. In the end, frustration and war-weariness prompted some of Rákóczi's followers to sue for peace in order to stop the bloodshed and the sufferings of Hungary's people. The resulting peace settlement, the Treaty of Szatmár of 1711, was a

compromise which served as the basis for Habsburg rule in Hungary as well as for the protection of the Hungarian nobility's privileges, for the rest of the eighteenth century and even beyond.

This struggle brought much bloodletting, material destruction, and loss of life to the Hungarian nation. Though these losses were not as great as Hungary had suffered in the Ottoman Wars and the Second World War, they were still considerable. Hungary's combat casualties from 1703 to 1711 amounted to 80,000, while over 400,000 people died in the famines and epidemics that accompanied the war.

The suffering did not by-pass Sövényháza. In the early summer of 1704 the Hanság region became a battle-ground between campaigning *Kuruc* and *Labanc* armies. The latter burned down a few settlements including Sövényháza. One source I read suggested that this was a part of a "scorched earth" tactic by the Imperial command to deny food and shelter to an advancing *Kuruc* army. Another claimed that it was an act of revenge for a defeat the *Labanc* had suffered at the hands of the *Kuruc* a while earlier. If this had been the case, it would not be the last time the people of the village became the victim of an act of revenge resulting from war.

Sövényháza was no more. Many of its residents evidently survived, as I keep finding people identified as natives of that village when I examine the baptismal registers of neighbouring villages for the decade after 1704. After the end of Prince Rákóczi's war, the newly-convened pro-Habsburg Diet of Hungary of 1715 ordered a census of the country's taxpayers. The census takers found no taxpayers, in fact no residents to report for Sövényháza when they completed their work, probably in 1716. Sövényháza's history, however, didn't come to an end.

### **Siedlung Sövényháza: a Village of German Settlers**

The Jesuits fathers of Győr were determined not to lose the income they used to derive from the village. For this reason they were anxious to re-establish it. This was probably impossible while the War of Spanish Succession lasted, but with the European war over in 1713, they began to make preparations. What they did, during the second half of the decade, was to entice immigrants from Bavaria to re-settle the village, in return for a three-year exemption from taxes. The move had a religious motivation beyond the economic one: the new settlers would be Roman Catholics.

The plan was successful. The new settlers (often called "Swabians" by their Magyar neighbours) came and re-populated the village. They came to Hungary at a good time. The century after 1713 was a time of reconstruction in the country after the turmoil of the last of the Turkish wars and the end of the *Kuruc* attempts to gain independence. Hungary had not achieved her freedom but she gained some respect from Vienna and she was henceforth treated with a degree of deference. Furthermore, some of the Habsburg rulers, such as Queen Maria Theresa and her son Joseph, were good to their subjects, even one might say especially the serfs. Alas, Maria Theresa was such a devout Catholic that under her the persecution of Protestant religious leaders continued, but by then the people of Sövényháza were Roman Catholics and needed not to worry about their religious affiliation. Maria Theresa's son Joseph put his Catholic prejudices aside and proclaimed the freedom of worship in his realm. He introduced many other reforms as well, some of which met with stiff opposition, so much so that at the end of his rein he rescinded all his decrees, except the one concerning religious toleration. From his time on, the Lutheran villages in the neighbourhood of Sövényháza could hire teachers and ministers of their own faith and even build places of worship.

Above all, the post-1713 decades brought peace or, at least, freedom from the invasion of Hungarian soil by foreign armies. Only at the end of a period of nearly hundred years did invading forces appear on the Kisalföld when French forces campaigned there during the Napoleonic wars but they did not bring destruction to the Hanság's villages.

This was also a time of economic progress in the region. Canals were dug to drain some of the Hanság's marshlands. As a result, more land was opened to cultivation. The entire region experienced an increase in its population, with some villages growing faster than others. Sövényháza did well. In 1786 its population passed the 700 mark. That is, it had nearly four-and-a-half times more people than it had had at the time of its destruction in 1704. It even had a school which functioned in the German language. By then, furthermore, its landowners were German: the Jesuit Order had been dissolved in 1773 and its Sövényháza estates were bought by German-speaking landlords.

### **Györsövényház after 1900**

Economic progress was not without negative consequences. While some peasants prospered, others remained poor. By about 1900 the rich peasants lived in one part of the village, the poor in another and social tensions emerged. After the First World War the ancient Kingdom of Hungary was truncated. Large parts of it were transferred to the newly-established states of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, and a greatly enlarged Romania. Even Austria got a slice of Hungary one that included much of the Hanság. Györsövényház almost became a border village.

This territorial settlement had a negative effect on Hungary's villages. They were deprived of much of their former markets. Life became harsher for Hungary's peasants. As if this was not enough, the Great Depression struck in 1929. Agricultural produce became almost worthless. The rich peasants could not sell what they produced and unemployment became a grave problem for the local agricultural workers and servants, including many of Györsövényház's Hungarian residents. By then they made up a third of the village's population.

The mid-1930s saw the rise of Nazi influence throughout Central Europe. Nazi propaganda and spokesmen inundated Hungary's German-inhabited villages. Their residents were encouraged to join purportedly social organizations (such as the *Volksbund*) to promote German culture and influence. Later they were encouraged to declare themselves citizens of the Third *Reich*. After the Second World War broke out, the young men of these communities were urged to volunteer for service in the *Reich's SS* armies. A handful from Györsövényház did.

At the end of the war there was a mass exodus from Hungary of people who feared retribution for their collaboration with the Nazis. Added to these were the masses who had not been Nazi collaborators or even sympathizers but who feared the Red Army and what might happen to them, especially to their wives and daughters, when Soviet forces occupied their cities or villages. Hundreds of thousands of Hungary's residents left, among them an estimated 60,000 to 70,000 ethnic Germans.

Many of those Hungarians and Germans who did not flee, or did not flee in time, were rounded up by Soviet military authorities to do "reconstruction work" in the Soviet Union. The Soviets' attention was focused on ethnic Germans, but often Hungarians with German-sounding names, especially names ending in "er", also became victims of these deportations. Red Army commanders were given quotas and to meet these they sometimes collected people of any ethnicity and neither old men, young or old women, or teenagers were spared. Tens of thousands



were deported. These people ended up in the Soviet Gulag, a vast constellation of slave-labour camps spread throughout the Soviet Union. Many of these people never returned to their native lands. They fell victim to malnourishment, disease, and the horrific conditions prevalent in these camps.

## **The Deportations of 1946**

After the war there was a wave of ethnic cleansing in East Central Europe. Hungarians were driven by the hundreds of thousands from Romania and Yugoslavia and were formally expelled from Czechoslovakia, while millions of Germans were deported from everywhere. Their deportation from Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary was agreed upon by the victorious Allied powers and was officially sanctioned by the so-called Potsdam Agreement. The rationalisation for this was the fact that the existence of large German minorities in Eastern Europe had been the excuse for the expansion of the Nazi state into the lands of its eastern neighbours. Germany was to be deprived of such an excuse in the future.

The Allies expected some six-and-a-half million ethnic Germans to be expelled from their homelands. Out of this half-a-million was to come from Hungary. The Potsdam Agreement was not a decree that Hungary's government of the times had to comply with. But, for a number of reasons, it did. One of these was the fact that the man in charge of the Allied Control Commission in Hungary, Soviet Marshal Klementi Voroshilov, presumably on orders from Moscow, wanted the Germans expelled from Hungary. The task was given to the Hungarian Minister of the Interior, who had been put into that position at the insistence of the Soviets. He was the Moscow-trained communist László Rajk. His police organized and supervised the deportations. (A few years later Rajk would be accused of "nationalist deviation" from communist doctrine and would be executed. His conviction had nothing to do with his role in the deportations of 1946.)

Thus it came to pass that in the spring of 1946 some 200,000 ethnic Germans were expelled from Hungary. Several criteria were used to select individuals for deportation. Those residents of Hungary who in the 1941 Hungarian census had identified themselves as citizens of

the Third Reich; those who had been members of the *Volksbund*, those who had served in any SS military formation, and even those who had taken Hungarian names at one time in the past but re-assumed their German names during the era of Nazi dominance.

There were provisions made for exemptions from some of these categories: people who were married to non-Germans *and* had under-age children; elderly grandparents who lived with their children who were exempt from the deportation orders; members of the Communist Party or other leftist political parties; or those who had suffered persecution during Nazi rule.

Despite the provisions designed to minimize the splitting up of families, many families were split up. Those deported also lost their Hungarian citizenship. Their homes, livestock and other possessions, as well as lands, were given to impoverished Hungarians, often to those who had been made homeless by the ethnic cleansing in neighbouring countries.

We might ask why not more were deported when the Allies had envisaged a much greater number? The fact was that in some formerly German-populated parts of Hungary there were hardly any people left to expel after many had fled before the end of the war or had been deported to the Soviet Union as slave labourers. Furthermore, the rounding up of some of the would-be deportees took more time than envisaged, and in some cases the local police delayed and thereby sabotaged the process. As the Cold War escalated, furthermore, cooperation between Allied authorities, in particular between those in the Western sectors of occupied Germany and the Soviets in Eastern Europe, became strained. In the end the deportations were halted.

The majority of Gyórsövényház's German-speaking residents, some 500 of them, did not escape this orgy of expulsions: they were sent packing to war-ravaged Germany. By that time, they and their ancestors had lived in Hungary for many generations and they had no ties to any German lands. Most of those expelled never felt at home in their new surroundings and longed only to return to the village of their parents and grandparents. By the time this would have been possible, after the end of communist rule in 1989, they were too old to do so and their children had put down roots in their new homeland.

## **Conclusions**

In 1704 the Hungarian population of Sövényháza had suffered at the hands of an army

commanded by German-speakers. Two hundred and forty two years later it was the village's German-speaking population that suffered as a result of Allied policy implemented by a compliant Hungarian government. Both of these calamities were inflicted in part in the spirit of revenge.

Relations between the Germans and Hungarians of Sövényháza had indeed been aggravated by the strains put on Hungary's villages by the post-World War I peace settlement, the Great Depression and especially, by the spread of Nazi influence and power to Hungary. The impact of these extraordinary circumstances, however, had started to wane with the collapse of the Third *Reich* in 1945. Given enough time, whatever bad relations between Germans and Magyars had existed, would have been healed. The "Swabians" and the Hungarians would have no doubt resumed living in harmony again as they did for generations before 1918.

My study of this tragic story is intended as a tribute to the people of Györsövényház, both Magyar and German. May their torments not be forgotten and serve as reminder how destructive wars are and how much suffering war-inspired acts of revenge can cause.

### **A Note on Sources**

The literature on our subject in English is limited. There are a few relevant books, but I only list shorter studies. On the Ottoman era see Géza Pálffy, "The Impact of the Ottoman Rule on Hungary," in *Hungary, 1001-2001: A Millennial Retrospection*, the selected proceedings of a University of Toronto conference on "1000 Years of Hungarian History," ed. N.F. Dreisziger (Budapest and Toronto: *Hungarian Studies Review* 2001): 109-132; on Hungary in the eighteenth century see János Barta, "Habsburg Rule in Hungary in the Eighteenth Century," in the same volume, pp. 133-161. For the reader who wants a brief introduction to the history of the *Kuruc* war of 1703-1711 I recommend István Czigány's "Rákóczi's War of Independence," in *A Millennium of Hungarian Military History*, ed. László Veszprémy and Béla K. Király (New York: East European Monographs, Atlantic Research and Publications, Distributed by Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 151-184. For a succinct English-language treatment of the deportation of Hungary's "Swabian" population in 1946 the reader should explore János Angi's

"The Expulsion of the Germans from Hungary after World War II," in *Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe*, ed. S. B. Várdy and T. H. Tooley (New York: East European Monographs/Columbia U. Press, 2003), pp. 373-84.

Hungarian-language works relating to the subject of Sövényháza's two tragedies are much more numerous. I can only mention a few. On the history of the village itself see the works of Beáta Fajkus, Péter Dominkovits, Csaba Gülch and Gábor Hancz, some of which can be accessed on the village's website: [www.gyorsovenyhaz.hu](http://www.gyorsovenyhaz.hu). On the life of the Lutheran villages of the Hanság before 1704 see the monograph of Sándor Payr: *A dunántúli evangélikus egyházkerület története* (Sopron, 1924), which is available on the internet: <http://mek.oszk.hu/01800/01850/02.htm>. Concerning the *Kuruc* war of 1703-1711 see the works of József Bánlaky, Sándor Márki, Miklós Asztalos, Béla Köpeczi and Agnes R. Várkonyi, all listed in footnote no. 1 to the above-mentioned essay by István Czigány. For the story of the 1946 deportations see for example Miklós Füzes, *Valami Magyarországon maradt – Etwas blieb daheim in Ungarn* (Pécs: Baranya Megyei Levéltár, 1999); György Zielbauer, *Adatok és tények a magyarországi németiség történetéhez, 1945-1949* (Budapest, 1989); Béla Bellér, *A magyarországi németek rövid története* (Budapest, 1981); and István Fehér, *A magyarországi németek kitelepítése, 1945-1950* (Budapest, 1988).

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