

Changes in Ethnic Composition of Three Major Towns in the Bácska-Bačka (Voivodina)

The Hungarian tribes took into possession the southern part of the region between the Danube and Tisa rivers at the end of the 9th century. The sparse Avar-Slav population was easily and fully absorbed by the Magyars. By the end of the 14th century, this southern part of historic Hungary (together with Sirmium-Szerémség-Srem between the Danube and the Sava rivers) emerged as the richest, densest populated, purely Hungarian part of the medieval kingdom, with the highest cultural level. In the middle of the 15th century 12 castles, 28 towns and 529 villages were flourishing there.

With the advance of the Turks the picture was forcibly and profoundly changed: the local population either fled, was massacred, or driven into slavery in the Balkans and Asia Minor. At the end of the 14th century the Serbians emerged in the area, first as refugees or mercenaries, but later as the auxiliary troops of the Ottoman army that killed, robbed and burned.

After the fall of Belgrade (Nándorfehérvár) in 1521 and the disastrous battle of Mohács (1526), the whole region lay defenceless and open to full-scale devastation and extermination. The core of historic Hungary belonged to the Ottoman empire for 150 years, although the Turks never succeeded in consolidating their grasp.

An extraordinary „dual power” developed , with Ottoman-Serbian garrisons in the fortified places and Hungarian light cavalry (huszár, hajdú) roaming about and regularly collecting taxes. Delineated frontiers were nonexistent. The old county structure (in this case Bodrog, Csanád and Bács) was maintained with diets and records in the safer, north-western „Austrian” part of Hungary.

This region – since called „the Bácska” – was liberated in 1686-87. The Serbians of Kosovo sided with the imperial army but – fearing revenge at the hand of the Turks – withdrew to the southern „marches” of Croatia-Hungary. The approximately 35,000 families were re-organized and settled along the Austrian-Ottoman frontier, where a special Militärgrenze (Határörvidék, Vojna

Krajina) was carved out. By virtue of the „Diploma Leopoldinum” 1690–91, the Serb frontier guards (graničari) enjoyed the status of „collective nobility”, a full ecclesiastical-cultural, and, as matter of fact, territorial autonomy and self-government. They were exempted from tax-paying, county and (Catholic) church jurisdiction: they constituted a state within the state and behaved accordingly.

The Imperial Court of Vienna maneuvered the well-armed and trained Serbian troops against the Hungarian freedom-fighters under Prince Rákóczi: the war operations, mutual ruthless devastation, and pestilence exterminated the entire region’s population again by 1710.

With the return of the Serbs and the reorganization of the military border zone, the Bácska and Bánát (the former Temesi Bánság) were proclaimed to be the property of the Imperial-Royal Treasury, from which the Hungarian landlords and serfs were excluded. In accordance with the decree issued by Empress Maria Theresa in 1766 „only Germans are to be settled on the land between Arad, Szeged and Pétervárad-Petrovaradin.”

As a consequence of the decline of Ottoman power, the role of the military border zone had diminished and a considerable part of it was taken over by a county administration dominated by the nobility in the mid-18th century. In order to compensate the mainly Serb inhabitants, the three major towns of the Bácska were raised to the status of a „free royal town”, each enjoying full self-government after having paid for it the considerable sum of 150–160000 Forints.

The „extended 19th century” (1789–1914) – in spite of the conflicting movements of national rebirth and even bloody warfare – was the period of peaceful population and economic growth, the creation of a world-level traffic system, settled (or at least controlled) national and minority conditions: during these twelve decades the Bácska – and the rest of Hungary – successfully re-integrated into Europe. The so-called „dualist era”, from the Compromises of 1867–68 (between Austria and Hungary-Croatia, respectively) until the outbreak of the 1st World War, can be regarded as a golden age with a steady and fast industrial-agricultural development and urbanization. The towns all over Hungary, from Pozsony-Pressburg-Bratislava to Brassó-Kronstadt-Brasov and Eperjes-Prešov down to Muraszombat-Murska Sobota acted as the „melting pots” of Magyarization, attributable more to economic factors and social mobility than to coercion.

In November 1918 the Serbian troops occupied the whole Bácska. On 25th the „grand assembly” of the South Slavs declared their unification with Serbia. The creation of a „Yugoslavia” was one of the favorite ideas of the victorious Allies most particularly President Wilson. Consequently, Southern Hungary – including Croatia-Slavonia – was ceded to the Kingdom of the Serbs-Croats-

Slovenes, although the South Slavs constituted roughly one third of the population in the Bácska-Bánát-Baranya, to be named Voivodina.

The bulk of the state and municipal employees, professionals, and partly the landlords felt themselves to be Magyars, thus fled or were forced to leave the succession states. Up to the mid-twenties, some 50 000 of them left Yugoslavia; this process repeated in 1944 with a loss of another 30 000 Hungarians.

As people in the ethnically mixed areas typically spoke two or three languages, they could easily change their language and national allegiance according to the likes and dislikes of the actual ruling power, to promote their own and their children's upward social mobility. As a consequence, the number of people declaring themselves to be of Hungarian mother tongue and/or nationality, was the highest in 1910 and 1941, diminishing radically after the cataclysms of the wars and reprisals.

The other factors reducing the number of Hungarians (and Germans) in Yugoslavia have been:

- emigration and „guest working” in Western Europe;
- the reprisals and massacres in 1944–48 (with a threefold purpose of revenge, intimidation and well-designed liquidation of potential political and public opinion leaders amounting to 20 000);
- assimilation, chiefly in the form of ethnically mixed marriages;
- the „manifestation of assimilation” by choosing the neutral „Yugoslav” category at census, preponderantly among people dependent upon the party-state power;
- a population decline, with an extremely low birthrate extending back for a century;
- the greatest and most recent blow came with the break-up of Yugoslavia. Both Serbian and Croatian authorities have drafted Hungarians into their armed forces. In order to avoid killing or being killed in this cruel fratricidal war, at least 50 000 Hungarians, predominantly able-bodied young men have thus far escaped to Hungary and other countries, probably 1500 uniformed and civilian ethnic Hungarians have perished. (The Hungarians constitute 4,2% of the population of Serbia, but every fifth or 20% of those killed in action on behalf of the Serbian dominated „federal” army, had Hungarian names.)

The proportion of Hungarians in the population of Voivodina (before the Second World War consisting of Bácska, Bánát, Baranya, and Bácska, Bánát, Szerémség afterwards) fell from 34% in 1910 to about 15% today as a consequence of a massive and steady inflow of the Serbians from the south. The Serbs reached an absolute majority in 1981 with 52%, and their number and ratio have been on the rise since with tens of thousands moving in from Kosovo and war-ridden Croatia and Bosnia. The Serbian authorities – on republic, regional

and local levels alike – encourage this forced shift in ethnic composition by settling these people – in most cases well-armed – into the empty houses of Hungarian guest workers and refugees.

In the place of present-day *Újvidék-Novi Sad-Neusatz* there existed a number of hamlets, villages and townships in the Middle Ages; the largest of them was called *Vásáros Vár* („Fort Market”). The Cistercians built an abbey (*Bélakút*, 1233) and a fortress (1252) on a hill of the *Fruška Gora*, on the other side of the Danube, later called *Pétervárad-Petrovaradin*. It was captured by the Turks in 1525 and retained its importance as a fortification while the surroundings were devastated. At the end of the 16th century, the Ottoman tax roll contained the names of 105 Serbian families. One hundred years later, after the liberation, the *Péterváradi Sándor* („Redoubt of Fort Peter”) was re-settled by Serbian frontier guards, peasants, craftsmen and German soldiers and burghers. The small country town (although the seat of a Serb Orthodox bishop) profited from the fall of *Belgrade* (1739) by providing a new home for German, Serbian, Greek, Armenian and Hungarian escapee merchants and craftsmen. The number of Catholics amounted to 1500.

The rapidly growing town gained the privileged status of a free royal town in 1748 by a decree of Empress *Maria Theresa*; She herself chose its name: „*Neoplanta-Neusatz-Újvidék-Novi Sad*”. The next hundred years were characterized by (in *Menyhért Érdújhelyi*'s words) „a mutual observance of rights and cautious avoidance of religious and national frictions”. The municipality was governed by Serb and German-Catholic mayors, alternating yearly. The councillors and officials were similarly elected at parity. In cases of dissention the Serbs typically prevailed.

From the beginning of the 19th century, Lutheran Germans and Slovaks, Calvinist Hungarians, Catholic Croats („*Šokci*”) and Hungarians, Greek Catholic (*Uniate*) Ruthenes and Jews continued to move in; they built their own churches and schools. The official languages of the trade guilds were German and Serbian following the majority composition of the guilds. (There was only one Hungarian guild: the tailors.) The lower strata of the population consisted of Hungarians, Slovaks and Ruthenes: they provided the day laborers, cart drivers, wood-cutters and domestic servants.

In 1848–49 *Újvidék* was the scene of one of the worst anti-Hungarian and anti-Catholic atrocities, committed by Serbian insurgents rather than by the local Serbs. In June 1849 the then empty town fell into the cross-fire of the Hungarian-held fortress of *Pétervárad* and the advancing forces of *Jelačić*, resulting in *Újvidék*'s complete destruction by fire.

During the 19th century the town became the economic, traffic and cultural center of south *Bácska* and northern *Szerémség*. Trade and shipping flourished,

railway lines developed, factories were built and many Serbian–German–Hungarian language cultural and educational institutions were established. (The National Theatre of independent Serbia, for example, began in 1862 as the municipal theatre of Novi Sad where the Matica srpska has had its seat since 1864.)

In 1880 Újvidék was still a small country town with slightly over 20 000 inhabitants. South-Slavs – predominantly Orthodox Serbs – constituted a plurality of 42,6%. The last census held in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1910 showed that the population rose to nearly 34 000 with a Hungarian plurality of close to 40%.

In the inter-war years Novi Sad profited most from the shift in power growing more rapidly than the other towns in the newly created Voivodina-Vajdaság region. After the proclamation of royal dictatorship in 1929, Novi Sad was made the administrative center of the Danube Banovina-Bánság (which included Voivodina, a part of Srem and Northern Serbia). It became a major town of 64,000, with a Serbian plurality (45%).

In April 1941 the Hungarian army – joining the German, Italian and Bulgarian forces – recaptured the Bácska–Baranya–Mura regions, resulting in a reverse migration process. At that time, it was the Serbian state employees and newly arrived colonizers who fled or were expelled.

Towns in the Bácska – and, indeed, in the whole Carpathian Basin – were, in the words of K. Kocsis, „the organizing centers of the prevailing state power, served as ‘political barometer’ with the changes of their ethnic compositions”. The best example of this was Újvidék, where, according to the census of 1941, the Hungarians reached a majority of 50,4% for the first time. But following several evacuations and massacres, the proportion of Hungarians fell to 28,4% by 1953.

After the war, the once numerous and prosperous German population virtually disappeared. The survivors regarded and declared themselves to be Hungarian. The population of Novi Sad (the political, economic and cultural educational center of the once autonomous region of Voivodina) has multiplied since, largely through the incessant inflow of Serbians from the south and from Kosovo.

Even though most Hungarian, and, of course, Serb, Slovak, Rumanian, and so on, cultural and educational institutions concentrated in Novi Sad, the Hungarian population has diminished to a minority of some 10% in a city of over 250 000 people.

Zombor-Sombor’s original Hungarian name was Czobor-Szentmihály. As the chief town of Bodrog county, it served as one of the major medieval centers of administration and fortification in Southern Hungary. (First mentioned in 1360.)

After 1543, the original Hungarian population disappeared and a mixed Ottoman-Serbian garrison was commissioned into a restored castle, protected by a moat and moor. Up to the end of the 17th century, Sombor was the seat of a vilayet (a small Ottoman administrative unit). In 1699, it belonged to the military border zone with a two thirds Orthodox Serbian and one third Catholic Croat (or „Bunjevci”) composition of soldiers and peasants. In 1717, 190 Serbian, 80 Croat soldiers and 3 Hungarian civilian families were listed in official records. In 1729, Bodrog and Bács counties were officially merged with Zombor as the seat of the administration. In 1747, Zombor was the first to gain the privileged status of a free royal town at a cost of 150 000 Forints.

By the end of the 18th century, Hungarian families numbered 158 and German craftsmen 63. The events of 1848–49 divided Zombor’s inhabitants: the Catholic majority (Hungarians, Croats, Germans) sided with the revolutionary Hungarian government and its national guards, while the local Serbs with the active support of the absolutist Vienna court and the Serbian insurgents – proclaimed their own „Voivodina”. Serbian forces held nearly all Bácska and Bánát in their power for a couple of months in 1849. In the absolutist era (1849–1861), Zombor was one of the district centers with a German-language administration. The Serbs managed to maintain the official use of their language in Újvidék and Zombor up to the end of the 1870-s by controlling majorities in the county diet and municipal corporations. Moreover the grammar schools of Karlóca, Újvidék and the teachers’ training college of Zombor provided the bulk of the men of letters and officials of Serbia and Montenegro, which gradually gained independence from Constantinople.

Railroads and industrialization brought a profound change in the life and development of towns. Szabadka and Újvidék (both on the main line connecting Vienna-Budapest with Constantinople through Belgrade) boomed, while Zombor has remained a garrison town with offices, schools and shops.

Unlike most of the towns in the Carpathian basin – especially county seats – Zombor has never again had a Hungarian majority. In 1880, there were only 3500 Hungarians (14,3%) and 2800 Germans (11,3%) in a total population of 24 700. In 1910, the Hungarians numbered 10 000, or close to one third. In the first Yugoslavian state, they fell to 5500 or 17,1%, along with 3150 Germans (9,7%). In 1941, the number of Hungarians rose to an all-time high 11 400 or 36%, with a significant South Slav majority of 55,4%. After the war a common historical trend was repeated, with the complete disappearance of the Germans and the reduction of Hungarians to about 6000 or 12% by 1981.

The name of *Szabadka* was first mentioned in 1391 in connection with a trial of a thief from that place. Its history is analogous to those of Újvidék and Zombor. The strong moated castle belonged to the Hunyadis and Török Bálint.

During the Ottoman conquest, it was the seat of a vilayet with a Turkish-Serbian castle-guard. At the end of the 17th century *Subotica*, as they renamed it, was resettled by 5000 Catholic refugees (called Bunjevci) from Bosnia-Dalmatia who were led by 18 Franciscan friars. The town was rebuilt and has remained a typical rural settlement of hardworking „bunjevci” and Hungarian farmers. In 1779 the name was changed temporarily to Maria Theresiopolis in honor of the Empress who elevated it to the status of a free royal town. Surrounded by a sea of Hungarian settlements, an irreversible process of Magyarization took place in the 19th century. In 1848–49 Szabadka defended itself against a Serbian onslaught. In the golden age between 1867–1914 Szabadka – together with the rest of the towns of historic Hungary – was transformed into a real city with magnificent public buildings, streetcars, factories and busy shops. In 1880 it was by far the largest town in South Hungary with 61 000 inhabitants, of which 31 000 (51%) were Hungarians. The case of Szabadka is unique in the Carpathian Basin. While several major cities have lost their 80 to 100% Hungarian majorities, cosmopolitan Szabadka has succeeded in preserving its 50 to 60% Hungarian population through today, in spite of wars, massacres, deportations, expulsions and renewed Serbian-Montenegrin colonization. This extraordinary phenomenon can be attributed to three factors:

- its favorable location, just south of the Hungarian frontier;
 - the constant accumulation of Hungarians, from other parts of Voivodina;
- and
- the friendly co-existence of the local Hungarians and Croats, both of whom are ready and willing to speak the other’s language.

In 1991 an effective Hungarian-Croat coalition was formed and 2 Hungarian and 1 Croat representatives sent to the Belgrade parliament, all of them on an opposition ticket.

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