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Hungarians towards the German aggression on Poland

Author: **Anna Kołakowska** 19.10.2020

Despite the pressure of Berlin the Kingdom of Hungary did not contribute to the German aggression on Poland in September 1939, but rather later secretly supported the evacuation of Polish soldiers to France.

Beware, dear sirs Hungarians

And back at you

Dear sirs Poles, of any impairment,

Any violation

Of the alliance found upon the blessings

Of the holy patrons of both kingdoms,

And respected for eternity: beware, so you would not

Bring upon them the wrath of God

And His anointed saints, and tragedy upon

Your countrymen. For

It is not befitting for a neighbour to fight his neighbour.

Indeed, both sides should

In sincerity and faith seek to help one another,

And stand united to meet both good fortune

And enemy side by side.

The quoted text of an unknown author from the 14th century includes an idea which has been realised by both nations – Polish and Hungarian – during their thousand-year-old history with mutual profit. Moreover, the conviction of mutual friendship was so strong that it also found its way to folk culture. Already in the inter-war period a legend circulated among the Polish and Hungarian highlanders that the border between the two countries was set by saint Wojciech and saint Stefan at the waters of the Beskid mountains, which could not be broken under the threat of God's punishment, and anyone who would damage the good neighbourly relations and the eternal peace would be damned in the afterlife.

During the inter-war period Poland never

stood against its brothers: it did not sign the Trianon Treaty from 1920, which was unfavourable for Hungary, and it did not join the anti-Hungarian Small Entente, founded by Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. Meanwhile, Hungary supported Poland in 1920 with deliveries of weapons and ammunitions for its war against the Bolsheviks.

“We shall never turn our weapons against Poland!”

As a result of the peace treaties after the First World War Hungary lost two thirds of its territory and more than 3 million Hungarians were forced to live outside the borders of their country. The hurt state tipped towards the German Reich, hoping to revise the borders, reclaim its historical lands and its strong position in the European world. The gratification for its alliance with Adolf Hitler was the including of southern Slovakia and southern Carpathian Ruthenia, where Hungarians were the majority of the population, to the Hungarian Kingdom in November 1938. In March 1939, with the permission of Germany which was annexing Czechoslovakia, Hungary invaded the remaining territories of Carpathian Ruthenia. As a result of these actions, the Polish-Hungarian border was established, which was very similar to the historical border between the two states. Even though Poland and Hungary were in opposite alliances, the relations between the two countries remained friendly. During the inter-war period Poland never stood against its brothers: it did not sign the Trianon Treaty from 1920, which was unfavourable for Hungary, and it did not join the anti-Hungarian Small Entente, founded by Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. Meanwhile, Hungary supported Poland in 1920 with deliveries of weapons and ammunitions for its war against the Bolsheviks.



Visit of the Hungarian regent

Miklos Horthy in Poland, the welcoming ceremony at the railway station in Cracow, February 5 1938. The regent of Hungary Miklos Horthy shakes the hand of admiral Józef Unrug at the railway platform. Among the generals are also visible: brigade general Janusz Głuchowski (second from the left), division general Aleksander Narbut-Łuczyński (third from the left), brigade general Bernard Mond (fourth from the left). From the collections of the National Digital Archives

It was in Hungary's best interest to support the Third Reich and Hitler's expansion policies, but it drew the line at the moral duties towards Poland. It is perhaps the only example in international politics where the government of one nation not only talked about moral aspects in international relations, but also took these moral duties into real consideration. Knowing that the Germans would break the non-violence agreement with Poland, the Hungarian minister of foreign affairs István Csáky sent a telegram to the ambassador in Rome on April 27th:

"We will not be directly fighting against Poles, because it would be impossible due to our internal politics, and what's more, our moral conviction tells us not to. On the other hand, the Germans cannot say that we did not support them. [...] However, if we allowed the Germans to enter our country without a single word of opposition or even with eventual resistance, so they could fight against Poland from the Hungarian territories, we would have a revolution on our hands and such moral apathy that, losing faith in ourselves, we would end up in a much worst situation than the German-supported Slovaks".

Csáky also assured the Polish representative in Budapest, ambassador Leon Orłowski, that Hungary would never fight against Poland. Hitler was also informed by the prime minister of Hungary Pál Teleki about the standpoint of his government on the German plans to invade Poland:

"[...] I am pleased to inform Your Highness, that Hungary, if there is no drastic change in the current circumstances, for moral reasons sees no possibility of an armed aggression on Poland".

The moral aspect was emphasized many times after that in diplomatic correspondence, also the one addressed to Italy - Hitler's ally in the Axis. In a letter to Benito Mussolini from July 27th 1939, Csáky informed:

"It is an undeniable goal of the Hungarian government to prove our undoubted and open friendship with the countries of the Axis. [...] So far, the Polish government, both towards the western states and Romania, did everything to protect the most important Hungarian interests towards Romania. Italy would be the first state to, knowing about that, condemn our ungratefulness [...]. Given all this, we especially do not understand the eventual doubts regarding our loyalty, since both Italy and Germany always knew that we would never conduct any warfare against Poland".

Also the regent of the Kingdom of Hungary Miklós Horthy did not leave any doubts regarding Hungary's loyalty towards the Republic of Poland. On August 31st 1939, during the inauguration session of the General Assembly, he said that Hungary cannot and will not give up its friendship with Poland for its friendship with Germany. He also wrote a personal letter to the Reich's chancellor, in which he firmly informed him that Hungary would under no circumstances stand against Poland. The Hungarian officials presented the views corresponding to the Hungarian society which manifested its pro-Polish sympathies on several occasions. One such example could be the Rally of the Party of Independent Smallholders (between August 19-20 1939) during which slogans like "Long live Poland!" and "We will never turn our weapons against Poland!" were shouted. The rally enthusiastically adopted the resolution stating that no Hungarian would ever have to fight against the Polish state.



Visit of the Hungarian regent Miklos Horthy in Poland in February 1938 in Warsaw, Miklos Horthy (in an admiral hat) greets the Polish generals by the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. In the foreground stand in line, from the left: deputy ministers of military affairs - brigade general Janusz Głuchowski and brigade general Aleksander Litwinowicz, brigade general Mieczysław Ryś-Trojanowski, colonel Stanisław Machowicz. From the left the minister of military affairs, division general Tadeusz Kasprzycki

Visit of the Hungarian regent Miklos Horthy in Poland, February 1938. A solemn dinner at the Senator Hall at the Wawel castle. President of the Republic of Poland Ignacy Mościcki (fifth from the left behind the table) raises a toast for Miklos Horthy (fourth from the left). Also visible are: the minister of military affairs, division general Tadeusz Kasprzycki (seventh from the right behind the table), minister of foreign affairs Józef Beck (seventh from the left on the right side of the table),

Welcoming ceremony for the Hungarian troops at the Polish-Hungarian border after Hungary took the Carpathian Ruthenia, march 1939. Visible is lieutenant colonel Władysław Ziętkiewicz (standing first on the right). From the collections of the National Digital Archives

Horthy even threatened to give the order to blow up the railway tunnel in Łupków, which would completely paralyse the only railway connection from Hungary to Poland, if the Germans decided to march through Hungary without permission.

The matter of honour

For the Polish-Hungarian friendship the trying time came on September 1st 1939. Following Germany's attack on Poland, Hitler turned to the Hungarian government asking for permission to use the railway lines at the Carpathian Ruthenia, in order to move German troops to the Polish border. The Hungarian government firmly rejected this request, even though the Germans offered Hungary the Sambor region of the Lviv province and

the Turka region of the Stanisławów province. The German minister of foreign affairs Joachim von Ribbentrop, on September 9th, turned to Csáky suggesting that the Hungarian government should allow the German troops to march to Poland from Slovakia. In response, he heard that the lack of engagement of Hungary in armed operations against Poland is the matter of national honour and national dignity of the Hungarian people. Also the State Council rejected these demands, responding firmly that Hungary will never partake in any armed operations against Poland. Horthy even threatened to give the order to blow up the railway tunnel in Łupków, which would completely paralyse the only railway connection from Hungary to Poland, if the Germans decided to march through Hungary without permission.

The fighting Republic of Poland also received propaganda support. In a secret telegram of the Hungarian government to the press, it was advised for it to convey information only from the Polish Telegram Agency and the official announcements of the Polish government, as well as information coming from its representatives. It was suggested that information from other sources should not be posted as it could not be verified. As a result, the Hungarian press published many articles on the historical friendship between the two nations and their bonds. Admiration for Poles' bravery was expressed too, just as compassion for the attacked nation. On the day Warsaw surrendered, the "Eger" daily quoted the speaker of the Polish Radio:

"The heroism of the defenders of Warsaw will be forever remembered in history. Without water, food and the most important means to live, but not morally broken, they seize to fight".

The director of the Press Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on September 19th, gave a top secret decree ordering to stop providing help to the refugees from Poland, and the 5th Division of the General Command began withholding press information on the number of civilian and military refugees, the number and types of weapons, military vehicles and other war materials which were brought to Hungary along with the evacuating Polish Army. Not publishing these information was mainly in the interest of Poles, which became clear in the following months.



Celebrations of the national

Welcoming ceremony for the

Hungarian holiday in Poland - ceremonies in Warsaw. A social meeting with the Hungarian ambassadors organised by the extraordinary ambassador and proxy minister of Hungary in Poland Andre de Hory (first from the left) for the representatives of the government and military, March 14 1939. In the picture are brigade general Tadeusz Kutrzeba (second from the left) and general Bronisław Regulski with his wife Zofia. From the collections of the National Digital Archives

Hungarian troops at the Polish-Hungarian border after Hungary took the Carpathian Ruthenia, march 1939. Hungarians and Poles and the shared border - at the Wołowiec railway station. From the collections of the National Digital Archives

In the inter-war period Poland initially had to safe borders: with Romania and Latvia. Not long before the outbreak of the Second World War it also gained a border with Hungary. It was a border of friendship and its creation turned out to be a blessing for Poland and the thousands of refugees running from the country ravaged with war, especially for the Polish Army. In the afternoon of September 17th, in light of the Soviet aggression, the first troops of the Polish Army began crossing the Polish-Romanian border with the intention of breaking through to France. Such conduct was in accordance with the directive of the Supreme Commander:

“The Soviets entered the country. I am ordering the general retreat to Romania and Hungary the shortest route you can take [...]”.

On the night from September 17th to September 18th the president of Poland, the government, Supreme Commander and most of his staff also crossed the Romanian border. Romania, on September 6th 1939, officially declared neutrality in the conflict. Although it had its obligations to Poland in the case of the USSR's aggression, the minister of foreign affairs Józef Beck in the name of his government released the Romanian side of them, counting on its permission for the Polish officials to go through the country on their way to the West. However, it turned out that due to the pressure from the Germans the Romanians interned the Polish

president, the government and the Polish soldiers crossing the border. In this situation, since September 18th the Polish troops in this region mainly crossed the border to Hungary. A day prior Beck ordered his secretary Paweł Starzeński to immediately go to Budapest and inform the Hungarian government that some of the Polish units would go through the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary and would like to use the right to political asylum, but with the soldiers following the regulations of the international law, allowing to be disarmed and not violate Hungary's neutrality in any way.

The only hostility and malevolence Poles received from Hungarians of German origin. The Hungarian authorities tried to conduct the disarming of Poles to the best of their abilities, so their dignity would remain intact. Often when this rather unpleasant operation had to be conducted, it was accompanied by a military orchestra playing the Polish national anthem.

“Welcome homeless, but dear to us brothers”

The border with Hungary remained open for Poles until September 28th. Its closing was caused by the categorical demands of the German authorities. Nonetheless, it is important to note that since September 20th the evacuation roads to Romania and Hungary were cut off by the Red Army anyway. Prime minister Teleki and the minister of internal affairs Ferenc Keresztes-Fischer assigned officials of the state administration to prepare special places for the refugees. The 21st Department of the Ministry of National Defence (the so-called Honvéds), led by col. Zoltán Baló, organised help for the Polish refugees. A Polish subunit was created under its jurisdiction, initially led by col. Marian Steifer and then by junior col. engineer Aleksander Król. The Hungarian commander of the 21st Department did not make any major decisions or resolutions regarding the Polish refugees without consulting the subunit first. The matters of the refugees from Poland were also the responsibility of the 9th Department of the Ministry and its Bureau on Refugee Affairs, which was led by a great friend of Poles, József Antall.



First Holy Mass held at the camp for interned Poles at Inarcskakucs (Hungary), October 15 1939 in Pośródek - altar. Photo from the collection of the Institute of National Remembrance



A group of officers of the Polish Army interned after the defence war of 1939 at the Ujedörek-puszta camp (Hungary), February 1940. From the left: captain Kelemam (Hungarian camp commander), priest Żelechowski, captain Antoni Bardecki, lieutenant doctor Faliszewski, lieutenant Poertygor (?), second lieutenant Nowarycz (?), Lorenz, second lieutenant Haydnik, second lieutenant Czesław Cichoszewski, Asc (Hungarian). Photo print gifted by Wanda Cichoszewska from Nowy Sącz, during the war a teacher a

The Polish soldiers at the border were disarmed and sent to intern camps, but they were generally accompanied with expressions of sympathy, friendship and respect from the Hungarian border guards, gendarmes, soldiers, officials and civilian population. The only hostility and malevolence Poles received from Hungarians of German origin. The Hungarian authorities tried to conduct the disarming of Poles to the best of their abilities, so their dignity would remain intact. Often when this rather unpleasant operation had to be conducted, it was accompanied by a military orchestra playing the Polish national anthem. General Kazimierz Sosnkowski recalled one of the stages of his journey in an escort to Eger:

“[...] we were unloaded in front of a gendarmerie outpost in the Toska village. The Hungarian gendarmes turned out to be kind, hospitable people. They invited us to supper and gave us four beds in the common

room of the barracks”.

On the route of the march of Polish troops to the intern camps the local population showed them much kindness, prepared food, streets were decorated with Polish flags or welcoming signs like “Welcome homeless, but dear to us brothers”. In the towns where Poles stayed for a night, the local population gave them their homes and beds, for the time moving to sheds and barns. The friendship of the Hungarian people for the Polish soldiers was recalled by gen. Stanisław Maczek:

“The 10th Cavalry Brigade was well-received, fed, welcomed with drinks and parties at every step of the way by the wonderful Hungarian population [...]. It is hard to forget so much hospitality and good heart. When one day the brigade’s command was moved to a small town [...], the entire population gathered at the main square and immediately divided us between themselves. Me and my family got the large and spacious house of the owner of the post office. The hosts moved to some small room so we could get the best rooms. We almost had no chance to get up from the table covered with fantastic dishes and wine, since entire waves of people came to meet and greet us”.

The Polish soldiers were divided into 140 intern camps, while the Representation of the Interned Polish Soldiers in the Kingdom of Hungary was created under the Ministry of National Defence – with gen. Stefan Dembiński as its head. On September 21st 1939 the Hungarian-Polish Refugee Committee was created, gathering aristocracy, scientists and people of culture, which was transformed in December into the Hungarian-Polish Committee of Care for Refugees. It was led by countess Erzsébet Szapáry who got the support of the most prominent Hungarian families for the Polish cause.

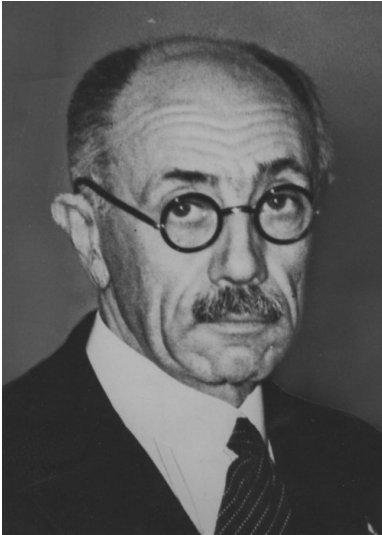
“Strengthening the Polish-Hungarian friendship”

For most Polish soldiers Hungary was never their final destination, but rather a stop on the way to the army forming in France under the command of gen. Władysław Sikorski. The Germans had a well-developed intelligence network in Hungary so the evacuation operation had to be conducted with much caution and secrecy. Luckily for the Polish cause, until November 1939, the Hungarian authorities did not create the records of the interned Poles, which made it very easy to escape from the camps. Also the living conditions in the intern camps and their semi-open character, passes for the internees or even specially prepared conditions for escape made it easy to evacuate. This was the case i.e. in the Petland-pusztá camp where the soldiers of gen. Maczek were stationed, and he would later recall:

“Major [Emil] Słatyński, even though he could not speak German well, not to mention Hungarian, every night drank a lot with the Hungarian colonel, the commander of the camp, strengthening the Polish-Hungarian friendship. Every night, before midnight, the gendarme chieftain came to the table reporting on the time and direction of his patrols, but more like stressing where and when they would not be present. Hearing this, the Hungarian colonel would lean in to Słatyński and add <<just not more than thirty>>. Hence, after several weeks, the September campaign in Poland and being interned in Hungary, the 10th Motorised Cavalry Brigade found itself in a slow and unique march <<in instalments>> to the new meeting point - France”.

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Of course, some of the representatives of the Hungarian authorities supported the Poles' efforts in getting to France. One such person was the aforementioned col. Baló who, after every single escape of the groups from the camp in Sárvár, located near the border with Yugoslavia (which happened every week), transferred to it groups from other intern camps so there would be no apparent change in the number of people. By November 21st most of the Polish soldiers left Hungary with a passport issued by the Polish embassy and a French visa. The codename for the evacuation operation was “Ewa” [Polish for “Eve”] and it was organised by the conspiracy Ekspozytura W (Polish underground representation). However, the documents themselves were not enough for legally crossing the border from Yugoslavia and Italy to France. Civilian clothes and money were essential. Hungarians also helped in this matter, especially the Committee for Care for Refugees. It should be emphasized that the Hungarian government, although an ally to Hitler, kept the Polish ambassadors until January 1941, even though Hungary had earlier joined the Axis.



Pál Teleki, two-time prime minister of Hungary (1920-1921; 1939-1941), a friend of Poland. From the collections of the National Digital Archives



István Csáky, the minister of foreign affairs of the Kingdom of Hungary since December 1938 to January 1941 (until his death). From the collections of the National Digital Archives

Under pressure from the Germans, on November 21 1939, the resolution of the 21st Department of the Ministry of National Defence went into force, according to which Polish soldiers were forbidden from leaving Hungary. Nonetheless, they managed to find a way around it - military attaché col. Jan Emisarski released soldiers from their service and they crossed the border as civilians. It would of course be impossible if not for the friendship and kindness of prime minister Teleki towards Poles. Ambassador Orłowski described such “civilian” expeditions:

“[...] several third class cars of the train going from Budapest to the Yugoslavian border were occupied, sometimes entirely, by stiff-sitting Polish <<tourists>>, dressed uniformly in similar clothes of the same cutting and colour and hats. Many <<tourists>> of this kind had military boots sticking out of their trousers. To much surprise of other passengers such <<tourists>> would often quickly get on their feet, slam their heels and answer a question asked by another <<tourist>> dressed identically”.

Also the Committee of Care for Refugees organised false documents which enabled the army men to be transferred to civilians camps. Many Poles left Hungary through the green border by the river Drawa as well. Here the Committee played a huge role too. Its secretary Tamás Salomon-Rácz drove several hundred people to the near-border towns in his car. Until spring 1940 most Polish soldiers left Hungary and reached France. The number of camps lessened from 140 to 25.



A group of Polish children and adults (teachers?) at the public school for refugees at Kadarkut (Hungary) - commemorative picture next to a Christmas tree, December 1940. In the background Poland's emblem hangs on the wall. The photo print gifted by Wanda Cichoszewska from Nowy Sącz, during the war a teacher at the school. Photo from the collection of the Institute of National Remembrance

The Poles' situation in Hungary became the thorn in the side of pro-German politicians and Germans themselves. Based on the Hungarian law several people stood trial for helping Poles in making their escape. However, no punishing sentence was issued. Based on the decision of the minister of defence the court ruled that the help given to Poles intending to leave Hungary was not aiding the escape of prisoners or an anti-state act, since Poles were not prisoners of war, but representatives of an allied nation.

The article comes from issue no. 12/2019 of the "Biuletyn IPN"

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