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HUNGARIAN FOLKLORE AND POETRY IN THE SOVIET LABOR CAMPS[1]

ABSTRACT
This paper focuses on one of the two distinct, yet interrelated bodies of Hungarian poetry born out of totalitarian repression: the poetry composed by Hungarian prisoners of war in Soviet labor camps during World War II, which is commonly referred to as Hungarian Gulag poetry, which reflects on the harrowing experiences of soldiers and civilians captured and deported to Soviet labor camps. Composed under conditions of extreme exile and forced labor, these poems explore themes of survival, displacement, and the profound dislocation of personal and national identity. Amid the brutality of Soviet repression, the poets' clandestine verses stand as acts of cultural and intellectual resistance. Through this body of work, Hungarian poets asserted their identity and humanity in defiance of the dehumanizing forces of totalitarianism.

KEYWORDS: Hungarian poetry, Soviet repression, World War II, GULAG, forced labor

My pen writes with black blood,
where are all the men who were taken?
Widows' tears fall on the snow,
Waiting for the mysterious dawn.[2]

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[2] Orig.: „Fekete vérrel ír a tollam, / a sok elhurcolt férfi hol van? / Özvegyek könnye hull a hóra, / várva rejtelmes virradóra." From *Kísértő múlt* (The Haunting Past) composed by Béla Kecskés and published in Dupka (1992: 82–83).

INTRODUCTION

The history of twentieth century Hungary is deeply intertwined with the tragedies of war, occupation, and the oppressive forces of totalitarian regimes. Among the darkest chapters in this history is the mass internment and forced labor of approximately 600,000 to 700,000 Hungarian citizens in Soviet prisons and labor camps during and after World War II.[3] Parallel to this, between 1950 and 1953, the Hungarian state, under the influence of Soviet models, established its own system of internment and forced labor camps, such as in Kistarcsa, Recsk, and the Hortobágy region. These camps became arenas of extreme suffering for political dissidents, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens ensnared by the regime's purges. The psychological and physical torture (false accusations, starvation, forced labor, punishments, cruelties, cold, injuries, diseases, etc.) that was experienced by those who were forced to work in these camps left indelible scars not only on the victims but also on Hungarian society and culture, even if amidst the devastation, a noteworthy *corpus* of literary works emerged, thereby witnessing the resilience of the human spirit. The texts composed during those years represent a potent medium for conveying the trauma, pain, and defiance provoked by these brutal experiences. Often composed in clandestine circumstances and under extreme threat, this *corpus*, deeply rooted in the lived experiences of its authors, goes beyond mere testimony to become a cultural and intellectual response to repression. These poems not only describe the horrors of the assembly and labor camps but also engage with general existential topics such as survival, loss, grief, fear, and the search for meaning. As both a memorial and a form of resistance, these texts – to a large extent shaped by Hungarian folk poetry traditions – crystallize the efforts of many Hungarian prisoners to maintain their identity, dignity, and intellectual autonomy in the face of relentless totalitarian oppression. Through the intersection of historical trauma and folk poetic expression, this study highlights the vital role of Hungarian folklore and literature in preserving the memory of these dark times and exploring their broader cultural and existential implications with a particular focus on its cultural sources, thematic concerns, and stylistic characteristics.

[3] While most detainees were lawfully captured soldiers, a significant 25–30% were civilians forcibly deported to perform the infamous "málenkij robot" (little work) as prisoners of war or interned "Germans" (including those of German, Hungarian, or Jewish descent with German names). These individuals were consigned to the GUPVI (Glavnoye Upravleniye po delam Voyennoplennykh i Internirovannykh = Main Administration for Affairs of POWs and Internees) POW and internment camps or sentenced to the GULAG (an acronym for Glavnoe Upravlenie LAGerei = Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps) camps under fabricated charges (cf. Bognár 2017, 11). After World War II, many Hungarians, including soldiers, civilians, intellectuals, and political dissidents, were deported to these camps. The conditions were abysmal, with prisoners subjected to forced labor, starvation, and severe punishment. Despite this, Hungarian prisoners found solace in poetry, using it as a means to document their experiences, express their despair, and maintain a sense of hope and humanity.

COLLECTION AND PUBLICATION OF THE HUNGARIAN CAMP POETRY

In the early 1990s, the leading Transcarpathian writer, politician, cultural organizer, critic, and historiographer György Dupka (b. 1952) began systematically collecting and publishing "oral history" memoirs from World War II prisoner-of-war and labor camps (specifically, concerning repression poetry cf. Dupka 1992). Other important written accounts, collections, and anthologies of poetry were first published in *samizdat* in the 1980s (cf. Faludy 1983, 1987) and, later on, from the 1990s without restrictions by the same survivors (cf. Faludy 1989; Forgon 1992; Karig 1995; Antalfy 1998; Gúth 2004; Jobbágy 2017) and outstanding scholars (cf. Küllős, Vasvári 2006; Dupka 2014a, 2014b, 2021a, 2021b).

> We started collecting and publishing some quarter of a century ago the memorial materials, oral recollections, the so called "written in the mind" camp poems and verses characteristic of "oral history" of the WW II POW-s in the concentration camps. These writings belonged then to the category of taboo. Today they are present in the Hungarian folklore, and the folklore branch of literature records them as camp folklore, as an organic part of the Hungarian folk poetry, resp. modern folklore (Dupka 2021b: 186).

Dupka's reflection (2021b: 184–196) highlights a significant yet long-silenced aspect of Hungarian literary history, particularly regarding the trauma experienced by Hungarian citizens in Subcarpathia during Soviet repression. His statement underscores the reality that, under Soviet rule, a body of literature emerged from the suffering endured in Soviet concentration camps, but it remained suppressed due to political censorship. This "camp literature" was often created by Hungarian prisoners who were captured by the Russians, civilians interned for "three-day work", or political prisoners compelled to labor behind the barbed wire of the GUPVI and GULAG camps, whose voices were stifled by the Soviet regime. It was only after the collapse of the Soviet system in the late 1980s that survivors could publicly share their experiences, enabling these hidden narratives to surface. For decades, the authors of this literature – ordinary individuals who became unwitting participants in history – were forced into silence and their works and personal accounts were either destroyed or concealed due to the pervasive control of the Soviet state. With the end of Soviet oppression, the "wall of silence" was broken, allowing survivors to recount their experiences and present the writings that had been smuggled out or committed to memory during captivity. Among these written accounts collected by the scholars, there are many memoirs in prose but also letters, prayers, songs, poems, and poetic diaries that represent a poignant testimony to the inhuman conditions endured in the Soviet camps and serve as a powerful reminder of the broader system of repression. This literary production, although belatedly recognized because of political censorship, provides valuable insight into the human cost of totalitarianism and expands the scope of Hungarian literary heritage by incorporating the voices of

those who had previously been marginalized and ignored. Dupka's analysis of Gulag camp literature sheds light on an often-overlooked genre within Hungarian and Carpathian Basin folklore: the poetry and prose that emerged from Soviet concentration camps during and after World War II. He laments that many of the survivors, who were instrumental in preserving and transmitting camp folklore, did not live to see the collapse of the Soviet Union, thus losing the chance to witness the dissemination of their experiences. However, the field of folklore studies eventually embraced these "camp poems" as a unique cultural artifact, reflecting the lived experiences of POWs and political prisoners under Stalinism.

These memoirs, known as "camp verses composed mentally", have since been recognized by the two leading Hungarian folklore scholars Imola Küllős (b. 1945) and Zoltán Vasvári (b. 1958) as a significant component of camp folklore and an integral part of both traditional and contemporary Hungarian folklore (Dupka 2014a: 245).

The collection *Áldozatok: a második világháborús hadifogolytáborok és a sztálini lágerek folklórjáról* (Victims: on the folklore of World War II POW camps and Stalinist camps, edited by Küllős and Vasvári in 2006), which brought together a broader spectrum of Gulag writings, plays a crucial role in documenting the raw emotional and psychological experiences of those imprisoned. These works, whether in the form of simple poems, oral narratives, or written memoirs, are invaluable historical records of individual and collective suffering. They provide an emotive insight into the personal tragedies endured by those in the camps, while also highlighting the resilience of the human spirit under such dire circumstances. Dupka emphasizes the fact that, from an esthetic point of view, the literary value of these camp texts, although not comparable to the value of the works composed by well-known, influential poets such as Miklós Radnóti or János Pilinszky, is in their authenticity. These simple poems born in the Gulag represent "timeless dramatic documents" that convey the raw and unpolished emotional state of the prisoners, serving as expressions of both personal and collective trauma.

From a stylistic perspective, Dupka, following Béla Tarczai (2001), recognizes that the creators of this prison poetry were not professional writers or poets. Rather, they were ordinary individuals thrust into extraordinary circumstances, compelled to express themselves through poetry and song as a means of coping with their environment. The roots of this camp poetry, as Dupka also points out, are in the rich tradition of folk poetry and music that the prisoners had internalized from their cultural background. These oral and literary traditions provided the prisoners who were detained in the transit and labor camps with a source of emotional and creative inspiration, supporting them in expressing their feelings and sentiments (anger, despair, fear, longing, hope, etc.). Thus, this poetry, which was born in the Stalinist camps, was rather simple, lacking in formal sophistication, and easily imitable (in fact, several texts survived in different variants). The *corpus* collected over the years serves as powerful evidence to the long-lasting connection and synergy between folk traditions and the human need for expression, even in the most inhumane conditions

(cf. Dupka 2021b: 187–188). According to Küllős (2006: 100–112), these works draw extensively from Hungarian folk poetry traditions, including secular folk songs, lamentations, mourning songs [...] love songs, soldier's songs, prison songs, etc., and folk ballads. The influence of traditional folklore (the inherited culture) is evident not only in the choice of genres (cf. farewell song, epistolary poems, prayer, hymn and creed, prisoner's song, lament, ballad), but also in the frequent use of well-known folkloric motifs such as the captive bird or withering flower, along with proverbs and ritualized speech patterns like blessings, curses, and farewells. Religious folklore with its prayers, invocations, and supplications also left its mark on these works in their tone, vocabulary, and structures as well as the structure of hymns and psalms resonating through the verses. In these verses, we can also find traces of the half-popular news poems [...] and certainly the images and melodies of the military songs and sentimental romances of the First World War appeared in the prisoner poetry but somewhat transformed.

Moreover, these camp poems are also shaped by the popular culture of the early 20th century, notably the Hungarian *nóta*, folk play songs, operetta melodies, and the phrasing of contemporary dance songs. The influence of high culture, including patriotic and religious poetry transmitted through formal education and religious instruction, is also visible, reflecting the cultural grounding of the authors.

In addition to the above, the influence of the high culture, religious, and patriotic poetry transmitted by school and religious education can also be seen in these verses. The age of the prisoners of war may also explain this. Despite their sincerity and emotional depth, the stylistic approach of camp poetry often remains within the confines of popular and folk traditions, with vernacular speech, dialects, and idiomatic expressions marking the texts. The presence of gallows humor in a certain number of texts [e.g., *Emberaszaló intézet Szolyván* (Human Dehydration Institute in Svaliava) by Béla Juhász, in Dupka 2014a: 41–42] reflects the prisoners' attempts to deal with their inhuman situation through sarcasm and dark wit.

However, Küllős emphasizes that, while these camp poems may be considered a form of folklore and not rarely do their texts exist in multiple variations due to the oral transmission of the same, they generally do not reach the artistic style of traditional Hungarian folk poetry.

In her work, the Italian scholar Claudia Pieralli (1979–2023), who tragically passed away prematurely, introduced the expression "zone poetry" (Pieralli 2013a, 2013b, 2017) to define literary texts "written during imprisonment, (or even during the exile following liberation, life in *spetsposeleniia*, i.e. special settlements)" and that are "a literary track of testimony of political repression, which was synchronical to the imprisonment experience in the USSR", while

> [p]oems written after liberation or the dismantling of camps, are not included in the concept frame of 'zone poetry', as they are retrospective writings, and anagraphically do not belong to that historical moment, thus they do not reflect the simultaneous impact of history on the subject. On the other hand, we propose to apply the concept of 'poetry of soviet political

> repressions' (*poèzija sovetskoj repressii*) to all poetry composed about the experience of segregation, retrospectively, or at a non specified nor philologically specifiable moment, as well as to all poetry influenced to different extents by Soviet repression (Pieralli 2013b: 388).

In the present study, I aim to adopt a more expansive lens in examining poetic texts related to Soviet repression. I will explore not only works that fall under the strict definition of "zone poetry", but also those written retrospectively by former prisoners following their liberation or after the dismantling of camps. In addition, I will consider poetic texts composed by family members or friends of prisoners of war and deported civilians, encompassing both synchronic and retrospective perspectives. By broadening the scope of analysis, this study seeks to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which Soviet political repression has been inscribed in Hungarian poetry, addressing the multifaceted temporal and experiential dimensions of these literary responses.

ORIGIN OF THE HUNGARIAN CAMP POETRY

During the Second World War, István Örkény (1912–1979) – one of the most significant writers of Hungarian literature in the second half of the 20th century – was a conscript at Don, then a prisoner of war, only to return home in 1946. After the war, in 1947, he published *Lágerek népe* ("The People of the Camps"), in which he recounted his time as a laborer and prisoner of war. In his work, he also addressed the origin of camp poetry:

> Captivity produced a lot of poets: unfortunately, most of them were poor ones. But diamonds are polished with their own dust: perhaps they, the poets also sharpen their mirrors on each other. […] Fragments of songs, garlands of songs occasional poems and plays were written, but no masterpieces were created. […] This is not culture, but intention and desire. Strong intention and ever-growing desire: these are the two fruits that captivity has borne. I don't know if they are little or much, but the fruit is sound and healthy, and perhaps from its seed, a better Hungarian world will sprout.[4]

Another significant example consists of the poems composed by László Fedák (1911–1991). From Uzhhorod, he was arrested and accused of anti-Soviet activities and, on December 18, 1948, the Transcarpathian Regional Court sentenced him to 25 years of hard labor as an enemy of the Soviet people. He was sent to a special

[4] Orig.: „Sok költőt szült a hadifogság: sajnos, túlnyomórészt rosszakat. De a gyémánt is a saját porával csiszolódik: talán egymáson gyalulják meg a tükörlapjukat ők is, a költők. […] Dalfoszlányok születtek, nem dalkoszorúk, alkalmi versek és szindarabok íródtak, de nem születtek remekművek. […] Nem kultúra ez, de szándék és igény. Erős szándék és egyre növekvő igény: íme, a két gyümölcs, amit a hadifogság termett. Nem tudom, kevés-e, sok-e; de a gyümölcs ép és egészséges, magvából tán kihajt egy jobb magyar világ." (Örkény 1981: 142, 148).

camp in Kolyma (Magadan County, Russia) where he suffered in the notorious gold mines and wrote about thirty poems in his mind until 1953. He spent more than seven years away from his family. In March 1956, during the political concessions made by Khrushchev, he was released early and for several years afterwards, until his retirement, he managed the junior team of Spartak Uzhhorod (1956–1971). After his death, he was rehabilitated (February 20, 1992). For decades, he kept his poems, composed in the remote Kolyma, in his memory, and only a few years before his death, he put them on paper.

In the following passage printed on the dust jacket, the poet Károly Jobbágy (1921–1998, spent 3 years in captivity) emphasizes the collective effort and solidarity that made the creation of his work possible [cf. *Kiáltás az urali erdőből. Verses napló a fogságból 1945–1948* ("A Cry from the Ural Forest. A Poetic Diary from Captivity 1945–1948)", 2017]. He reveals that the existence and the materialization of the volume is not solely his achievement, but he owes much to the kindness and bravery of his friends, specifically of Iván Keményfi and Gyula Péterhidy, who protected the manuscripts from destruction. His words of thanks emphasize the importance of solidarity, friendship, and mutual support in the tragic circumstances in the camps. Jobbágy also had a kind thought for those unidentified persons who contributed in other, often small but vital ways, such as providing him small pieces of paper, protection, and moral support, or sharing with him small portions of bread. These companions, though not explicitly named, are an integral part of his writing process concluded with the successful, but very late publication of the volume in 2017, symbolizing the collective struggle and resilience that characterized everyday life in the Stalinist camps. His tribute highlights how personal survival and creative expression were communal endeavors, shaped by the sacrifices and compassion of fellow prisoners:

> That this volume is readable, that it exists, is due to two people in addition to the author. My friends Iván Keményfi and Gyula Péterhidy brought it home and protected it from destruction. I will not mention those who gave me their last piece of paper and their business cards in the camp so that I could write. Those who protected me, helped me, encouraged me, and who shared their meagre bread with me. They are part of this writing.[5]

Inside the small volume, in his foreword *Egy hajdani verses napló elé* ("Before a Former Diary in Verses"), Jobbágy judges his poetic diary more valuable than just a simple collection of poems; it is a significant historical *document* (italics are in the original Hungarian text) representing the lived experiences of a prisoner detained in a Stalinist camp for 1,258 days during one of the most inhuman periods of modern

[5] Orig.: „Hogy ezt a kötetet olvasni lehet, hogy megvan, az a megíráson kívül még két ember érdeme. Keményfi Iván és Péterhidy Gyula barátaim juttatták ezt haza és védték meg a pusztulástól. Nem említem meg azokat, akik a táborban utolsó darab papírjaikat, névjegyüket adták, hogy írni tudjak. Akik védtek, segítettek, bíztattak, akik kevés kenyerüket megosztották velem. Ők is részesei ennek az írásnak." (Jobbágy 2017).

history. He underscores the extremely miserable circumstances under which these pieces were created: in camps, inside wagons, during stops, and on scraped and improvised materials such as the backs of letters and cement bags and, in this way, he affirms that the act of writing itself became a form of resistance and preservation. Jobbágy's words convey his desire to bear witness to the unimaginable, to the daily exposure to death and to the horrors in Siberia and to ensure, even almost 70 years after, that the truth of this immense suffering would not be forgotten. His vivid descriptions of traveling through the war-ravaged landscape of Budapest (from the moment of capture) to reach Celldömölk and later Focșani (in Romania), the weeks-long journey to Siberia (the Lala region), the enduring freezing temperatures [cf. *A fagy ágyúi szórták a halált. A fagyott lábak és kezek dagadtak. […] Kinn akkor mértek -54 fokot.* "The cannons of frost scattered death. The frozen feet and hands swelled. [...] The temperature outside was -54 degrees at that time." From *Karácsony 1945.* (Christmas 1945: 63)], evoke the inhuman conditions of the prisoners, transforming his diary into a testament of survival and a record of collective trauma:

> What the reader has in his hands is first and foremost a document. I started writing 40 years ago, in the spring of 1944, and finished in May 1948. These poems were not written to pass the time, but in circumstances when it would have been wiser not to write and the conditions for the writing itself were not there. In camps, in wagons, at rest stops, on the envelopes of other people's letters, later on cement bags, I wrote my lines, from a few lines of notes, when I could, building poems. Hoping that, if found, they would tell the story of what we had lived through. What it was like to roll through the ruined country of Budapest in a wagon. To leave a home just freed from war, to languish in a collection camp in Foksan and set out on the weeks-long journey to Siberia, to face the ordeal of -54 degrees cold.[6]

Károly Jobbágy was sent home in 1947, but he was stopped already in Sighetu Marmației (in Hun. Máramarossziget, in northwestern Romania) and isolated from his group because of the poems he was carrying. From the Hungarian border, he was deported back to the Soviet Union in September 1947 as a dangerous person and imprisoned until 1948. In April 1947, he wrote a poem *Levél* (Letter) in Verkhotur'e in the middle Ural Mountains and then we have only two short poems from October 1947 entitled *Levelezőlapokra* (To postcards). The collection ends with only three poems from the period March-May 1948: significatively, Jobbágy wrote much less after autumn 1947.

[6] Orig.: „Amit az olvasó kezében tart, az elsősorban *dokumentum*. 40 évvel ezelőtt, 1944 tavaszán kezdtem írni és 1948 májusában fejeztem be. Ezek a versek nem azért születtek, hogy az időt elverjem velük, hanem, olyan körülmények között, amikor okosabb lett volna nem írni, és magához az alkotáshoz nem voltak meg a feltételek. Táborokban, vagonban, pihenők alkalmával, mások leveleinek borítékjára, később cementes zsákokra róttam soraimat, pár soros feljegyzésekből, amikor mód lett rá verseket építve. Remélve, hogy ha megtalálják, hírt adnak arról, mit is éltünk át. Milyen volt vagonba zárva átgördülni a romokban lévő országon, Budapesten. Elhagyni az éppen háborútól szabadult otthont, tengődni Foksáni gyűjtőtáborában és nekiindulni a többhetes útnak Szibéria felé, a -54 fokos hideg megpróbáltatásai elé." (Jobbágy 2017: 6).

MAIN FEATURES OF THE HUNGARIAN CAMP POETRY

The topics covered in the collected Hungarian camp poetry reflect the traumatic experiences of prisoners in Soviet assembly or transit (Hun. *gyűjtőtábor* e.g., the transit camp in Svaliava) and labor camps (Hun. *munkatábor*), capturing the emotional, physical, and spiritual struggles that they endured. A recurring theme is the traumatic process of being taken prisoner and the subsequent forced marches to the assembly camps [cf. e.g., *Lágerballada* ("Camp ballads"), 1944 by unknown author, in Dupka (2014a: 9–11)]. Prisoners often found themselves ripped from their homes and families, with little understanding of their fate [e.g., *Ott, valahol messze, ott, valahol távol, / Komor hegyek között van egy fogolytábor* "Somewhere far away…, somewhere in the distance…, / Among the gloomy mountains there is a prison camp", *Fogolykarácsony Szolyván* ("Prisoner's Christmas in Svaliava"), Károly Holozsi's poem, see also its variants, in Dupka (2014a: 17–22)]. This phase is frequently marked by an overwhelming sense of uncertainty and foreboding, captured in lines that express the haunting thought, "perhaps I will never return" [e.g., *Isten veled, szülőföldem, / Ahol én születtem, / Szüleimtől testvéreimtől / Nagyon távol estem.* "Farewell, my homeland, / Where I was born, / From my parents and brothers and sisters / I have fallen far away." *Fogolyének* ("Prisoner's song")]. The texts in the *corpus*, as emphasized by the scholars, are often composed to the beat of popular songs and give voice to the sufferance of the prisoners forcibly removed from their homes and homeland and obliged to move toward an unknown and terrifying future, unsure if they would ever return to their loved ones. The initial experience of being taken prisoner and forced to march to the concentration camps is a common theme in the camp poems, capturing the shock, fear, and disorientation of sudden capture. The physical journey itself – marching to concentration camps – symbolizes the beginning of their dehumanization, as individuals are reduced to mere numbers, herded like cattle. This sense of loss, both of personal autonomy and of a future, forms a key part of the emotional landscape of these poems.

The everyday reality of life within the assembly and labor camps is another central theme, with poems often describing the monotonous and dehumanizing routines of the prisoners. Acts such as inscribing messages into bricks provided a mental and emotional escape from the brutal reality, offering a fleeting sense of purpose and humanity [cf. e.g., *A ceglédi fogolytábor téglafalainak versfeliratairól* ("From the poetic inscriptions on the brick walls of the Cegléd Prisoner Camp"), (1945, in Dupka 2014a: 173–175; Bognár 2017: 300–306)]. As Bognár (2017: 302) notes, this allowed the writer to shift focus from their dire reality and create something "elevating and nice". These inscriptions engraved into bricks with a nail or similar sharp object, though small and fleeting (sometimes just names and dates), helped prisoners survive in those cruel circumstances and represented a moment of distraction during which they were not thinking of their suffering.

Prisoner's moving from the assembly/transit camps to labor camps meant further stress and difficulties to overcome, as described in several camp poems [e.g., *Más*

táborba visznek innét. / Mennyi élmény! Nem is hinnéd. / Itt a tetű majd megevett, / Ott majd bolha lesz ehelyett. "They take me to another camp from here. / What an experience! You wouldn't believe it. / Here lice almost ate me, / There will be fleas instead." From *Más táborba...* (To another camp…) by Sándor Balog, in Dupka (2014a: 106)]. Travel between different zones and camps was exhausting, often through adverse weather conditions, and the threat of injury, disease, or death was constant. For many prisoners, deportation from one site to another meant increasing despair as they realized that they were not returning home but rather being repositioned – driven out like cattle – between different nodes of a well-designed and inescapable system of oppression. Poems from this period often focus on the physical and emotional exhaustion that came with these transfers, with nature playing a symbolic role – whether it was the barren taiga or the wild, unforgiving landscapes of the Kolyma region – that mirrored the desolation in their hearts. Once in the labor camps, daily life became a brutal routine of physical suffering, starvation, and despair.

In these camp poems, dehumanization of the prisoners often takes the form of animalization, where they are described as being herded or driven like livestock. The phrase "hajtottak be oda" (herded there) evokes an image of the prisoners being treated as nonhuman or subhuman, as animals: they were deliberately deprived of their individuality, self-determination, and agency; they were no longer perceived as individuals: *Ott, valahol messze, ott, valahol távol, / Komor hegyek között van egy fogolytábor. / Sok jó magyar férfit hajtottak be oda, / Gyászba borult mindnek a drága otthona.* "There, somewhere far away, there, somewhere distant, / Amidst grim mountains lies a prisoner camp. / Many good Hungarian men were herded there, / Each of their dear homes is shrouded in mourning", c.f. *Fogolykarácsony Szolyván* ("Prisoner's Christmas in Svaliava"), Svaliava, Christmas 1944, by Károly Holozsi, in Dupka (2014a: 17–19). This type of dehumanization (or animalization) reflects the cruel reality of camp life, where prisoners were reduced to subhuman entities, mere numbers and consequently subjected to inhumane conditions. Their being treated like animals emphasizes the loss of dignity and autonomy, showing how Soviet repression sought to break their spirits and resistance by denying their humanity.

Verses reflecting on homesickness and longing for freedom that seemed distant and unreachable, often intertwined with the description of the troglodyte conditions prisoners lived in the labor camps, describe the great pain of separation, with images of family members, peaceful domestic scenes, offering momentary relief from the constant physical and psychological suffering. Their feelings were intensified by the extreme isolation and conditions of the labor camps, often established in the harsh and remote regions of the Soviet Union and, therefore, memories of home became a kind of mental escape from the daily brutality they faced.

Everyday living conditions in the labor camps were primitive, prisoners were housed in overcrowded, dilapidated barracks with inadequate shelter from the cold, lacking even basic sanitation or comfort [e.g., *Rideg, fehér barakkfalak, / Rongyos,*

foltos emberek, / S a végtelen nyomorúság / Vesznek körül engemet. "Cold, white barrack walls, / Tattered, stained people, / And endless misery / are surrounding me", from *Rideg, fehér barakkfalak* ("Cold, white barrack walls") composed by János Rózsás in 1952, in Dupka (2014a: 201–202)]. These conditions are vividly described in the poems, with imagery of dirt, crumbling walls, lice and fleas, and suffocating air that stripped the prisoners of any sense of humanity [e.g., *Félhomály dereng a barakkban, / Fülledt, füstös a levegő. / Az ablak vasrácsán keresztül / Látszik a futó felhő.* "The barrack is gloomy. / The air is stuffy and smoky. / Through the iron bars of the window / You can see the running cloud." From *Félhomály dereng a barakkban* ("The barrack is gloomy"), by János Rózsás, in Dupka (2014: 203); *Hogy nem tudunk aludni napok óta, / mert este véres, vad zászlóaljak, / poloskák törnek ránk, s mi szitkozódva az ágyon üljük át az éjszakát. "*That we can't sleep for days, / because at night bloody, wild battalions, / true bugs break in on us, and we sit on the bed swearing through the night." From *Vád* ("Accusation"), Jobbágy 2017: 66]. The harsh environments forced them to live in filth, huddled together in darkness, with little distinction between the living and the dead (e.g., *Megfagyva kuporgunk hideg betonlapon, / A hosszú, álmatlan, dermedt éjszakákon.* "Frozen, we crawl on cold concrete slabs, / Through long, sleepless, frozen nights". From *Fogolykarácsony Szolyván* ("Prisoner's Christmas in Svaliava"), Svaliava, Christmas 1944, by Károly Holozsi, in Dupka 2014a: 17–19]). This dehumanization through squalor is a central motif in many works, highlighting the relentless physical and psychological degradation that marked daily life in the camps.

Religion played a central role for many prisoners, with festivals and religious rituals offering brief moments of relief. Cultural activities (readings, etc.) that prisoners engaged in as they sought to maintain their identities and dignity, were also attempts at preserving some semblance of normality and humanity amidst dehumanizing conditions. It is also true that, in some texts, we also have the representation of other kinds of family reality and complex relationships such as in *Laci fiamnak* ("To my son Laci") or *Még egyszer Klárikához* ("Once more to the little Klári") composed by Simon Horvát in 1955. Memories of family and religious celebrations, particularly Christmas, the holiday of love, played a significant role in sustaining them during their suffering. New Year's Eve was another heartbreaking time, often marked by bittersweet reflections on home and the hope of eventual reunion. "Religious life and practice were ensured secretly by the priests living in captivity among the convicts, and if one fell out, his disciple kept alive the faith in God and Freedom in the people. According to their statements the prisoners in the camps – even former atheists – lay claim to 'the consolatory strength of faith and religion'." (Dupka 2014a: 190).

Nature, particularly the forbidding landscapes of the vast, cold taiga and the wild, remote region of Kolyma region, also becomes a backdrop in the poetry, symbolizing the isolation of the camps, hopelessness, and the indomitable force of the natural world, reinforcing the sense of entrapment felt by the prisoners. Nature in camp poetry is frequently depicted as both a physical setting and a metaphor for isolation and desolation, and its forces are indifferent to the prisoners' suffering.

Other recurrent themes of this camp poetry include insomnia, the unbearable sanitary conditions, disease spreading rapidly due to overcrowding, malnutrition, and inadequate medical care, constant suffering, and the omnipresence of death. Insomnia was a constant affliction for prisoners, aggravated by malnutrition and starvation, cold, wounds, and the mental anguish of their situation [e.g., *Sír az erdő, zúg a tajga, / Haldoklik egy rab magyar, / Sebe vérzik, arca sápadt, / Nem megy többé már haza.* "The forest is crying, the taiga is wuthering, / A Hungarian prisoner is dying, / His wound is bleeding, his face is pale, / And never will he go home again." From *Nagy Jóska halálára* ("To the death of Jóska Nagy") by László Fedák, in Dupka (2014a: 12–13)]. Death was a constant threat in the camps, whether due to disease, wounds, starvation, mental deterioration, or execution.

Ultimately, liberation and the eventual return to home occur as topics, offering moments of reflection on survival, trauma, and the bittersweet nature of freedom after such a prolonged ordeal [e.g., *És amikor elérkeztem jó falum határára, / Leborultam, imádkoztam Istennek hálát adva, / Hogy engemet hazahozott szörnyű nehéz helyzetből. / Patakként folyt nekem az örömkönny szememből. / De mielőtt hazaértem, rágondoltam azokra, / Kiket egykor velem együtt vittek Oroszországba. / Hej, de sok édesapa lett annak áldozatja, / Akit csúfos bánásmóddal kergettek a halálba.* "And when I reached the border of my good village, / I stumbled down, praying, thanking God / For bringing me home from a terribly difficult situation. / I had tears of joy flowing like a stream from my eyes. / But before I got home, I thought of those / Who were once taken with me to Russia. / Oh, how many fathers were victims of it / Who were driven to death by maltreatment." From *1944. november havában* ("In the month of November 1944") by Károly Barta, in (Dupka 2014a: 46–61)]. The thematic arc described in this poetic chronicle – from capture to liberation – captures the full spectrum of the prisoners' experiences: from Beregszász to the transit camp in Svaliava, Verecke, Sambir, the valley of death, Stanilo (oggi Donetsk), Chistiakov, Bessarabia, and then through Romania until home, providing a comprehensive narrative of their suffering, endurance, and resilience. While the idea of freedom had long been a distant dream (it is an obsessive repetition also in Barta's chronicle), the return from captivity and the subsequent life of the prisoners was often full of difficulties. Many survivors faced psychological problems and difficulties in their reintegration into society.

The conditions and experiences of the prisoners are often described in stark, hellish terms. Phrases like *Ez a mi életünk legsötétebb napja* "This is the darkest day of our lives", from *Fogolykarácsony Szolyván* ("Prisoner's Christmas in Svaliava"), *Nem egyéb ez itten, mint pokloknak pokla, / Ahol ember egymást, mint vadállat falja* "This is nothing but the hell of hells, / Where men devour one another like wild beasts", from *Könyörgés* ("Supplication") by unknown author, Ochamchire 1946, in Dupka (2014a: 23–24)), or *a sok férfi éhezett, ez az idő életükben / a fekete fejezet* "Many men starved, / this time in their lives / is the black chapter", from *Lágerballada* ("Camp ballads") capture the profound suffering and sense of moral darkness that pervaded life in the camps. The use of such imagery reflects the prisoners' perception of the camps as places of absolute despair and evil, where their physical

and emotional torment felt like an infernal punishment. These metaphors also emphasize the historical significance of their suffering, framing it as a dark chapter in human history that should never be forgotten.

Realia is a common phenomenon in labor camp poetry that often refers to everyday objects and specific terms that are grounded in the material and linguistic reality of the labor camps and provide a sense of authenticity. They usually include references to items like cement bags, which prisoners used instead of paper, or everyday objects like barbed wire, cold concrete slab, *vahta* 'posto di guardia', etc. Moreover, *realia* extend to cultural and geographical references, such as mentions of the surrounding Siberian landscapes (taiga, forest, snow, etc.) or Russian words (often reflecting the linguistic imposition of the Soviet regime), which were part of the prisoners' environment. Russian words, phrases, or camp-specific slang [e.g., in the above-mentioned *1944. november havában* ("In the month of November 1944") by Károly Barta], for example, highlight the linguistic imposition and cultural dislocation experienced by prisoners. By embedding such *realia* into their texts, the authors offer future readers a dramatic and historically grounded representation of life in Stalinist camps.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I have highlighted the profound relationship between the traumatic experiences of Hungarian prisoners (mostly from Subcarpathia) in Soviet labor camps and the emergence of a unique *corpus* known as camp literature. The conducted research and publications by scholars such as György Dupka, Zalán Bognár, Imola Küllős, Zoltán Vasvári, and others contributed to enriching our understanding of this genre, placing it within the extensive field of Hungarian folklore. By acknowledging the diverse influences especially on this camp poetry, including popular culture and religious traditions, we can better appreciate the multilayered nature of these writings. It is important to point out the vital role of these written accounts in preserving historical memory and conducting further research to bring their semantic and stylistic features to light.

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