

## **A WATERSHED IN DANUBE SWABIAN HISTORY**

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## **World War One: The Watershed**

The First World War and its aftermath mark a watershed in Danube Swabian history and set the scene for the beginning of the end of their life together as a people; the destruction of their communities; their dispersal throughout the world; the loss of their culture and sense of identity; their expulsion from their beloved *Heimat*: all the ties that held them together personally, as families and as communities. It would see a parting of the ways of the various threads that made up the tapestry of Danube Swabian experience since their arrival in the Habsburg lands along the Danube in the eighteenth century during the Great Swabian Migration and *Schwabenzug*.

Their communities had developed in six major regions of the Kingdom of Hungary each with different and separate patterns of settlement, with the settlers representing various regions of South Western Germany that would impact on the dialect spoken, the culture and various traditions that were maintained among them; each of the settlement areas faced unique conditions and political situations out of which emerged a more or less common history. The major common outside influence and force that shaped and formed their life and history was the fact that they were subjects of the Kingdom of Hungary; subject to its laws, policies, institutions and aspirations. In this multi-ethnic Kingdom, the Magyars were a minority in their own house and sought to rectify that through the assimilation of the other minorities. This was their major thrust during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when Hungarian became the language of instruction in the schools of the minorities and was the official language in the courts and all phases of public life. This would be true for all of the Danube Swabian communities in all of the settlement areas but all of that would change after the First World War when there would be a parting of the ways.

The Batschka, Srem, Slavonia and the western Banat would find themselves in the successor state of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes the so-called south Slavs or Yugoslavia. The eastern Banat would fall into the hands of Romania, while Swabian Turkey, Szatmar and the Hungarian Highlands would remain in Hungary. Each of the three nations would deal with their German population in their own way and in each case the German population would adopt their own response to their situation as much as it was possible for them to do so. This will become the key to understanding the different and varying responses of the various governments to their Danube Swabian population during the trauma of the Second World War. The inter-war years were crucial for what would follow and I will attempt to delineate that for the Danube Swabians in Hungary and hopefully someone in future will address the situations in Yugoslavia and Romania during that time frame that is beyond the scope of my presentation.

### Setting the Scene:

A sense of betrayal stalked the land and mistrust permeated all levels of government and those being governed as the First World War went through its final death agony and ground to a complete halt on November 3, 1918 when an armistice was signed between the Western Powers and Austria-Hungary even though it would drag on for eight more days on the Western Front. Ten days after the armistice, the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary was declared dissolved and disappeared from the map of Europe and was rather brutally carved up by its successor states with the full blessing of the Western Powers.

On November 16, 1918 the Hungarian National Assembly declared independence and the establishment of the People's Republic of Hungary. Count Mihály Károlyi was elected as its first President promising the introduction of universal male suffrage in the next election in order to win the support of the Social Democrats and trade unionist allies who assisted him in coming to power. He would face the fierce opposition of the *ancient regime*: the vested interests of the magnates, nobles, gentry, the moneyed upper and middle class, the military and higher clergy of the Roman Catholic Church who made up the electorate in the past who accounted for less than five per cent of the population. These political forces were united in their efforts to bring down the populist and democratic government and restore the old order of class and privilege at the helm of government and conspired to carry out a quick military takeover. Yet on the day of the declaration of independence of Hungary, Béla Kun, a Hungarian Army officer born and raised in a Jewish family in Transylvania, arrived in Budapest along with eight companions disguised as army surgeons who had all just recently returned from captivity in Russia. Their mission was to carry out Lenin's directive to set in motion events that would lead to the founding of a Hungarian Soviet Republic.

All cross the country, all eyes were now focussed on Budapest, a virtual seething political cauldron, where Hungary's fate as about to be sealed.

Hungary was without allies, besieged on all sides; falling victim to the aspirations of its land-grabbing neighbours in their quest for territorial expansion at Hungary's expense. They were all free to act at will, with the full support of the French government, who along with the other Western Powers, refused to accept the legitimacy of the Károlyi government in Budapest. In early December 1918 France was adamant in its demand for the immediate withdrawal of the Hungarian armed forces and government administrators from Slovakia. By the end of the year most of what had once been *Upper Hungary* was occupied by armies of the newly formed fledgling Czech state. The Czechs further demanded that a sizeable land corridor be established to pass through central Hungary to enable them to join up with their fellow Slavs who lived to the south, in the now so-called Yugoslavia, a union of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. France supported the idea but the other Western Powers were rather cool to the scheme.

The Serbian Army occupied southern Hungary as far as Pécs while their government squabbled with Romania over who would have control of the Banat. After occupying Transylvania in mid-December, the Romanian Army advanced further into Hungary and

France ordered Hungary to avoid bloodshed at all costs by providing a demilitarized zone between the two armies. In an attempt to pacify the Hungarian people over the territorial losses that were taking place, Károlyi initiated negotiations with the Swiss Red Cross for the repatriation of the remaining 430,000 Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war in Russia. His efforts were scuttled by France to rob Hungary of the possibility of having any additional manpower to prevent the takeover of more of its territory. It was the intention of France and the occupying successor states to make the recent territorial changes permanent and a weakened powerless Hungary was necessary in order to affect that.

In an attempt to drive the final nail into the coffin of the Károlyi government, France issued a communiqué on March 20, 1919 giving Romania the green light to occupy the Great Plains of eastern Hungary. New demands were also made by the insatiable Czechs for additional territory in Slovakia. In order to save face and not accept responsibility for the loss of still more territory, Count Mihály Károlyi resigned from office and handed over power to a coalition of dissident left wing Social Democrats and trade unionists who had joined forces with the recently established Communist Party led by the same thirty-two year old Béla Kun, protégé of Lenin and season revolutionary, who had spent the past few months stealthily working towards manipulating the takeover of the government.

The Hungarian Soviet Republic came into existence on March 22, 1919 with Béla Kun at its head calling for a national military response to the threat of the partition of Hungary by the successor states and played down the Communist nature of the regime he was putting into place behind the scenes. Once again the Western Powers refused to accept the legitimacy of the government in power in Budapest and postponed any discussions for a peace treaty and the final settlement of Hungary's future borders. Meanwhile, the successor states used the creation of a Communist Republic on their doorstep as a pretext for invading Hungary. In this way they would not have to allow the local populations in their annexed territories the right to self-determination expressed through the results of a plebiscite. The plebiscite was but one of the Fifteen Points related to national minorities that had been promised by the American President, Woodrow Wilson, the rather late arriving ally of the Western Powers, who was an ill-informed expert on all matters European. It would be Romania that would be the first to test these troubled waters.

On April 17, 1919 the Romanians launched yet another invasion of Hungary from Transylvania and their armies swiftly rolled across the Great Plains of eastern Hungary heading towards Budapest. By the end of April they were less than sixty miles from the capital when Béla Kun called upon the citizenry to take up arms and join the Red Army and drive out the invaders from the sacred soil of their Magyar Fatherland. The leaders of the trade unions recruited workers' battalions numbering more than fifty thousand men who were quickly equipped and sent directly to the Front. By the end of May they retook every major town and city in the Great Plains and the fleeing Romanians retreated to the safety of Transylvania, resulting in an outburst of patriotic fervour all across Hungary over the victory won by the workers' brigades of Budapest. Béla Kun was astute enough to use that to his own advantage.

In early June he decided it was time to consolidate his hold on power and appealed to the awakened nationalism of the people and the newly created Red Army and ordered an invasion to retake Slovakia. By the end of June, the Hungarian Red Army occupied a considerable part of former *Upper Hungary*. An order issued from Paris by the Western Powers put a halt to the invasion and occupation which led to the immediate withdrawal of the Red Army because of a promise by the Western Powers made to Kun to cease all further hostilities against Hungary. There was now a temporary lull in military activity on the part of Hungary's rapacious neighbours in light of its recent military successes. This breathing space provided the counter-revolutionaries in Hungary more opportunities to spread their propaganda among the large landowners, businessmen, financiers, industrial workers, peasants, members of the middle class, Magyar nationalists and Roman Catholic clergy who had been most affected and aggrieved by the economic and anti-religious measure imposed by the budding Communist regime.

All of Kun's attempts to create his version of a Marxist utopia failed utterly. Businesses and retail stores closed; land reforms that were undertaken were a disaster; farmers refused to sell their produce at state regulated prices and city dwellers went out into the countryside to barter for food. Inflation was rampant. Banks and financial institutions fell into the hands of government appointed hacks; industries were governed by workers' committees. Opponents of the new regime and its policies were arrested, imprisoned and executed depending on the nature of their crime against the Soviet Republic. There were two hundred and thirty-four victims who lost their lives during the Bolshevik Terror. A disproportionately large number of their opponents and victims were Jews. Ironically that fact was totally ignored by the virulent anti-Semitism that was now sweeping the land. It was at the heart and core of the counter-revolution that perceived Bolshevism as an anti-Christian Jewish plot to rule the world based on the fact that there were a number of Jews among the leaders of the Communist Party. The Magyar Nationalist counter-revolutionaries saw the Jews as an undesirable foreign element in Hungary's body politic that needed to be eradicated to preserve the racial purity and integrity of the nation.

An active underground emerged. Uprisings against the government were planned by trade unionists, deserters from the Red Army, politicians from both the left and the right of the political spectrum and most importantly secret agents of Admiral Miklós Horthy. As Minister of War of the counter-revolutionary government that had been set up in the southern city of Szeged with the tacit approval of Romania that occupied the area and with the full support and connivance of France, he was gathering a National Army of dissidents to overthrow the Kun government. With all of this opposition arrayed against him, Kun knew his situation was precarious. In power for only four months, he and his acolytes were now unable to enforce their authority in Budapest or in the countryside except for isolated pockets of strength in Pécs and Kaposvár in south western Hungary.

The final death knell of the Hungarian Soviet Republic was sounded on July 24<sup>th</sup> with another Romanian invasion of Hungary and a subsequent uprising in Budapest that saw Béla Kun flee the country on August 1<sup>st</sup>. After one hundred and thirty-three days, the failed Hungarian experiment with Marxism ended and went underground for the next twenty-five years. *Red Kaposvár*, as it would be soon become known, would be the last

Communist stronghold to fall in the face of the onslaught of Horthy's *Nemzeti Hadsereg* and the subsequent brutal White Terror that would be unleashed all across the country.

Romanian troops entered Budapest on August 6<sup>th</sup> as the internal government structures collapsed after the departure of Béla Kun. Swift reprisals were taken against all suspected sympathizers of the former regime, trade unionists, journalists, Jews and Social Democrats carried out by death squads consisting of reactionaries, scoundrels and freebooters that were associated with the officers of Horthy's National Liberation Army. It was only a foretaste of what was yet to come. The loot-laden Romanian Army was forced to abandon Budapest on November 14<sup>th</sup> on orders received from the French government. France was anxious to place the counter-revolutionary arch-conservative government of their choice in power through a totally bogus election.

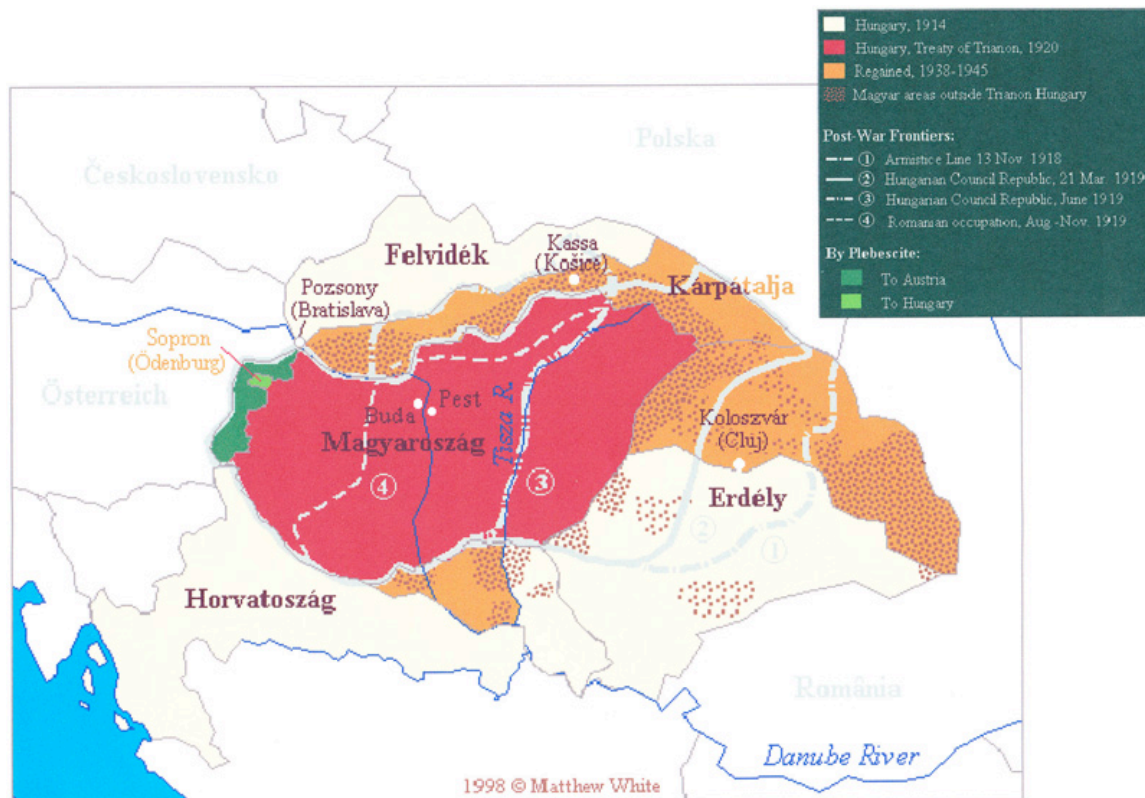
Admiral Miklós Horthy, an established war hero, entered Budapest in his full dress blue naval uniform under the weight of countless medals, service ribbons and awards with gold epaulets on his shoulders, astride a white stallion surrounded by troops of his National Liberation Army and took control of the city in the name of the counter-revolution on November 16<sup>th</sup>. In addressing the populace of the city he upbraided them for their betrayal of the values held sacred by the old order that was being re-established and placed in power once more. He assured Budapest it would pay a high price for its flirtation with democratic reform and would eventually welcome the stability the counter-revolution would bring to Hungary.

Under Horthy's auspices the two year reign of his White Terror would be set loose. The savagery of the acts of violence and bloodletting that were carried out against its victims whether men, women or children had no parallel in Hungarian history since the darkest periods of the Middle Ages. The perverse brutality and indescribable tortures inflicted upon their prisoners and the horrible deaths of thousands silenced all opposition. It was a time when the informer was king. These systematic and sporadic killings were showcased as reprisals for the Red Terror but yet they targeted Social Democrats, peasants, journalists and Jews who were known supporters of the democratic reforms. Horthy and his followers feared and hated the most. Hungary gave Europe its first taste of state Fascism. Nationalism was taken to the nth degree. In future, worship of the nation could and did cover a multitude of other sins.

On March 1, 1920 the National Assembly made up of members of the old order that longed for the kind of power they had known in the glory days of feudalism in Hungary, re-established the Kingdom of Hungary but without a King and voted to install Admiral Horthy as Regent and Protector of Hungary. After receiving a small delegation from the National Assembly, he accepted the position but only on condition of additional powers, which included the authority to appoint and dismiss prime ministers; to convene and dissolve parliament and command the armed forces. After being granted these sweeping powers, he took the oath of office and began his twenty-four year Regency, maintaining a stranglehold on all attempts at democratization of the nation and its government; forcing *Magyarization* on its remaining minorities and providing a guide for institutionalizing

Fascism that was on the rise all across Europe and passing and enforcing the first anti-Jewish laws since the Middle Ages.

The Treaty of Trianon, the final peace treaty with Hungary was concluded on June 4, 1920 without Hungarian participation in the negotiations. Hungary lost two thirds of its former territory and one third of the Magyar population. For the first time in Hungary's history, Magyars were the overwhelming majority of the population within its own borders with the German and Jewish populations forming the only large minorities.



### Horthy and Hitler and the German Minority

There was a rumour going around that Regent Horthy probably slept in some type of naval attire. He was never seen in public without wearing his full-dress Admiral's regalia which seemed strangely out of place, since Hungary was a landlocked country without a seaport or a navy. In addition to his uniform there was always an appropriate colourful silk sash draped over one shoulder on which he pinned every military and navel decoration he could lay his hands on. He preferred a white ostrich plume on his tri-corner hat that he felt gave his appearance a special flair indicative of his position as the Head of State and created the illusion he was taller than he actually was. For that reason

he always rode on his white horse when in public so that the cheering crowds had to look up to him. These were only some of his fetishes that reflected his vanity and arrogance.

As the Commander in Chief of the Imperial Fleet of the vanquished Austro-Hungarian Empire, he had risen to power at the head of the Hungarian Nationalist Army that had put down the Red Revolution in 1919 as noted before and then unleashing his White Terror to stabilize and strengthen his personal hold on political power. He had ruled unchallenged ever since, surrounded by a cadre of anti-Semitic military officers like himself, right-wing politicians and outright Fascists like Szálasi, the leader of the infamous Arrow Cross Party, who all did his bidding and were determined to realize the goal held in common by all Hungarian political parties regardless of their stated ideology. It was best summed up in their rallying cry: *Nem. Nem soha.* No. No never. This slogan was an expression of their refusal to accept the territorial and population losses Hungary had suffered as a result of the Treaty of Trianon following the First World War. All policies, both domestic and foreign, had to pass the litmus test of how they would affect or bring about the return of the *Lost Territories* in the neighbouring successor states. A revisionist dream gripped the soul of Hungary and Regent Horthy would prove to be the greatest dreamer of them all.

A Magyar confession of faith was born during the 1930s that always accompanied the singing of the National Anthem at sports and entertainment events, governmental and public gatherings and even services of worship: *Hiszek egy Istenben...*

I believe in one God  
I believe in one Fatherland  
I believe in the eternal justice of God  
I believe in the resurrection of Hungary.  
Amen

As part of Hungary's stated foreign policy and using their position at the League of Nations, no opportunity was lost to present their case protesting loudly that the minority rights enshrined in the Treaty of Versailles were not being granted to the three million Magyars cut off from their homeland, living in the successor states oppressed by alien regimes. The truth of the matter was that the situation of the Hungarian minorities living outside of Hungary was far better than that of the minorities within what remained of Hungary. That was primarily true of the German minority, known as the Swabians, who lived in their insular agricultural enclaves in various regions of the country and were the only large minority left in Hungary after the Kingdom had been so mercilessly truncated by the Major Powers at Versailles.

The Swabians, whom the Hungarians referred to as the Svábok, also included other German speaking populations and the term Danube Swabian was virtually unknown in Hungary having only recently been invented by an Austrian geographer. The Swabians became the target for total assimilation while at the same time talk of deportation of the unwilling became rampant in the nationalist press. The whole issue began to come to the fore in 1933 with the government's organized campaign for all citizens of Hungary to



adopt a Hungarian surname. This struck much too close to home and gave birth to opposition from various quarters within the German community. It was a clear violation of minority rights and there were those who raised the matter publicly leading to arrests and public convictions of some of their spokesmen. In this way the issue became known abroad, notably in Germany where there were calls for the rectifying of the situation. In the following years more pressure was applied against the Swabians in the matter of their schools, resulting in interventions on their behalf by the German government and most especially after Hitler's ascendancy to power.

Special agreements were drawn up between the two governments regarding the German minority (as it was called) primarily because of lucrative trade treaties and incentives mutually beneficial to both nations and support for one another's foreign affairs objectives in calling for a revision of the terms of the treaties concluded at Versailles. That was especially true of Hungary's goal to regain their *Lost Territories* which fit in quite nicely with Hitler's overall plans for the Balkans where he needed a compliant and willing ally. In the face of immense public resistance; the opposition of all political parties and the negative editorial stance of all of the major newspapers, Regent Horthy sanctioned the organization of the *Volksbund der Deutschen in Ungarn* (The Folk Union of the Germans in Hungary) on November 26, 1938 to carry out its official cultural, social and educational programme under the leadership of Dr. Franz Basch. The nationalist opponents of the *Volksbund* saw it as an affront to Hungary's national interests if not treasonable because of the organization's stated opposition to assimilation.

Regent Horthy mistrusted both the organization and its leadership and kept both under strict surveillance. He was simply providing window dressing in order to court Adolph Hitler which was achieving his own ends. It was all part of the give-and-take nature of the relationship between Hitler and Horthy; Germany and Hungary. The Munich Agreement signed September 29, 1938 had provided the incentive for his decision.

While the world waited anxiously, as the major European Powers met with Hitler and attempted to negotiate the *Sudenten Crisis* in Czechoslovakia, Regent Horthy bided his time at home. He had been personally affronted and stung by Hitler's barbed comment directed at him during his state visit to Germany earlier in August. Horthy had expressed reluctance to provide troops for Hitler's planned take-over of Czechoslovakia in order for Hungary to annex its *Lost Territories*: the southern counties of Slovakia, known as the *Feldvidék* and the Carpatho-Ukraine bordering Poland. He had indicated he was afraid to risk war with the well-equipped Czechoslovakian army and hoped to regain the territory through diplomatic means. At the time Hitler had sneered, "If you want to share in the meal you must help in the kitchen." The two dictators had kept their distance ever since although Horthy kept diplomatic channels open just in case.

With the total capitulation of the European Powers to Hitler's demands and the signing of the Munich Agreement, the subsequent rape of Czechoslovakia followed in its wake.

The first step in what would lead to the total dismemberment of Czechoslovakia took place at the Belvedere Palace in Vienna where negotiators representing Nazi Germany

and Fascist Italy met with representatives from Czechoslovakia and Hungary. In addition to the Hungarian Foreign Minister Kálmán Kánya to represent him, Regent Horthy had assigned the then, Minister of Education, Pál Count Teléki to state the case for Hungary's claims to its *Lost Territories*. On November 2, 1938 the largely populated *Feldvidék* and the southern portion of Carpatho-Ukraine were awarded to Hungary in what would become known as the First Vienna Accords. Unopposed units of the Hungarian Army completed the occupation of the newly awarded territories by November 10<sup>th</sup>. On the following day, Regent Horthy in his full-dress naval uniform, seated on his white prancing charger made his triumphant entry into Kassa the principal town in the region. He was met there by adoring crowds of thousands as he officially welcomed one million Magyars back home into the fold.

Going through the motions of officially permitting the organization of the *Volksbund* two weeks later on November 26<sup>th</sup> was a small price to pay for what Horthy had achieved and experienced that day in vindication of his foreign policy. He later described it in his diary, "As I passed along the roads, people embraced one another, fell upon their knees and wept with joy because *liberation* had come to them at last..."

Early in 1939, it was revealed to Horthy that his Prime Minister, Béla Imredy, a well known pro-Fascist anti-Semite was in fact of Jewish descent. He was immediately forced from office. Remembering the outstanding work that Count Teléki had done during the negotiations that had led to the Vienna Accord, the Regent appointed him his new Prime Minister on February 15, 1939. Hungary joined the *Anti Comintern Pact* with Germany, Italy and Japan and became part of the Axis on February 24<sup>th</sup> and withdrew from the League of Nations a few weeks later. Then as a further reward for marching lock-step with the Nazi *Führer* and his policies, on March 19<sup>th</sup> Hitler gave the green light for Horthy to order his army to occupy the northern portion of the Carpatho-Ukraine up to the Polish border as Germany took over what remained of Czechoslovakia by force.

Still not content with his recent acquisitions of territory, Horthy now cast a covetous eye in the direction of Transylvania that Hungary had lost to Romania. Its reunification with Hungary became central to his foreign and domestic policies with the full support of a compliant Prime Minister who was beginning to have reservations about the directions in which Adolph Hitler was heading and began to caution the Regent in that regard. Not gaining the kind of support he had hoped from Hitler for the reacquisition of Transylvania and the bellicose response of the Romanians to his demands by sending troops to its borders with Hungary, Regent Horthy had second thoughts. It became the opportunity Prime Minister Teléki had been awaiting and he persuaded him to steer a more independent course for Hungary.

Prior to the launching of the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, Hitler demanded that Horthy provide freedom of passage for his troops through the Carpatho-Ukraine to attack Poland from the south. Teléki convinced the Regent not to comply. Horthy declared Hungary was a non-belligerent nation and refused to allow German forces to travel either through or over Hungary. Budapest would await a response as Hitler concentrated on defeating Poland, fully aware that the German dictator would not

rupture their relationship because of any possible affect on the German minority and the aspirations the *Führer* had for using the *Volksbund* to meet his own ends.

### **Franz Basch: Volksbund**

Dr. Franz Basch the self-proclaimed university intellectual had been born in Zürich, Switzerland on July 13, 1901 to a Swiss mother and a Swabian father from the Banat. At the age of two, his family relocated to the Basch family home in Hatzfeld, in that portion of the Banat that was originally ceded to Yugoslavia in the Treaty of Trianon after World War One but later became part of Romania. Because all of his preparatory studies for university had been done within the framework of the Hungarian educational system and the Hungarian language he opted to attend university in Budapest both for practical and career related reasons and cast his lot with whatever the future held for Hungary his newly adopted homeland.

During his student days at university, he came under the influence of Dr. Jakob Bleyer who was professor of German studies at the Jesuit operated Peter Pazmany University in Budapest. Dr. Bleyer, like Basch himself, had been born in what became Yugoslavia but had chosen to remain with Hungary and had been part of the first Horthy government in which he served as Minister of Minorities a position from which he resigned due to pressures from the nationalists who did not believe he could be trusted because of his desire to ensure the rights of the German minority. Returning to a career in the academic world he focused his attention on the preservation of the history, culture, traditions and language of the German minority in Hungary. In order to accomplish this goal he and his close associates mostly fellow academics from within the German minority promoted the formation of local educational societies in the Swabian villages to carry out the programme by establishing libraries, dancing groups, choirs, youth events, gatherings and folk festivals to celebrate their heritage. Together these local societies formed the membership of the government approved, *Ungarländische Deutsche Volksbildungsverein (UDV)* of which he was the president. (The Germans of Hungary Educational Society)

Franz Basch joined the student and scholarly circle gathered around Dr. Bleyer and was soon brought to his personal attention. Bleyer was impressed with him not because of his intellectual brilliance but because of what Bleyer described as his energetic personality; his intensity; his grasp of issues and fiery magnetism. He became the professor's protégé and was groomed for a future leadership role in the movement as his heir apparent. After receiving his Doctor of Philosophy degree and teaching diploma at Budapest University he assumed the functions of the General Secretary of the *UDV* until the death of Jakob Bleyer in 1933. He was almost immediately forced out of his position by Gustav Gratz who had succeeded Bleyer to the presidency, who charged Basch with fomenting discord within the organization because of his radicalizing tendencies.

In his previous position he had become the self-styled spokesman for the younger more radical elements within the movement who were impatient with the slow pace of progress being made under the older conservative leadership. They demanded an active political

role for the organization in confronting the Hungarian government and its minority policies and achieving more autonomy for the German minority and securing the rights guaranteed to them in the Treaty of Versailles. This went far beyond Bleyer's original intentions and his policy of working in close harmony with the Hungarian state as much as possible. Basch's ongoing attacks against Hungary's assimilation policies led to a backlash within the organization that led to the forming of factions and a parting of the ways with the young radicals who sought another forum to achieve their aims.

Basch would eventually come into his own in 1934 while speaking at an *UDV* event in Batáapati, a German Lutheran community in Tolna County, where he railed against the government legislation calling for the *Maygarization* of German family names. He publicly declared, "Whoever does not honour his father's name is not worthy of his ancestors and betrays them." This comment was picked up by the Hungarian press and seen as traitorous and he was vilified all across the country. He was put on trial for slandering the honour of the Hungarian people and for bringing contempt on Hungary in the eyes of the world. After serving a three month prison sentence, he and his fellow radicals continued in their agitation within the *UDV* but with limited success. Making a second public denunciation of the name changing legislation again in 1936 he was put on trial and sentenced to five months in prison. In order to disassociate itself from Basch's anti-government pronouncements, the General Assembly of the *UDV* met on August 2, 1936 and formally expelled Franz Basch and his followers from its membership.

As a result of his second imprisonment and the action taken by the *UDV*, Franz Basch came to the attention of the Nazi leadership in Germany. Overnight, he was lionized in the German press as the victimized *Führer* of the German minority in Hungary and through official Reich intervention he was released from prison early in 1937 and later pardoned. Nazi officialdom saw the value in promoting Basch and his associates as the legitimate spokesmen for the German minority in Hungary in their future dealings with the Hungarian government. But, he would require mentoring for the task, consistent with Nazi objectives both for the German minority and Hungary and the advancement of National Socialism. They would discover in Franz Basch an apt and willing learner.

In a sense, National Socialism came naturally to him and his close associates who saw within its ideology the thrust and impetus they needed to achieve their goals in Hungary. In their eyes the German minority was simply part of the Reich living in Hungary and that met a responsive chord within the Nazi leadership who offered the financial support and political clout and foreign intervention that could help them achieve their ends. The anti-Semitism of Jakob Bleyer and his leading followers within the *UDV* was almost legendary and was fertile soil for the racial policies of Nazism that Basch and his circle fully embraced as they began to shape and form a new Society that would become the *Volksdeutsche Kameradschaft* (The Folk German Brotherhood) to rival the *UDV* and did so without government sanction and was therefore illegal. Hand in hand with Basch's efforts to enlist the support of the German minority to his cause, representatives and agencies within the German Reich government worked to promote the legitimacy of Basch and his fledgling movement with the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior responsible for affairs related to the Germany minority beginning early in 1937. They

agreed to turn a blind eye to the illegal activities of the *Kameradschaft* that began to disrupt life in the Swabian communities as rival factions began to form. This schism in the ranks of the *UDV* was welcomed by Horthy. He saw it as a sign of its imminent demise and was prepared to simply let matters run their own course.

While the Hungarian negotiators participated in the discussions that would lead to the Vienna Accords in early November 1938, Franz Basch was summoned to Germany for discussions with the Nazi establishment to finalize the formal documents outlining the goals and objectives for a new organization to represent the German minority in Hungary. Negotiations had been ongoing and Basch had become a familiar face to all concerned and his judgement related to Hungarian affairs was respected. At his suggestion they accepted the focus of the organization be placed on the cultural aspirations of the German minority for *now* and all references to any political role be avoided except for his pet project: the recognition of the organization as *the* representative of the German *nation* in Hungary. It was the only stipulation with which Horthy would not concur because he saw it as an infringement on Hungarian sovereignty over its German citizens. Basch was prepared to wait for a more propitious opportunity to present itself in the future.

The organization of the *Volksbund der Deutschen in Ungarn* was officially sanctioned by the Horthy government on November 21, 1938 and its goals and objectives were submitted to the Ministry of Interior for approval. The announcement was met with newspaper headlines calling for the deportation and expulsion of the entire German minority as the only credible solution to Hungary's nationalities problem. Meanwhile, five days later on November 26<sup>th</sup> the constituting assembly of the *Volksbund* with seven hundred persons present took place in Budapest. Franz Basch was the keynote speaker. He was clear in telling his listeners that their new organization marked a total break with the past and everything associated with the *UDV* and they would strive for the cultural autonomy they needed to achieve their wider goals in concert with and through the support of the German Reich government.

On December 23, 1938 the *UDV* officially went out of existence. All of its local branches were disbanded and their activities and programmes were brought to an abrupt halt. The *Volksbund* now had the field all to itself and was fully prepared to fill the vacuum. The focus of their efforts now shifted to the insular and sometimes isolated villages where the vast majority of the German minority lived all across Hungary. It was only natural that Franz Basch would first set his sights on those in Swabian Turkey where the highest concentration of Swabians was to be found in all of Hungary. In going there he also knew of the divisions, conflicts and bad feelings that were already tearing many of these communities apart as the villagers struggled with the question of what it meant to be German living in Hungary and what it would mean for the future.

The village of Cikó is situated in the heartland of Swabian Turkey in southern Tolna County, located among its lofty forested hills that provide a panoramic view of the market town of Bonyhád only six kilometres in the distance. On April 30, 1939 a festival was held there to celebrate the formation of the *Volksbund* with an estimated thirty thousand participants present, at least according to "*Deutsche Volksbote*" which was the

*Volksbund* newspaper whose publication costs were borne by the German Reich. Other estimates were more modest and in the neighbourhood of eight thousand five hundred.

The local inhabitants had to undertake the organization and make preparations for the event and from the outset they were beset with difficulties. The nearby town of Bonyhád was the centre of opposition to the *Volksbund* and many of its leading citizens were calling for the creation of a movement among the German minority to demonstrate their loyalty to Hungary and repudiate the aspirations of the *Volksbund* and discouraged participation in the event. There was also local opposition in Cikó, coming chiefly from among the older generations and the landowning families. Weeks before the planned event the local supporters of the *Volksbund* prepared banners, flags and decorations. They were mysteriously destroyed and after new ones were assembled they were guarded night and day by a group of local youth until the day of the assembly. Fights brought out in the local *Wirtshaus* (tavern) among the rival groups; heated arguments took place between neighbours; extended families were torn apart; lifetime friendships were destroyed. Cikó's *Dorfgemeinschaft* (village sense of community) was unravelling. This kind of strife and disunity among its inhabitants had been totally unknown in the two hundred and thirty year history of the village.

The vast majority of the participants that converged on Cikó for the festival came from the southern districts of Swabian Turkey. On their arrival, they were greeted by others with shouts of: "Heil!" They called one another "*Volkskamerad*" and many wore the official uniform adopted by the *Volksbund* or that worn by the *UDV* in the past. After Basch and the other leading *Volksbund* dignitaries arrived the assembly attended Mass. An outdoor band concert followed in the afternoon and then the local groups who were represented marched in formation carrying their *Volksbund* flags led by two Hungarian flags and passed by the reviewing stand where the *Volksbund* leaders stood and raised their right arms in the "German salute". Then the speeches followed.

Before it was Basch's turn to address the assembly two telegrams were read. The first was from Regent Horthy who expressed his personal good wishes and every success to the *Volksbund* and the role it would play in the life of Hungary. The other was from the Prime Minister who encouraged them in their cultural aspirations and continued loyalty to the Hungarian state. Basch and his cohorts were only too well aware of both men's actual attitudes towards them but knew their hands were tied in order to maintain their current close relationship with Hitler and his regime.

For Basch's part he reciprocated and expressed his personal loyalty to Hungary and its government waxing eloquent about his greater loyalty to the *Volk* (using that loaded word with all of its racial implications) and their Hungarian Fatherland. Both of which he claimed had produced the need to form the *Volksbund*. He also spoke of his deep respect for Adolph Hitler, the *Führer* of their German Motherland who was the greatest friend that their Hungarian Fatherland could ever have. The *Volksbund* would become the bridge forever connecting their Fatherland and Motherland.

Later in the day, the local *Volksbund* organization was formed in Cikó, the first in all of Hungary. Within the week there were almost one thousand members; an executive was elected and positions of responsibility were assigned. With no government interference to worry about, plans were immediately drawn up by Basch to inaugurate a massive membership drive beginning in the fall once the harvest was in. That changed quickly following the German invasion of Poland and declaration of war by Britain and France.

Adolph Hitler addressed the German *Reichstag* following the quick defeat of Poland on October 6, 1939. In his rambling speech he went on interminably vindicating Germany's response to Poland's unprovoked attack along the German frontier that had been repulsed by an avenging German Army fighting against great odds. He must have stretched the limits of his own imagination to have concocted the scenario he presented to the German people and the rest of the world for the unprovoked invasion and subjugation of Poland that had fallen quickly to the double thrust of German and Russian aggression.

He ended his diatribe outlining the next five steps that would have to be taken after the collapse of Poland with short statements on establishing new boundaries; bringing peace and order; maintaining security and restoring economic life. Then he added a fifth urgent step that had to be taken in future that I am certain immediately had the full attention of both Regent Horthy and Franz Basch.

Hitler went on to say: "The most important task, however, is to establish a new set of racial conditions, that is to say, through the *resettlement* of nationalities in such a manner that the process ultimately results in obtaining better defined borders than in the present case. The problem is not simply restricted to the particular sphere of Poland but of a task with far wider implications both for Eastern and Southern Europe which are to a great extent inhabited by various *splinter groups of German nationality*, whose existence can no longer be assured or maintained."

I can imagine Regent Horthy snap: "Repeat that!" to his interpreter hardly able to believe what he had just heard. While I can imagine Franz Basch turn green.

Hitler continued: "Their very existence is the reason and cause for continued international disturbances. In this age of the principle of nationalities and of racial ideals it is utopian to believe that members of a highly developed people can be assimilated without trouble. It is essential for a farsighted ordering of the life of Europe that a *resettlement* be undertaken to remove at least part of the cause for future European conflicts."

Regent Horthy had just heard Hitler propose the final solution to Hungary's Swabian problem: resettlement elsewhere.

For his part, Franz Basch was totally aghast. Once the Swabian population in Hungary heard of Hitler's plan to resettle and remove them from their beloved *Heimat* it would unleash unrest in the villages and raise hostility against him and the *Volksbund* for aiding

and abetting Hitler in achieving his aims. If word got out it would completely destroy the credibility of the *Volksbund* and would make it impossible to accomplish its goals and those of the Third Reich. It was all a terrible blunder!

The entire leadership of the *Volksbund* was in immediate panic mode. They still hoped that time was on their side before the news filtered down to the-less-than-well-informed Swabian villagers in their isolated rural communities with few radios. Franz Basch was called upon to take charge of damage control with both the Hungarian and Reich governments.

He appealed personally to officials in the Ministry of the Interior and those close to the Regent to officially oppose such a proposed resettlement of Hungary's German citizens as interference in the internal affairs of Hungary. Horthy instructed the Ministry not to respond to his request. Franz Basch was informed unofficially that the matter was Adolph Hitler's issue and not that of the Hungarian government. He should take his concerns directly to him. He knew that to get a retraction on the part of the *Führer* was impossible. He wrote hurriedly to Heinrich Himmler to ask Reich officials to tone down the rhetoric and hopefully things would simply settle down if there was simply less said about it in the future. Himmler concurred with him but word was out in the scattered Swabian communities and suspicions of complicity on the part of the *Volksbund* were rampant across Hungary.

The threat of resettlement added renewed impetus for action on the part of those who opposed the *Volksbund* and gave birth to the *Treu Zur Heimat Bewegung* (Loyal to the Homeland Movement) that came to birth in Bonyhád to thwart the efforts and plans of the *Volksbund*. The *Volk Kampf* was now about to begin throughout the nation.

Regent Horthy waited until early November before responding to the *Reichstag* speech. He wrote personally to Hitler indicating his gratitude for the proposed resettlement of the German population of Hungary because it would stabilize what could have otherwise become a volatile situation. After writing he informed the Ministry of the Interior he indicated the need to make plans for future land reform in order to entice Magyars living outside of Hungary to return home by offering them the land, livestock, homes and property of the Swabians after their resettlement. In a reflective moment he commented that he could finally be able to change the face of Swabian Turkey and make it Magyar once more and do the same in other parts of the country.



## **Prelude to War:**

With the beginning of 1940, as Hitler secured his position in the West, Horthy cast his covetous eyes in the direction of Transylvania once again. By July, Horthy was prepared to launch an invasion and sent military and diplomatic officials to Munich to meet with the representatives of the Axis Powers to obtain their blessing. Both Italy and Germany held back from becoming diplomatic umpires between the two belligerents who saw both Hungary and Romania essential to their own plans. Nor did Hitler want to rock the boat with the Romania in order to safeguard his interests in the German minority that included both the Transylvania Saxons and the Banat and Szatmar Swabians. He offered a compromise allowing Hungary to annex the northern portion of Transylvania and giving Romania the green light to annex a portion of disputed territory with Bulgaria. The compromises were offered while he carried a big stick; his military might that intimidated his allies. Hungary added 44,000 square miles to its territories along with 2,700,000 inhabitants. The vast majority were Hungarians but also included 50,000 Transylvania Saxons and an equal number of Szatmar Swabians. Horthy made another excursion into liberated *Lost Territories* to the acclaim and adoration of over 1,500,000 Magyar compatriots. This fortified Hungary's revisionist dream, even if only partially.

This was ratified at a meeting at the Belvedere Palace in Vienna on August 30, 1940 and would become known as the Second Vienna Accords. Less noticed than the recent land acquisitions of Hungary detailed in the agreement at the expense of Romania was the wording of that part of the agreement that would regulate the relationship of the German minority in Hungary with the Reich. In fact, the matter had never been discussed and the Hungarian delegation was taken off guard and felt under duress when forced to act. The Prime Minister Teléki threatened suicide unless it was reworded. They were able change some of the wording to lessen the impact of the proposed rights of the *Volksbund* in Hungary and allow the members to espouse and promote National Socialism

The inclusion of these stipulations in the Accord was a result of goals that the Reich authorities had decided upon for the ethnic German minorities in South and Eastern Europe and for which the department: *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* had been established by Hitler on July 2, 1938 and was part of the SS apparatus. The purpose of the *VOMI* as it was called under the leadership of Rudolph Hess and later Heinrich Himmler was to transform the various German *Volk* group organizations into a functioning instrument of the Nazi Party and its programme. In other words, said less prosaically, in future they would become the vehicle for the recruitment of canon fodder for the Nazi war effort.

As a result of the Accord the Hungarian government was forced to acknowledge that the *Volksbund* was the only legitimate representative of the German minority in Hungary and they had the right to acknowledge themselves as a distinct national group within Hungary. Theoretically they had established an organization that included *all* Germans in Hungary and membership meant to adopt the National Socialist worldview. Basch was well aware that the Reich had no intention of helping the *Volksbund* achieve its cultural goals but was to act as an outpost of the Reich. It must be understood by us that the force of the Accord in terms of the German minority in Hungary was not in response to their

wishes but rather a furthering of the interests of the Third Reich. The Hungarian Prime Minister and other government officials saw the concessions in the Accord as an infringement on Hungarian sovereignty and led to fierce debate in parliament about the appropriateness of collective rights for the German minority...a state within a state. But that did not resonate well as Hungarian foreign policy drew it closer to the Reich. A whole range of economic and trade agreements were quickly put into effect much to Hungary's benefit and the *Volksbund* and its activities slipped under the radar as it pushed its agenda of membership recruitment so that by the end of 1940 there were 95 local groups made up of some 75,000 members.

But Basch's activities and energy had to be redirected to deal with a new problem. How to incorporate the Transylvania Saxons and Szatmar Swabians into the *Volksbund* when they brought new dynamics into play because of the relative autonomy they had enjoyed under more benevolent Romanian rule operating a whole complex of German educational institutions, at every age level up to university and technical schools had been developed by the Saxons unlike their Swabian compatriots in Hungary whose young people were practically functionally illiterate in the German language. The Saxons had political aspirations and their own political party which would have been unheard of in Hungary. They were not prepared to accept Basch's leadership and tried to take an independent course to safeguard their rights and privileges as they had known them under the Romanians. These were a few of the dynamics that were beginning to surface among the various Danube Swabian and German groups in response to the different governmental policies in the jurisdictions in which they lived.

To make matters worse the Fidelity movement: *Loyal to the Homeland* that had its beginnings in Bonyhad was spreading especially in Swabian Turkey following the news of Hitler's announcement of *resettlement*. There was a similar movement emerging in the numerous Swabian enclaves around Budapest. Basch had his hands full and ideology was now the least of his worries as he began to feel pressure to provide *volunteers* to serve in the German *Wehrmach* and *Waffen SS*. He was hesitant to support such a move because it would mean a citizen of Hungary would have to swear allegiance to a foreign Head of State. In most places that would be known as treason. The implications were mind boggling and yet several hundred young men had been enticed to go to Germany to participate in sports event and would end up on the battlefield with their families unaware of what became of them. It was a foretaste of things to come. Clandestine recruitment of volunteers for the German military would be ongoing.

For some time Hitler had been courting the Yugoslavian Government's participation in the Tripartite Pact which their foreign minister signed on March 26, 1941 in Vienna. On his return to Belgrade he found that a bloodless military *coup d'etat* had taken place that rejected the alliance and accepted a British guarantee of its security instead. Hitler feared his southern flank would be exposed while already preparing his Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of Russia, the following year. A military operation against the recalcitrant Yugoslavs was planned immediately. The Hungarian ambassador in Berlin was sent home by air with a message for Regent Horthy:

“Yugoslavia will be annihilated, for she has just renounced publicly the policy of understanding with the Axis. The great part of the German armed forces must pass through Hungary but the principal attack will not be made on the Hungarian sector. Here the Hungarian Army should intervene, and, in return for its co-operation, Hungary will be able to *reoccupy* all those former territories which she had been forced at one time to cede to Yugoslavia. The matter is urgent. An immediate and affirmative reply is requested.”

An offer like this was hard to turn down to a revisionist dreamer like Horthy but his Prime Minister would not assent to the invasion because Hungary had signed a Treaty of Eternal Friendship with Yugoslavia in December of the previous year. He cautioned the Regent to remain out of the conflict unless the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia was in some kind of danger. The vision of *Lost Territories* returning to the bosom of Hungary was too much of a temptation for Regent Horthy to resist. But as always he was hesitant to commit any troops but the Hungarian military was prepared to act and without any government approval General Werth, Chief of Staff of the Hungarian Army made a private agreement with the German High Command for the transport of German troops across Hungary. Teléki denounced the General for treason. When the aging Prime Minister received the news that the German Army had just started its March into Hungary on the night of April 3, 1941 he committed suicide. On April 6<sup>th</sup> Germany launched its invasion of Yugoslavia and in eleven days the war was over.

Once hostilities were over the Hungarian Army occupied the Batschka in lieu of its co-operation in the war effort but was denied control of the Western Banat which remained under the jurisdiction of the German Army and they were promised that it would later be ceded to Hungary. Croatia had declared its independence with Hitler's support so there was no likelihood that it would return to Hungary in the near future. Hitler retained control of the Western Banat to punish Horthy for his refusal to send his troops into battle. The local German minority in the Batschka were shocked by the arrival and occupation by Hungarian troops and they were unwelcome in their villages and their leaders made no bones about it. Franz Basch and the *Volksbund* attempted to take control of the Swabian Cultural Association that had been established and developed in Yugoslavia and it took Reich persuasion to enable him to do so over the objections of the Batschka Swabian leadership and those in the Banat and Croatia were able to assert their independence. In future the Swabians in the Batschka and those in Hungary would share many similar experiences because of the *Volksbund*.

To his chagrin Basch discovered that because of their past experiences under the Yugoslavian government and the advances they had made in terms of their language rights, schools, the development of their own political party and a cultural association the Batschka Swabians were not prepared to take a back seat to Basch's leadership. They too had their won young “Renewers” as they were called who were infected with National Socialism and were impatient with Basch because of what they saw was his subservient role when it came to direct relationships with the Hungarian Government and his sometimes lacklustre pronouncements that did not satisfy the convinced Nazis.

## The Die Is Cast:

In early 1942, the Hungarian government responded favourably to the proposal made by the *VOMI* that Franz Basch act as the *Führer* of the expanded *Volksbund* in all of the territories that now made up “Greater Hungary”. They also provided economic, educational and cultural incentives as part of the agreement. They requested only one additional concession on Hungary’s part; permission for the young men in the German minority to fulfill their military duty by serving in the German *Wehrmacht* or the *Waffen SS*. Surprisingly, the Hungarian Prime Minister who had always been seen as being pro-German rejected the proposal. The radicals in the *Volksbund* were outraged and demanded action on Basch’s part. In the meanwhile, the German ambassador in Budapest instructed Basch to tone down any criticism of the Hungarian government action and restrain his members to avoid endangering Hungarian-German relations.

Unfortunately, Franz Basch did not listen but took up the cause based on the “*Führer principle*” that he was above taking advice from anyone. He attacked the Hungarian government publicly in a speech reported in the press. The Reich ambassador was called in to the Prime Minister’s office and he received a dressing down for the actions of Basch and the *Volksbund*. The *VOMI* informed Basch to co-operate because the invasion of Russia was just around the corner and Hitler needed Hungarian support, both economic and military to accomplish that. He further added it was time that the German minority picked up the tab for past support by the Reich. In April of 1942 a direct agreement was signed by Hitler with the Hungarian government, that the *Volksbund* be authorized to carry out a recruitment drive among the men of the German minority for volunteers to serve in the *Waffen SS*. There was however a caveat: the volunteers had to be members of the *Volksbund* and would lose their Hungarian citizenship by doing so. It was assumed that meant that they would receive Reich citizenship in return but that never materialized. Over 25,000 reported to the recruitment centres and 7,500 were accepted into the *SS* and 10,200 were taken into the *Wehrmacht*. Almost 10,000 of the volunteers came from the Batschka where the drive had been most successful.

The reaction in the Swabian villages was mixed and there was an obvious decline in enthusiasm for the Reich and its war effort because of the way the recruitment had been carried out in some communities where coercion was used on the young men. The *Volksbund* suffered membership losses and Basch and his associates were outraged by the Loyalty Movement and its growing success. Its counter-propaganda cost the *Volksbund* thousands of members and the support of the Roman Catholic and Lutheran clergy played an important part in holding the *Volksbund* accountable for its anti-Hungarian agitation. In Tolna and Baranya the heartland of Swabian Turkey the Loyalty Movement had already attracted 10,000 members. In corresponding with the *VOMI*, Franz Basch now recommended the introduction of compulsory conscription into the German armed forces.

In an attempt to counteract the charges of the Loyalty Movement the *Volksbund* in the mind of the Swabian public, Basch and his associates all professed to be Hungarian patriots. Basch ordered that all local branches of the organization put up pictures of Regent Horthy next to that Adolph Hitler and always include Hungarian flags in parades

and at all *Volksbund* events. In response, the leaders of the Loyalty Movement issued a challenge to Basch and his cohorts to volunteer for the *SS* themselves.

On June 22, 1942 Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa the invasion of Soviet Russia. A force of 4,500,000 men streamed across the frontier into Mother Russia including units from Finland, Croatia, Romania, Slovakia, Italy along with the *Waffen SS* and German *Wehrmacht* as the *Luftwaffe* flew overhead. Four days later, Regent Horthy finally yielded to Hitler's demands and on June 27<sup>th</sup> declared war on the Soviet Union. The Hungarian Second Army consisting of 200,000 poorly armed and equipped troops joined in the Crusade against Bolshevism. The die was cast and everything that would follow had consequences for the German minority in Hungary that no one had ever envisioned except for Adolph Hitler himself. The expulsion of the German population of Hungary at war's end because three men met in Potsdam to redraw the map of Europe once more. But then that's another story for another time.

I was six and one half years old living at 23 Oak Street in Kitchener, Ontario in Canada on the night it was announced that Hungary had entered the Second World War. As usual my father and Uncle Adam were huddled around the shortwave radio for the nightly report from the BBC, Dr. Joseph Goebbels shrieking from Radio Berlin and at eight o'clock as usual it was time for Gabriel Heatter. I remember that night he did not begin his programme with his familiar trademark introduction: "There's good news tonight!" He used that to boost the morale of his listeners in those very dark days of the Second World War. Instead he began by saying, "There's bad news tonight for all of the people of Hungary and what is now in store for them..."

From the expressions on the face of my father and uncle I knew they were apprehensive about what they were about to hear but little did we know then that this was the beginning of the end...for the Children of the Danube and the world they had known.