

**Theses of the doctoral (PhD) dissertation**

**The Fate of Hungarian Prisoners of War in Italy  
The Long Captivity of Lance Corporal János Kozeschnik**

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## I. The topic and the objectives of the dissertation

The aim of my dissertation is to present the life of Hungarian prisoners of war in Italy during the First World War, on the basis of the story of a Hungarian soldier, János Kozeschnik, who fought in the *honvéd* regiment n. 1 of Budapest as lance corporal. I have chosen this topic for two reasons. First, even though several books, studies and doctoral dissertations have been written about the life of prisoners of war in the Great War, there are still many unused sources, including official documents and POWs' autobiographical writings. Secondly, the centenary of the war gave occasion and impetus to the research of the topic.

However, taking into account every relevant record and presenting the story of more than one hundred Italian POW camps or the captivity of over a hundred thousand prisoners exceed the limits of a PhD-dissertation. Therefore, I have reduced the topic.

I have chosen a prisoner who left over a considerable record of sources, and I present his life in captivity, examining the camps where he was interned. János Kozeschnik left over more than one hundred messages he had sent from captivity to his beloved ones, written on postcards. I consider his story typical and appropriate because he was kept in seven places: in five POW camps (Civita Castellana, Santa Maria Capua Vetere, Padula, Vittoria and Cassino), in a military hospital (Altamura) and he did forced labour in Albania. The story of these places has not been discussed entirely yet, nor by Hungarian, nor by Italian historians. In addition, the story of concentration (or internment, as the two terms were equivalent at that time) is not the only question to discuss: the regulations regarding the treatment of POWs are also examined in the dissertation, in the first chapter.

The dissertation has three scientific objectives:

- 1) to summarize the results of other researchers about the selected internment camps and the Albanian forced labour,
- 2) to add on my own, novel findings, and
- 3) to make a list of the Hungarian soldiers who were detained in the examined camps.

Concerning the topic of POW captivity, a two-volume book edited by Hungarian historians, entitled *Hadifogoly magyarok története* (The History of Hungarian Prisoners of War) is a fundamental work, although only two chapters dealt with the captivity in Italy. Therefore, there is much to add on to it because its authors did not use up every document kept in Italian archives, nor every POW record. The new works on the topic came out after a long pause, at the turn of the Millennium. The major works are the dissertations of Rita Keglovich (doctoral, 2018) and Balázs Juhász (habilitation, 2022). However, other researchers have not

deal with my topic, i.e., the story of the six POW-camps, the forced labour in Albania, and the story of János Kozeschnik, and they did not publish a list of POWs related to any of those camps, with a few exceptions: a bilingual book about the camp of Vittoria, entitled *Hungarian Chapel in Sicily* (2017) was published by Dezső Juhász and Giancarlo Francione, and Italian historians edited a book about the camps of Padula and Cassino.

I published my first papers on the topic during the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the war. In the beginning I examined the camps where Hungarian POWs were present in greater numbers, in Central Italy. After reducing the topic on the basis of János Kozeschnik's captivity, I wrote papers about the relevant camps, as well as a study in the bulletin of the Hungarian Military Museum (*Hadtörténeti Múzeum Értesítője*) about his postcards. The latter study is integrated into my dissertation. I also wrote a paper in which I give a general review of captivity in Italy.

## **II. Methodology of the dissertation**

The record of János Kozeschnik – consisting of 120 postcards, one telegram, a demobilisation certificate, a notification on POW status, and five photographs, kept in the Hungarian Military Museum – has not been used by historians yet. For the topic of the treatment of POWs, the basic sources are the rulebook and the protocols of the Prisoner of War Committee of the Italian Ministry of War, which were based on the 4<sup>th</sup> Hague Convention of 1907, signed by the Kingdom of Italy. In addition, the Italian government and general staff also issued decrees regulating the conditions of the prisoners. My methodology is that I compare these official regulations with the sources of the prisoners (diaries, memoirs, and letters) and with reports written by people who visited the camps, such as workers of the International Red Cross, diplomats and other delegates of neutral states (especially Spain and Switzerland) and bishops of Italian dioceses.

The reports and the POW-sources have to be used critically. Prisoners may withhold or alter information in letters and postcards in order to prevent their message from being blocked by censorship, either Italian or Austro–Hungarian censorship. In memoirs there can be false information due to the writer's issues with memory or perception. Postcards are autobiographic sources, because their writers talk about themselves, creating subjective history.

By comparing the sources with each other, I aim to explore the way of life of POWs through the following questions: When did they arrive in the camp? How many prisoners were there? How did the Italians treat them (accommodation, nutrition, clothing etc.)? How did they spend their time? Did they have access to religious services, entertainment, sport, language

learning etc.? Was any Hungarian soldier swapped? When and why were the prisoners relocated to other camps?

The hypothesis of my work is that the prisoners received a relatively good and humane treatment in the camps where János Kozeschnik was interned. I set it up on the basis of the great number of János Kozeschnik's postcards. I assume that if correspondence as a service was provided so regularly, not only for Kozeschnik obviously, but also for every prisoner, then other services should be satisfactory (alimentation, religious life etc.).

In the dissertation I referred to certain events of the war in connection with, for example, the capture of János Kozeschnik, the drive of POWs under Serbian control through the Balkan Peninsula (the so-called "Death March in Serbia"), the Isonzo battles etc.). For this I used the works of József Galántai and Tibor Balla, the diary of Habsburg Archduke Joseph and the albums of various regiments.

The other objective of the research was the collection of the names of Hungarian prisoners of war detained in the six examined camps. I did it with meticulous care, aiming to find every name. The result will be useful for researchers of family or community, as I listed not only the name, but also the year of birth and place of origin of the prisoners or their regiment.

Its main source is *Verlustliste*, in English: list of losses, edited in Vienna and issued from 1914 through 1919. I accessed it on the webpage of Arcanum Digital Scientific Deposit (Arcanum Digitális Tudománytár) which has a search engine. The search was based on the name of the POW-camps, which I needed to do with multiple variations:

- In the case of POW-camps with multi-part names, I searched for the parts separately too (e.g., Civita Castellana: Civita, Castellana; Santa Maria Capua Vetere: Santa Maria, Capua), except for Casale d'Altamura – in this case I only searched for *Altamura* because *Casale* may refer to another place, Casale Monferrato.
- The name of Santa Maria Capua Vetere was sometimes written in an abbreviated form (S.M.C.V.).
- Further search was necessary due to spelling mistakes in the source (Vittoria: *Vittorio*, *Vittori*; Padula: *Padul*; Altamura: *Alta mura*, *Altamur*; Cassino: *Casino*).

When using the *Verlustliste*, certain facts have to be taken into consideration. First, they contain POWs' name, unit, year of birth, place of origin or birth and the camp where they were interned or if they died or disappeared. Consequently, we can only assume their Hungarian origin, as their nationality was not registered. As a result, my list is not based on nationality, but on territorial origin; it is a list of POWs originating from Hungary and not a list of Hungarian

POWs. Secondly, the POWs' given names were occasionally written in German, and I converted them to Hungarian. Thirdly, based on this source exclusively we cannot state that a prisoner was being detained at the camp indicated in the list when that number was issued, because the lists were always issued at a later date. This is the reason why POWs of Civita Castellana were listed in numbers issued after the termination of this camp, for example, or why there are so few Hungarians in Cassino, as they were moved there after autumn 1918, like János Kozeschnik, and in early 1919 the *Verlustliste* ended.

The other main source of the name list is the stamp: many Hungarian POWs sent a short message to Hungarian newspapers indicating their internment camps and regiments and listing their fellows.

### **III. Scientific results of the dissertation**

János Kozeschnik fell captive on 8 December 1915, on Mount Saint Michael, following the 4<sup>th</sup> Battle of Isonzo. He was held in quarantine for about 8 days behind the front, for the prevention of carrying infectious diseases into Italy.

The first place where he was detained for a long period was *Forte Sangallo*, a 16<sup>th</sup> century castle near Civita Castellana in Central Italy. There about 700 Austro–Hungarian prisoners were held for one year, from July 1915 until 22 May 1916. The treatment of the POWs there was rather good according to several sources, although a few soldiers were punished with incarceration and disabled prisoners were detained there too. Concerning alimentation, we find a list in János Kozeschnik's messages (18 in total) of the foods that he asked from his wife, because they were not provided in sufficient quantity: sugar and meat (salami). In his first messages he asked for brandy and rum too but withdrew his request after learning that pure spirits were forbidden. He also wanted to get moustache holder, soap, toothpaste and playing cards. He needed 100 grams of tobacco every two weeks. He did not ask for clothes, which confirms that the Italians sufficiently provided prisoner privates with clothes. They could attend Holy Mass every Sunday and many illiterates learnt to read and write. Postcard correspondence was allowed on a weekly basis.

In May 1916 János Kozeschnik was transferred to another Central Italian camp, a barrack camp next to Santa Maria Capua Vetere capable of holding 5000 POWs. He sent home 14 messages from there. The Spanish military attaché visited the camp and stated that overall he had an excellent impression of it. Kozeschnik asked for soap, sugar, pasta (sweet or salty cakes) and money. According to an Italian journalist, drinking water was abundant and the prisoners

had the opportunity of bathing, playing tennis and tenpin bowling. However, the Italian censorship withheld the messages of a few prisoners who complained about food. In 1916 the POWs were only allowed to work within the camp: to repair their shoes and clothes, to maintain the buildings etc. Later they were involved in agricultural work outside the camp. In the autumn of 1918 the camp was designated as the concentration camp of Polish prisoners. There was a camp for officer prisoners named *Casino Multo*, operating since the autumn of 1915.

In mid-January 1917, János Kozeschnik was moved to Padula. There are 13 postcards he sent from there that have remained, and four that he received there. The POW camp consisted of a Carthusian monastery and barrack camp next to it, capable of holding 15 thousand prisoners. Food, water and religious services were satisfactory. Several photographs have survived in museums that soldiers had taken of themselves in Padula and sent home to their wives. Many sources recall a theatre in the camp where Kozeschnik as a musician could make use of his civil profession. However, escape attempts were too often, and two pandemics spread among the prisoners: cholera and typhus. The delivery of the money sent by the families of the prisoners was irregular. Starting from the summer of 1917, Czech and Slovakian prisoners were being concentrated in Padula and Kozeschnik was relocated to another camp.

He was in Vittoria until mid-November 1917 which was the biggest Sicilian camp with 10 thousand prisoners. We only have four postcards he sent home from here, while nine postcards that his wife sent him to Vittoria have remained. There was a photographer in this camp too. Alimentation and correspondence are proven to have been problematic there. Furthermore, according to a newspaper in Budapest malaria spread in the camp, but the Italian authorities denied this claim.

Starting from autumn 1917, the Italians brought thousands of POWs to the southern part of Albania, occupied by them. They forced the prisoners to work on the infrastructure of the area: to wipe out malaria around Vlora, to set up a telegraph network, to maintain roads and to build a so-called transbalkan railroad. The Italians did so because the Balkan front did not generate the necessary number of prisoners for those works, and because the Italian Foreign Ministry had plans with Albania for the future. Consequently, Hungarian people made a considerable contribution to the development of the infrastructure of Southern Albania. However, the living conditions of the POWs was obviously the worst there. This is also confirmed by the memoir of László Horthy, a voluntary corporal of the 85<sup>th</sup> Imperial and Royal Infantry Regiment. Many contracted malaria, including János Kozeschnik who was hospitalised.

Kozeschnik recovered in the military hospital near Altamura, a city in South Italy, in October 1918, but he did not write any detail about the treatment there. Therefore, I examined the treatment of POWs in hospitals using other sources, for example the diary of Vendel Balázs Sr. who was cured in the military hospital of L'Aquila. There was a POW-camp next to Altamura too, with over six thousand prisoners. Although Kozeschnik was not detained there, I examined that camp too, giving a supplement to the findings of Italian researchers.

János Kozeschnik's last station during his 4-year-long captivity was *Villa Molini*, a camp holding 15 thousand prisoners near the city of Cassino, approximately 130 km from Rome. The Hungarian soldiers were present in a greater number there, which is reflected in the records of officer prisoners too. However, the *Verlustliste* contain very few POWs from Cassino. Consequently, I was able to identify less soldiers than expected. The Spanish military attaché claimed the prisoners were satisfied with the conditions there. The Hungarian sources, however, contradict this claim, particularly concerning alimentation and correspondence. Kozeschnik did enjoy better conditions, because he was held in the officers' department, working as a waiter. He returned home in late September 1919.

He lived in relatively good conditions in the five internment camps. Apart from the malaria that he contracted in the summer of 1918, he was healthy during the captivity. However, my hypothesis concerning the good and humane treatment of the prisoners was only partly confirmed. In fact, Kozeschnik often complained about the quantity and the quality of food, indebtedness, the delay of his wife's postcards, boredom, and most importantly the absence of his beloved ones he did not see for 5 years. In addition, we cannot know what information he withheld because of the censorship, in connection with the guards, for example. The sources of POWs and the persons visiting the camps (Italian bishops, delegates of neutral states) often contradict the idyllic picture depicted by Italian administrative or military sources. Consequently, the Italians indeed provided good and humane living conditions for the prisoners, but with the war going on this was less and less the case, not only because of the shortage of food and the pandemics, but also by the will of the captors.

Concerning the list of the Hungarian POWs, I have identified 2408 prisoners by name: 176 in Civita Castellana, 253 in Santa Maria Capua Vetere, 1086 in Padula, 227 in Vittoria, 550 in Altamura and 116 in Cassino. This number makes up 2-3% of the total number, which can be considered a satisfactory result, considering that my research involved only six internment camps which is 6% of the total number of camps, and that a full list of the prisoners cannot be accomplished due to the lack of records.



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### List of publications related to the dissertation

#### Hungarian book chapters (3)

1. **Takács, B.:** Magyar hadifoglyok Civita Castellanában (1915-1916).  
In: Tavaszi Szél - Spring Wind 2019. : Tanulmánykötet. Szerk.: Bihari Erika, Molnár Dániel, Szikszai-Németh Ketrin, Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, Budapest, 83-95, 2020.  
ISBN: 9786155586521
2. **Takács, B.:** A Nagy Háború magyar hadifoglyai Olaszországban.  
In: Az Osztrák-Magyar Monarchia és a történelmi Magyarország összeomlása 1918-ban : Konfliktusok és megoldási kísérletek. Szerk.: Barta Róbert, Kerepeszki Róbert, Pintér Zoltán Árpád, Debreceni Egyetem Bölcsészettudományi Kar Történelmi Intézet, Debrecen, 125-138, 2019. ISBN: 9789634901341
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#### Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (3)

4. **Takács, B.:** A Fonte d'Amore-i hadifogolytábor az első világháborúban.  
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8. **Takács, B.:** Prigionieri di guerra ungheresi all'Aquila (1915-1919).  
*Ital. Debr.* 24, 183-197, 2018. ISSN: 1219-5391.  
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### List of other publications

#### Hungarian books (1)

9. Szerk. Barta, R., **Takács, B.:** Földváry László első világháborús hadinaplója. Debreceni Egyetem Történelmi Intézet, Debrecen, 240 p., 2020. (Speculum historiae Debreceniense, ISSN 2060-9213 ; 27.) ISBN: 9789634901945

#### Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (3)

10. **Takács, B.:** Történelmi emlékezet és rendszerváltások: Hatalmi politizálási alternatívák a 20. századi Magyarországon.  
*Debr. Szle.* 29 (3), 352-355, 2021. ISSN: 1218-022X.
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13. **Takács, B.:** Magyar hadifoglyok Olaszországban a Nagy Háború idején.  
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The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

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