



Preface

Galley slavery is now a strange-sounding term. In medieval Europe, however, it still frightened people: it was one of the slow deaths of those sentenced to death, from which there was no escape. The galley slaves served in the struggles against the Turkish Empire in the Mediterranean, or as oarsmen on voyages of discovery or were deported to a penal company in Canada. Jean Valjean visualizes the impossible in Victor Hugo's novel, namely how one can remain pure even under the most terrible circumstances. Just like in Lewis Wallace's famous work, the fictional story of Ben-Hur also reveals the survival of an innocent convict in Roman times, whose experiences distance him from revenge.

This volume takes the reader back to the 17th century world of Protestant persecution in Hungary, when, during the reign of Leopold I (1657–1705), following the suppression of the uprising of the nobles in 1670, the Habsburg court ordered an investigation into the Protestant ecclesiastical nobility (1674, Bratislava). Out of the 700 priests found guilty, it had about 70 priests and teachers who persevered despite the trumped-up trial (1675) imprisoned and/or sold to the galleys. However, thanks to a huge international protest, some 40 survivors of the ordeal were freed (1676). A year and a half of redemption followed a year and a half of suffering. Those freed from the galleys were welcomed in Zurich, and about 15 of them visited German, Danish, Dutch and English churches and princely courts of international Calvinist sympathizers in search of help. Eventually, all survivors returned home, and in 1681, the ruler, by decree of the parliament, put an end to the injustices that had been going on for years since 1670. In Reformed historiography, this period is known as the Mourning Decade, and became a lasting example for future generations. Since the ruler was Catholic and of Austrian descent, and the people considered rebels were, in terms of their religion, mostly Hungarian Protestants, and a small part Slavic nobles of the church, therefore, the history and language of galley slavery was connected with the idea of freedom not only in later religious but also in political debates. At the end of the 19th century, therefore, the approach of cultural Protestantism, which represented the protagonism for spiritual/cultural freedom, was born on Hungarian soil beside the theoretical trend of cultural Catholicism proclaiming Catholic spiritual revival. In 2024, we have commemorated the Bratislava lawsuits initiated during the Mourning Decade.

Three hundred and fifty years ago, the subsequent events led to the situation that about 70 faithful Protestants stood up for the cause of freedom of opinion, legal representation in court and freedom of religion. This volume focuses less on the relatively well-known history of suffering, and more on the highlights of international and Hungarian reception history.¹

The authors invited to contribute to the volume are distinguished representatives of their field, the majority of them being learned researchers but due to the diversity of the reception history, there are also musicians, reporters, and even former university students among them.

The studies fall into two large categories: the first one recalls the history of the Hungarian galley slaves. Katalin S. Varga's writing is a scientific sensation as it is about the original records of the lawsuits, which she found in Esztergom. László Zsigmond Bujtás provides an insight into the world of Dutch, Dávid Csorba into the Swiss, Attila Verók into the German sources by examining and analysing contemporary letters, pamphlets, requests, and historical reports.

The second group of studies focuses on the topic of memory. Gábor Pusztai pays homage to the Dutch admiral De Ruyter who freed the galley slaves, and visualizes his historical images to the reader. Kund Botond Gudor evaluates the Hungarian translation of the history of suffering by Bod Péter, a key Transylvanian historian in the Hungarian reception. Bálint Csergő Kocsi's account of his suffering did not only appeal to the reader through its Latin original, but also its Hungarian manuscript translation was considered a success. As a result of these, e.g. commemorative plaques of the galley slaves were placed in the new building of the century-old school of the Reformed College of Sárospatak. Edina Pálfi analysed them in her article. Sándor Berkesi, the conductor of the Reformed College of Debrecen put the pieces of music composed for the Galley slaves' anniversary in 1973 under scrutiny. From the end of the 19th century until today, this story of tribulation and miraculous deliverance has become part of the identity of many localities in the consciousness of Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin. The Reformed minister Ágnes Fekete's short reports, which present interviews with several of today's organizers, reveal their motivations to the viewers. Moreover, the analysis of the Utrecht University scientist, Els Stronks, searches for the spirituality of the old sources in the modern De Ruyter image in Holland.

This volume contains Gábor Pusztai's interview with the descendant of Admiral De Ruyter, who, through his website and his enterprise, is the most vivid upholder of the tradition of the great Dutch hero and ancestor.

He has visited Hungary several times and has taken part in the anniversary celebrations of the galley slaves for the past 30 years; therefore, for today's researchers of the history of memory, his vision is extremely important from both the Hungarian and the Dutch point of view. Jaap Doedens provides a short reflection on the fate of one of the De Ruyter monuments.

A book review closes the series, from the pen of Robert Oláh. He presents a volume on the phenomena and effects of galley slavery in Hungary. In 2019, speakers at a conference organized by Dávid Csorba in Sárospatak discussed the historical thesis of bloodless Counter-Reformation, which represents the 18th century historical perspective, i.e. in Hungary after 1681, the Counter-Reformation continued, though in a different way. Galley slavery was thereby ingrained in the memory, even in the identity of Hungarian Protestants; mainly in Reformed context, it has become an essential part of their spiritual and pneumatic identity, their historical perspective and their piety. Finally, Adrienn Hetei gives a concise description of this year's commemoration at the galley slave memorial.

The volume is decorated with the images of several archival documents, which were selected by Zsigmond László Bujtás and Dávid Csorba, mainly from the pages of publications and manuscripts of the 17th and 18th centuries that emerged during their international research.

The objective of this volume is, on the one hand, to commemorate one of the shocking and identity-forming traditions of Protestantism in Hungary on the occasion of the upcoming 350th anniversary of the Bratislava trial, the escape in Naples and the jubilee in Zurich. On the other hand, the goal of the editor, Dávid Csorba, was that both domestic and international historiography should take not only the calibre of this written and cultic tradition, but even more so its diversity into account. It should not just look at it as a history of medieval torture – and see itself in it today – but as a divine miracle, a story of liberation based on international cooperation, a story beyond all hope.

Dávid Csorba
guest editor

Notes

¹ On the occasion of the anniversary, a website was created in October 2024 that displays the objects, texts, and Hungarian memorials of the history of galley slaves memory (galyarabok.drk.hu).