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**Oaş Land, 1940-1944**

**The years of the war in the memory of the inhabitants and  
archival documents**

**SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS**

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**Key words:** Oaş Country / Oaş Land, WWII, the Vienna Diktat, conscription, deportation, Holocaust, Jews, frontline, prisoners, concentration camp, Soviet Army, Hungarian Army, German Army, invasion, forced labour battalions.

Up until now, the somehow few studies that were dedicated to Oaş Country have researched this area mainly from ethnographic and folkloric points of view and very little from a historic one. In such a context, the present thesis puts up for clarify an important chapter of the past of this area – The Oaş Country in the years of the Second World War. I began to discover this topic as a challenge of the postgraduate course “History beside us. The Memory of the local community” proposed by the Institute of Oral History from the “Babeş – Bolyai University”. Responding the challenge and making the first interviews with the witnesses of those times, I realized that those events from the years of war that happened 80 years ago are now history and have to be absolutely saved and written down so we and our descendants to know.

Making 56 interviews, discovering unpublished documents from the parishes of Oaş, studying the documents from the *Collection of documents of the ecclesiastic institutions* and *The Prefecture of the County of Satu Mare* from the National Archives Satu Mare County Office and the bibliography of specialty, I acquired a history that presents the life of the inhabitants of Oaş Country in 1940 – 1944 under Hungarian administration and in the conditions of a ruthless war.

The present study presents Oaş Country in the years of the II World War (1940 – 1944) It is structured as follows: Introduction, seven chapters of text, bibliography, the list of the images in the text, addendums containing 56 interviews and the addendum of the archive’s documents.

In the first chapter, *The years 1939 – 1940. The Oaş Country on the threshold of the Vienna Diktat*, I have described the aspects regarding the concerned time and place. In its beginning, I have presented the tensioned condition in which the north-western territory of the Romanian state used to be, as it felt threatened by the Hungarian revisionism. At that moment, the Romanian Army have prepared for fight intensely, have mobilised troops, and defensive lines were made. Within these defensive improvements, the most daring hill peaks were turned

into citadels, therefore the inhabitants of the Oaş villages have reached right into the middle of events. The witnesses I have interviewed, children at those times, dearly recall the Romanian soldiers quartered in the village houses, about the fact that their presence sent a strong sensation of safety to the community and the belonging to a solid state.

From the point of view of the soldiers, there was the same sympathy for the Oaş countrymen, whom they have seen as being some proud peasants, who managed to keep their Romanian identity during the centuries of foreign domination. From the archive's documents it came out that other measures were also taken on administrative level, for instance, several statistics with Hungarian ethnics, potential adversaries of the Romanian state, were made, as a further prove that the danger was perceived.

In chapter two, *The Effects of the Vienna Diktat (1940 – 1941)*, I chronologically followed the thread of historical events, unfortunately, with dramatic aspects. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of August 1940, the international arbitration has cancelled all these. Superior forces have taken the most critical decision for the Romanian people and threw the north-western part of Transylvania under foreign rule. Oaş Country got under the administration of the Hungarian state. Immediately, the Romanian military, as frustrated and grieved as well, have withdrawn across the new border. Another phenomenon was that, almost instantly, there was a mass migration in multiple directions. The Romanians, especially the families of the military and those who worked in administration, disappointed or even frightened, migrated southward, for example to the refugees' camps from Turda and Lugoj. On the other hand, the Hungarians remaining south of the new frontier, unsettled by the fact that they remained outside Hungary, set sail to north. There were also Hungarians from Hungary who headed to the reunified Transylvania, occupying jobs in administration or education, wanting to contribute to the evolution of Hungarianisation. Actual actions of establishing the rule of the Hungarian state. Its representatives were the army and the administration. In Oaş Country, the most important administrative and military centre was in Oraşu Nou, a settlement that had had that status prior to 1919, being the centre of the civil parish and where the population was predominantly Hungarian.

Supporting points were also installed in the settlements surrounding the Oaş parish. Changes have been made in schools immediately afterwards. Office clerks, school teachers and constables were the factors of transmitting and imposing, sometimes forcibly, the laws and culture of the Hungarian state. Somehow related to education, as its venue was the schoolyard, was organised the pre-military (called *Levente* in Hungarian). Romanian teenagers got military training, the final aim being a base training in order to serve later in the Hungarian army. Those

who got to legal age before the end of the war got to that phase, following the pathway to the army and the frontline till the end. Shortly after the installing of the Hungarian administration and under the influence of the evolution of war – I mean the starting of war against the USSR – starts the real exploitation of the north-western Transylvanian resources. The main way of this was the conscription of the young people in the Hungarian army and sending them on the east frontline. This ongoing process had complex facets, the young people from Oaş were recruited for conscription in military units from Hungary and, being Romanian were received with hostility. Some of them accepted their fate considering that nothing can be done, many tried to avoid this obligation. Meanwhile, at home, in their native villages, Hungarian, and from now on, German soldiers were quartered on their way to the eastern frontline. For the time being, the latter, were just passing by having the status of allies and they behaved as such to the Hungarian or Romanian civil population. They were heading eastward after years of wellbeing so they didn't have to obtain anything through plundering the population. The image they left at that moment was that of people of superior civilisation and technology.

In the third chapter, *the years 1942-1943*, the narrative of life in the settlements of Oaş goes on. While on the far away frontlines the great global conflict went on, its effects have reached to the local inhabitants who experienced some shortages. From the accounts of the witnesses and from the documents I have recreated the everyday life of this period. The Oaş countrymen continued to rely on the traditional occupations: logging or forest exploitation, working the fields, animal breeding, completed with the practice of traditional craftsmanship (milling, pottery, carpentry, cartaging, a.s.o.). It was a simple but strenuous way of life. In wartime, the inhabitants of Oaş had an even more difficult manner of living. As the family economy was based on physical labour, the disappearance of men gone to war created additional problems. Supporting the family, usually with many children, remained a task for the elderly and the women. The living conditions have even made the Hungarian state to provide some war support for the families of those gone to the front. However, deliberately or not, in all the cases of the Romanian families identified by me, who have asked for war support, the answer of the Hungarian officials was negative.

The economical and administrative organisation of the Oaş parish went on according to the benefits of the Hungarian state. Thus, a dispute has been created about the establishment of a Law court of Oaş, the matter being if it should be in Seini or Negreşti. In the same time, the Hungarian central and local authorities were involved in accomplishing and imposing some sanitary and hygienic inside the Oaş communities. Special course of action was taken for the

nomad Gypsies. Hungarian authorities were concerned by the organisation of commercial activities from the village grocery stores to the fairs and markets, but also in food industry, establishing rules to regulate the milling industry, considered of great importance.

The life of ecclesiastical institutions went on undisturbed. Nothing from the parishes' archives shows for now the fact that it is war time. I was able to create a retrospective image of the Negrești commune at that time, as a model of Oaş settlement from the middle of the last century.

In all these socio-economic aspects of life, the Jews played an important part. At that moment, they were perfectly integrated in the rural communities. There was a mutually advantageous relationship between the Jews and the Hungarian as well as between the Jews and the Romanian. For instance, when they were looking for labour force or acquired agricultural products, the Jews called the Romanian who, this way, were earning a decent money. When more elaborate economical activities were undertaken, such as forest exploiting or logging, the Jews were the ones who coordinate them. They had the investing capital and the entrepreneurial spirit needed. They were good traders and settled down on the main street of every commune. Until that moment they have built places of worship and even synagogues, gaining the respect of Romanian. Their children went to school along with the Romanian. That should have been difficult to foresee what was going to happen to them after a while.

From time to time, the Hungarian post office brought some news from the frontline. We are talking about the letters sent from the conscripted men. Although illiterate, through others, they tried to communicate with their wives, the elders, parents and in-laws. For example, in the summer of 1942, Maroșan Gheorghe from Târșolț sent his wife four letters from the Soviet frontline. Typical is the fact that he doesn't complain about the hardship, but he sends money and advises his wife to prepare for winter with all the necessary, warm clothing and a new stove. Therefore, morally, the war was still close.

In the fourth chapter, *The year 1944. The Apogee of the Nightmare*, I presented the tragical events when the war literally got to the north-west of Transylvania. A first sign that the things have turned worse, was the massive presence of the enemy airplanes in the sky. Russian bombers in huge formations – so the inhabitants see them as flocks of birds – headed westward. For the locals, these events are terrifying. Witnesses always mention the signalling rockets that lit the night sky and the sound of the anti-aircraft alarms. Sometimes, at night, partisans were dropped on the surrounding hills. These established fighting cells confronting



immediately with the Hungarian soldiers. Meantime, the German military aircrafts reacted and air fights resulted. This is why, at least two German fighter planes have crashed, one in the marshes at Mujdeni and another on a hill slope called Buian Foot. After the fall of the fighters, the crew that survived while parachuting, were immediately arrested by the Hungarian Constabulary. The wrecks of the smashed fighter planes made an attraction for the locals, especially for the children, but they were pretty dangerous due to the fact that they still contained dangerous pyrotechnic materials. On their own will but also at the request of the authorities, the locals took camouflage action covering the windows of the houses with black paper. There was a siren on each town hall that, at the phone announcement from the military was put to work so the population to know that a danger of an airstrike was about to come. Unfortunately, not even then, there were no anti-aircraft shelters so that the people could, at most, hide in the areas with thick vegetation or improvise some holes in the garden that could give them the illusion of a minimal safety. Luckily, their salvation came from the fact that the air strikes aimed urban targets and objectives.

A practice was the establishment of labouring battalions. In their structure went teenagers and old people that did not fill the criterion of age in order to be taken to the frontline. They were used, together with their oxen and carts for the execution of some certain work. The unluckiest of them, got to the Uz Valley but also in Hungary and Germany being used to sustain the war economy.

Another visible aspect for the inhabitants of Oaş that signalled the critical tilt of the front situation was the haste with which the Hungarian constables were looking for conscriptions. The war machine needed the progressive conscription of the youth. From now on, the news from the frontline were terrible. It was known that the Red Army own terrible weapons like the *katyusha*, it was known about the apocalyptic defeats from the Don Elbow and Stalingrad and it was talked about rivers of blood. As a result, nobody really wanted to go to the front willingly and every conscriptable was trying to save himself at any cost. From running away to the forests, the most desperate measures were taken, like auto-mutilation. On the other hand, the Hungarian constables were desperate to catch them, appealed to the informants, different tricks and traps, brutality and blackmail on the family members of those hiding.

As an apogee of the nightmare, the gathering and deportation of the Jews happened. These had a forewarning of what was about to come due to the antisemitic measures taken,

culminating in wearing the distinctive sign, the “David Star” on the chest. Some hoped that, as it was written in the Old Testament, they would be taken to their own country. Few thought that they would ever come back. Aware of the situation, they began to leave a part of their goods to friends and neighbours especially those that were too heavy or bulky to be transported. Some very valuable things, usually made of precious metals, were hidden for example in the walls of synagogues. In their stores they kept the accountancy and the debt notebooks so, at least some of them still hoped a salvation.

After the Ester, in May 1944 their deportation was ordered. There were implied the communes’ town halls with their “bakters” – a kind of public guardians and the youth from the pre-military but the main force was the Hungarian constables together with additional forces from Oraşu Nou and Seini. These ones, with their bayonets on their rifles and on horseback led the operation. The Jewish families were taken from their homes and gathered in a public building – the synagogue, the praying house or the school. After a while, a row of the local people’s carts was established, they were forced to take part as such and the Jews were taken and transported towards the ghetto of Satu Mare. They got there the next day in the evening. The cartmen returned back home. The Jews stayed several weeks in the ghetto then they were embarked in trains in the railway station of Satu Mare, heading to the road to the extermination camps towards their sorrowful end.

Chapter five, *The end of the year 1944, the fate of the war change*, renders the events that happened in the Oaş Country in this moment when the main confrontations of the world war were on Romanian territory. The German and Hungarian armies found themselves in the situation of a desperate retreat and narrowly avoided being caught in an encircling by the Russian Army that advanced on several directions. Benefiting from an overwhelming numeric superiority, the Russian have become masters in manoeuvres of encircling and locking the enemy in traps resembling to that of Stalingrad. Both the Hungarian and the German did dreadful actions. First of all, these Germans did not resemble to those who set to the Operation Barbarossa three years ago, they were starving and lacking many things so they took everything they could from the local people. What is more, their actions were motivated by a strong resentment towards the Romanian caused by the Stalingrad moment but also by the betrayal – from their point of view – from 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 1944.

In October 1944, these manoeuvres got to take part right in the area of Satu Mare county. Unfortunately, before the Russian infantry came the waves of the Soviet bombers that

terribly bombed the cities of Satu Mare and Baia Mare, void of defence. The last German units have destroyed the transport and communication routes: bridges, roads, railways, telephone wires and even electric wires. Right after that came the huge Soviet infantry.

That was disturbed by a few bombshells fired by the German artillery that made collateral damage among civilians. The population saw these hordes as endless swarms of locusts that could chaotically come from everywhere, from over the hills or on the roads. The measures taken by the Germans did not slow them down at all. They immediately entered the streets of the villages and then into the houses of the people under the pretext of finding the enemy. Very soon they started absolutely savage actions that proverbially persist until nowadays.

In this agony, the only element the Oaşlanders had as an allied was the hilly relief, strongly forested which, on those days was interpenetrated with every village. Behind his house, the Oaşlander jumps into the garden and then directly into the wilderness. The settlements from Oaş were built on hills, under the edge of the forests, probably by the early communities so that they offered refuge when needed but also a permanent observation point over the access route to the village. In case of danger, the locals gained the ability to notice and retreat as fast as possible into the shelter of the forests whenever hostile military were observed entering the main street of the village from the road that goes through the centre of the depression. Much worse was the situation in the case of the Soviet invasion for the inhabitants of cities, towns or villages from the plains.

Chapter six, *After the War*, presents aspects that have direct connection to the Second World War from the chronological phase happening immediately after the conclusion of peace. It is about the return of the soldiers from the frontline. Many were conscripted but few have returned. For the lucky families, the moment of return of those who survived was a real miracle. Against all odds, sometimes the father or the husband returned. Their physical condition was a degraded one due to the many shortages; they had wounds, swellings and lice so that they didn't enter the house until they took off their clothes and washed. However, the most serious wounds were hard to notice being a consequence of physical trauma. After a while, they have told their relatives of their villagers some of the things they have gone through.

Most families had been waiting until they lost the hope of returning. Juridically, a law court declared all of those who were lost dead. The families made them funeral services according to the Christian traditions burying clothes and other goods of the departed.

There was another category, those who didn't come back home, but not because they were dead but because the Russian offensive turned them into POW – prisoners of war. For a few years they were practically slaves of the Soviet state. They were kept in concentration camps in order to do the most difficult activities in cold conditions and undernourished. However, some of them have resisted until the release of the Romanian, came back to their native village where they resumed their normal lives. From this category I had the opportunity to meet and interview the former Oaş prisoners from the Soviet camps: Goje Ioan from Prilog, Bota Vasile from Trip and Dragoş Vasile from Negreşti Oaş.

In those troubled times, when the authority of the Romanian state was not yet remade and when there were so many weapons left in the hands of the population, groups of armed individuals were constituted who were hiding in the woods making the law. Up until now, the remembrance of the gang of Griga lui Ianoş from Bixad is kept. His deeds are considered by some a kind of anti-communist actions but others see his deeds as some dreadful robbery.

That has been another return, that of the surviving Jews from the extermination camps. They remained with the tattooed serial number on their arms and with their souls grieved by the horrors they lived. They tried to remake their lives among the Romanian but most of them left in the 60s for the newly established state of Israel. Few of them remained in Romania until they died and are buried in the Oaş cemeteries, for instance Gottesman Mano in Negreşti Oaş.

In the present, monuments erected in the memory of the Romanian soldiers who died in the two world wars can be found in all the settlements from Oaş Country, reminding the supreme sacrifice they did.

In the seventh chapter, *Conclusions*, I was able to sustain that using as a main method the interview of spoken history but also archive documents and bibliography, I retraced the history of events that happened in Oaş Country in the period 1940 – 1944. In 1938-1939, the years preceding the war, the population lived a stressful life. Aware of the dangers brought by the Hungarian revisionism, they took measures to defend the boundaries. The year 1940 brought the Vienna Diktat and the changing of the borders. Oaş Country was among the territories that got into the possession of the Hungarian state without a fight. The departure of the Romanian military and clerks followed and the take-over of these north-western Transylvanian lands by the Hungarian state. It was a return to the organisational structure from before 1919, Hungarian language became official and allegiance was swelled to the Hungarian state.

The years 1941-1943, under Hungarian administration and with the presence of German troops, meant then war and economical exploitation. Both the population and the resources were used for the eastern war. Antisemitic measures were taken.

The year 1944 represented the climax of the damage produced by the Second World War. Deportation of the Jews to the concentration camps happened and three armies – Hungarian, German and Russian – crossed the Romanian territory, bombing and other destructive phenomena have happened. Although, the nightmare had a happy ending, at the end of the war the north-west of Transylvania returned to Romania. After the war everything came back to normal. The last survivors from the frontline and from the labour camps returned home.

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